

Choral Music in the 21st Century

Can it still fascinate us?

Andreas Herrmann,

Professor of Choral Conducting

You would probably not be reading this article if one fine day in the past you had not been infected by a virus: the fascination of choral music, the human voice as the most direct means of artistic expression. If you have ever listened, the way a child would listen, to how countless human voices can meld into a whole, into vivid sounds, into pure harmony that conveys an immediate message, you will be hooked for life: wherever choral music is concerned, you will never be free from a certain missionary zeal, no matter whether you happen to be a composer, a music teacher, a choral singer or just a “simple” listener and consumer of music.

Do you know families who still sing together? Lullabies, rounds, counting songs, nursery rhymes – up to a few years ago, in many families singing was a part of living together with children that was taken for granted. But insecurity is spreading: the stereo, the TV, the computer, the mp3 player – these devices produce a kind of vocal and instrumental perfection that would not have been imaginable even a short time ago, and it emanates from every quarter. And thus the thought creeps into our subconscious, whether it might not be better to leave matters musical, as far as the child is concerned, to the specialists, those who deal professionally with early years: the media, the musicologists, the schools,

the teachers – those who know about such things, even to those proficient pop stars whose vocal skills will immediately (and with the aid of computers) be professionally categorized and ranked.

Voice – breath – technique

“He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Man became a living soul”– this verse from the libretto for Joseph Haydn’s oratorio “The Creation” precedes all human endeavours. Breath is the precondition for musical impulse. Healthy breathing is the precondition for healthy singing and speaking. In its turn, wholesome air is needed if we want to make sensible use of the good breathing exercises which can be found in plenty in all good singing textbooks. Singers’ voices are subject to a heavy burden, comparable to the kind of physical stress experienced by athletes. Here lies a task we must not underestimate, namely to break out of the tunnel vision of our musical education and recognize the value for modern civilization of pure “creation”, and of wholesome air to breathe, and to preserve this.

Carefully selected vocal exercises during warming up can help smooth the way to making music, be it for a rehearsal or for a concert. In an ideal situation, tensions will be relaxed, and there will be a spiritual and physical turn towards the music. Much that is good and much that is less good has been written about warming up. A recent phenomenon in the relevant literature is the descriptions of the physiological foundations. These can be very helpful, particularly when we are looking at questions like the treatment of the immature voice, vocal difficulties through overuse, or extension of, and smooth changes between, the vocal registers. We must not forget that choral warming up is no substitute for solid vocal training, and that the overriding aim of every rehearsal, namely to make good music, must not be missed because

exercises end up occupying a disproportionate part of the rehearsal time. Thus: good singing lessons that bear these matters in mind are valuable for everybody.

We can only deduce what is good singing by hearing it. However, in the situation of a rehearsal we have to learn to differentiate between aural and vocal training. If you are able to sing a bit more loudly, it does not automatically follow that intonation will always be correct: vocal technique has to be right, too. Technical and vocal difficulties can be overcome, but only if you have learnt to listen. In order to achieve that, learn to listen: hum along, make notes, compare different interpretations. Recall tunes from pieces of music and try to whistle and to sing them in the shower. Look after your physical health – it is the key to a fulfilled intellectual and spiritual life. Only in possession of good health will you have the strength to enthuse others in your role of an ambassador for choral music. Who in your choir does yoga exercises? Who does not?

Initial Studies and in-Service Training

“Be not afraid!” [“Fürchtet euch nicht!”] I would like to pass on this joyous Christmas message, which Bach used as the title for one of his six motets, to all politicians and committees who get lost in timorous little details when they address the arts and try to create an upheaval in any educational system. No matter how high the administrative cost, the raw human diamonds – the students – are polished and hauled through the machinery of the Bologna Accords until they are all deemed as beautiful as only a perfect system, dreamt up by humans, can imagine them. The “joy of the gods” at the start of the final section of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, The Choral, has become subject to the fetters of the administrators. Let us raise our voices in a plea for their favour! In their desire perfectly to streamline each child in a technocratic system that

resembles a wind tunnel, the technocrats have robbed young people of priceless time. Give it back now! Keep the trust and fear not – all will be well if you allow those with an artistic bent simply to become artists. Give them time; allow them to choose what is on offer; give them more liberty to go their own way, including the liberty to raise their voices, including the liberty to play and to sing! You have only borrowed the world from your children! Drop the reins!

Sight reading

This is a topic I am particularly keen to touch upon, because it links my first group of topics – vocal technique – with the second: training. Unfortunately, for many ensembles, sight reading will either remain an alien concept or be linked together with fear. And the older choir members are, the more difficult it becomes for them to acquire this skill, which in my opinion is very important.

Sight reading is one of the most important and possibly the most difficult skills demanded of choral singers. Of course, teaching sight reading during a choral rehearsal is a time-consuming matter. Nevertheless, choral directors who are good sight readers themselves should give thought to the questions of how much time they should dedicate to this subject, which starting points for teaching might be employed and what methods exist to monitor success. A large variety of systems exist which tackle rhythm and pitch, and surely a large number of didactic approaches will be required. In America, a number of such publications go back to the seventeenth century. In our day, music publishers are introducing us to ever newer and better methods. However, competence in this field remains a topic that, within choral music, is frequently neglected. I ask myself how many of you reading this article just now will be asked to sight read new works in a rehearsal. I am also curious to find out whether you have ever broached the subject

with your choral conductor. Does he or she possess the ability to sight read accurately? Let us hope this is not too provocative a question! It is certainly worth while to give some thought to this topic. Recent academic research has revealed that those choral directors who are not able to teach sight reading are far less motivated to react accordingly. Warm-ups are fun, but they are not the be-all and end-all. Is enough being done to train our voices and our musical brains? If we all knew more about scales and intervals, we would all be in a much better situation to sight read unknown pieces. Moreover, this theoretical knowledge can and should be connected to the feeling that is aroused in our bodies by certain musical gestures and phrases. Just Google “movable do” and “minor la” – you will be surprised!

Who is in charge of the choir?

A choir can only ever be as good as its conductor. Many things that come together to make a really good choral conductor can be learnt: there are courses one can attend for practical skills and books and articles for the musicology. Make use of the manifold offerings in this direction and take an interest in new things, in matters that up to now were not your strong points. If you are not a choral conductor yourself, speak with someone who is. Do not shy away from asking them questions about the route they are following. Either you will learn something from this, or they will. Be brave!

The conducting of instrumental ensembles and orchestras is another topic of enormous importance. This should be an absolutely essential part of training as a choral conductor. The choral literature with instruments is immensely varied, and as a choral conductor you will soon find yourself having to deal not only with vocal but also with instrumental ensembles. I know about plans in some German music conservatoires to reduce this important aspect of training out

of a mistaken zeal to save money. Anybody who has ever stood in front of an orchestra for the first time knows this vague feeling of uncertainty: here, in addition to a helping of musicality, you also need a helping of learnable technique. Give young choral conductors the opportunity to gain practical experience in this, even though unfortunately – like much that is good, beautiful and important in life – it costs money.

Something creative

Read good books, watch good films, go to good restaurants, play sports, laugh, be a human being. Question everything. Don't let a day pass without following up a topic of which you know nothing whatsoever. Start with "Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt" [\[1\]](#). When you are watching a good film, pay attention to the music. When you are having a good meal out, pay attention to the music. When you encounter choral singing, pay attention to the music. When you go to a concert, pay attention to the music. Enjoy the music and indulge in the joyful luxury of occasionally not being critical.

IQ stands for the intelligence quotient, EQ for emotional intelligence. Singing is communication. Therefore, if you occupy yourself with choral music, a high EQ will take you further than your IQ, so you should develop your emotional abilities further: ring old friends, try sensing how they are without asking many questions. React appropriately. Learn to say no without hurting yourself or others. If you make music within an ensemble yourself, make sure that there are regular conversations about how matters might be improved. Help open the ensemble for new members.

In everyday theatrical life, there is far too little time to work on choral quality *per se*. If you are a fan of opera, also attend performances in which your opera chorus appears, and supply appropriate feedback. If you are a fan of performances

of pieces for choir and orchestra, also attend concerts in which your choir appears a cappella, and supply appropriate feedback. Encourage a person from among your friends and acquaintances whose main interest does not lie in matters musical, for a piece of choral music that is close to your heart. Long live variety.

Organising comes in many shapes and sizes

Take seriously the creativity of children and young people: they can and want to achieve more in the artistic sense than some would deem possible. Supply constructive criticism and motivation: for any one negative criticism praise at least three other things ...When planning concerts and events always leave space for new ideas: therefore be open-minded in respect of contemporary music, but on the other hand do not shy away from including in your programmes well-known, valuable pieces that have stood the test of time. Consider the degree to which the use of new equipment like a video projector, lighting effects, sound engineering etc might help. After all, that's show business. However, also do bear in mind how far the inner beauty of some music can get by without such superficialities. You should have a good structure in place for all your artistic aims. What? You are not artistically active? Then it is high time you did something about that. You can do it. World premières are the icing on the cake. Contemporary music removes the museum-like stuffiness from concert halls. Do not shrink from also attending concerts in which your choir performs new music and supply appropriate feedback. Choral competitions can offer marvellous opportunities for encounters. However, art *per se* is not something that lends itself to the competitive element. This should be deliberately put on record despite the large number of artistic competitions. True intellectual and artistic genius will always come through, no matter what some committees or juries may decide. We all know that Mozart ended up in a pauper's

grave, while other, far inferior spirits whose names nobody knows any more left the competitions of their times as victors.

As I write, many national choral organisations are musing about the future of choral singing. There are huge numbers of working parties, groups for planning projects and round tables, and every one of them states that something has to be done. But how can choral singing be made so attractive that it has a real future? What are the current structures in your national or regional umbrella organisation? And what is the degree to which the larger nation-wide organisations work with the future in mind? It would be interesting to know the thoughts of those at the grass roots, and whether those who work in our organisations really occupy themselves with singing. It is not enough to pin down the number of choirs and of their members on paper. Does your choral organisation make excessive demands on its members? Or does it try to act as a model of good – musical – activity? It goes without saying that there is absolutely nothing wrong with many of the existing structures and mechanisms. But the times they are a-changin', and committees, boards and circles of friends have to confront ever new requests. The unpopular topics are always those that are hardest to sort out. So back to the topic of vocal technique and sight reading!

Another relevant question is the one as to whether choral life is designed to serve professionals, or if it is only by amateurs, for amateurs. The one does not automatically exclude the other, and the latter may sometimes sound as if it were the former. What remains is the fact that the committee members of most German nationwide organisations fulfil political as well as musical functions. But politicians, too, need to be called to account. Are they doing what we expect and demand of them? And are they helping to set up initiatives, within which "change" – as Obama put it – can take place? Only when the "ordinary" member feels supported

from below as well as from above will choral life receive new impulses.

The media

Your own websites, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter can help attract international attention to artistic projects long before the established television and the press ever start to prick up their ears. Familiarize yourself with the techniques required. The German radio "landscape" has created a system of radio orchestras and radio choirs that is unique in the world. It is in this fertile soil that professional German choral and orchestral culture is flourishing and thus, with its outstanding quality, inspires both semi-professional and amateur choirs in Germany. Such national effects also extend beyond national borders. Stick out your neck when it comes to maintaining such quality in Germany and also to consolidating it in other countries. Maybe this culture is one of the very few true export values which Germany can offer at an international level, the human value of which might be a lesson to be learnt from Germany all over the world. The financial costs for these choirs and orchestras are – as relevant studies prove – comparatively low if we bear in mind the gains, both socio-economically and materially as well as the priceless spiritual and intellectual value. Financial cuts in this area are stupid, short-sighted and merely cutting corners.

Quality

There is no way past quality. Artistic everyday life allows too little money for an awful lot of what is desirable. But if there is quality, often doors open, the existence of which you hadn't even known about. Always work on the quality, no matter where you are placed, in a choir or in front of it. Bear in

mind that which matters most: the work, the music. Organisations and structures are not ends in themselves, they must serve the cause. Even if that may be an unpopular word, it's the only way to ensure that there is a future. Do not lose sight of the holistic picture: in that moment when vocal training, aural training, sight reading and conducting are efficiently entwined with each other and blend into one, a totally new sound comes into being, one which the public finds most pleasing. All music is serious, everything that happens on-stage must be entertaining. Remain faithful to music, and you will not be disappointed.

“And if I knew that the world were to come to an end tomorrow, I would still plant my young apple tree today” (attributed to Dr Martin Luther [the famous German religious reformer– and musician! – who lived around 1500 – translator]).

[\[1\]](#) Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, born 1928 in Vienna. Animal ethologist, investigated experimentally and descriptively the development of behaviour of mammals and compared the behaviour of communication of vertebrates.

Translated from the German by Irene Auerbach, UK