

Choral Singing and Citizen Education

André Pires

Choir Director

While honored by the invitation to write this article – on the relationship between choral singing and education – I did wonder what I could possibly say on the subject that hadn't already been said or written. A difficult task! I had to force myself not to turn down the invitation. But I've written the article; here it is.

Man is a political animal; he lives in society. "Other people" can be his hell (Sartre) or his paradise (Jesus), depending on the attitude a person takes towards social relationships. And because a choral group is a society in miniature, the limits and boundaries between individuals and the collective can be experienced there. The group supports the individual and vice versa. It only takes one tenor singing a note on a different pitch than his companions for the entire musical edifice to break down and collapse in full view of the public. Each singer functions like one side of a gothic arch, where the two opposing sides, right and left, mutually support each other in a marvelous and stable architectural equilibrium that ensures the cathedral's survival for many centuries... A choir can thus be considered a true laboratory for life in society.

A choir always forms out of a common interest, be that the simple desire to sing, or for some religious, political, business, school, professional, economic or other reason.

Apart from that shared interest, which is clear from the start, a group may be extremely diverse, its members young and old, male and female, white and black, married and single, gay and straight, of varying economic and education levels, talkative and introspective. In short, each choir is a micro-representation of the macro-society of which it is a part. It must seek unity through diversity, with diversity and in diversity. That unity will result from collectively imagining, creating and performing a musical project – just as a country or a nation is always the result of the collective imagination of its people. A choral group's sound cannot be an individual project because it belongs to all who participate in it. (Quite frankly, a choir director has no power during a concert to fix a problem of harmony or intonation. He can point it out during rehearsals, he can suggest a solution, but he will never be capable of correcting it... that is the task of the singers.)

This is what it means to be interdependent: One gives the best of oneself for the benefit of the group, and the success of the group becomes the success of each individual. The singer must always try to discover the right balance between “*standing out*” and “*blending in*”. He must never sing *pro domo sua*, but *pro domo nostra*. The part and the whole are in dialog and each constantly sustains the other. The audience's applause is the capstone of this shared success. That's why we can assert, without fear of being mistaken, that the experience of choral singing is capable of forming better citizens – citizens who feel more connected to each other, who are less egotistical and more disciplined, respectful, and tolerant.

Throughout every rehearsal, a singer can experience the unique sense of just what musical syntax (and indeed social syntax) is all about. For example, let's suppose the choir sings a harmonic sequence of four chords: C minor, A flat Major, F minor and, finally, C Major. During that time, the tenors

must sustain a long C natural: But suddenly they notice that their C doesn't stay the same note! First it is the tonic, in the C minor chord; then the third, in A flat Major; then the fifth, in F minor; and then again the tonic in the C Major chord. There are four C's! The transformation of the other voices around the tenors elicits, affects and modifies the notes despite themselves. The tenors, who during separate section rehearsals (equal voices) had the illusion of singing one long and unchanging C, discover during the rehearsal of all four parts together that they are being forced to continual transformation, forced to become something else, and something else, and yet again something else, drawn on by their relationship to voices different from their own. With these voices they keep forming different chords, like in a kaleidoscope, despite the first false sensation of always singing the same C... This purely musical syntax is certainly a metaphor for social and political syntax. What one learns in choir, one replicates in society.

Before concluding, I propose a visit to the dictionary. Looking up the etymology of a word, we can almost reach out and touch the magic moment of its genesis. We visit the moment that gave birth to the word – filled with the same power and energy capable of birthing an entirely new star! We often come to discover previously unimaginable meanings; we may even be filled with wonder before this magnificent event! The road that this word has traveled through time in order to arrive at our day, the transformations it has undergone, the additional meanings it has collected, all this holds power to refresh the word, to make it more alive to us beneath (and in spite of) its old skin. By inspecting the etymology of these two words – education and chorale – we can perhaps discover links between them, threads with which we might yet weave some final considerations.

1. The French word *choral* (choral, chorus in English) comes from the medieval Latin word *choralis*, an adaptation of

the still older Greek words *chorallion* and *chorós* (dance choir – from which the word “choreo-graphy” is derived – and by extension, *choeur de chant en commun*). Surely it cannot be sheer coincidence that in French, the word *coeur* (*cor*, *cordis*, in Latin) – for millennia the imagined seat of the psyche or soul – is a homophone of *choeur*... And that we say that music is sung or played “by heart”... and that we call a “chord” the simultaneous harmonic whole of several sounds on different pitches?

2. The word *education* comes from the Latin *ex ducere*, which means: to lead (*ducere*) from the inside out (*ex*). *Ex ducere* became *educate* by way of the forms *ex-ducare* and *e-ducare*. What a beautiful trajectory! First, because to promote someone’s education would thus be to bring about his development from the inside out, from the simplest to the most complex, from the most closed to the most open. Secondly, because it would be an invitation to go out from oneself, to leave one’s “*id*”, to turn towards others, to not be an “*idiot*”. To educate therefore means not only to help people negotiate the process of personal development, but also to their appropriate and harmonious integration into the exterior world, by establishing good relationships with others and with respect to their environment. I asked myself what other tool, what other instrument, what other process, available to teachers could be as effective as the arts and sports for attaining these two objectives. What subjects, what disciplines within the curriculum could succeed as well in accomplishing that task? Among the arts, music certainly stands out by far – and within music, choral music...

Choral singing certainly/clearly plays the role of a citizen in the modern world. The media do not dictate the repertoire sung by volunteer (non-professional) choirs. In that sense,

choral singing is a true resistance movement against the media, against the mass-produced music demanded by globalization. Choral singing continues teaching us, at the start of the 21st century, that people can make and listen to music, and derive true pleasure from it, without recourse to 64 subwoofers powered by a 30,000 watt system.

A choir always offers its audience the human universe – the measure, the mysteries, the miseries, the tenderness, the beauty and the seductiveness of the human.



André Pires is a choir director and leads the Choir of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. He is president of the artistic committee of the AMERICA CANTAT 6 festival, to be held May 7-15, 2010, in Juiz de Fora, Brazil.

Website: www.ufjf.br/americacantat

Translated by Anita Shaperd, USA