

# An 'Isle Full of Noises' – The Current State of Choral Music in the United Kingdom

*Andrew Potter, publisher & project manager*

In this occasional ICB series, the work of various national choral organizations is examined. The author is erstwhile Chairman of the Association of British Choral Directors.

Singing really is the *Zeitgeist* in the UK, but how does British choral music fare within the international context?

*The isle is full of noises*

*Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not*

Shakespeare's words from *The Tempest* resounded at the opening of the 2012 London Olympic Games and reflect the importance of music to the British. A wonderful variety of singers and songs was featured. These words, and the various Olympic ceremonies, also chime closely with the values of IFCM, which include **helping** to preserve choral music and promote cultural diversity.

British choral music has its deepest historical roots in a collegiate and cathedral choral tradition, where choirs of boys and men have sung and developed beautiful sacred music for more than half a millennium. There is a strong 150 year-old tradition of amateur and community music-making, and in the last half century British popular music and artists have taken a leading position in the world's repertoire.

Just over 25 years ago the Association of British Choral Directors (*abcd*) was formed to enable better training, networking and awareness. Bodies representing choral groups had been in existence for several decades, but none of them represented the conductor. Now with 700 members, *abcd* has developed an informative and interactive web site, various training programmes (often attended by colleagues from outside the UK) and an annual convention. The formation of *abcd* coincided with a blossoming of choral singing brought about by a televised Choir of the Year competition which showed a real broadening of choral music-making; it began to be recognised that choral leaders needed, to a large extent, to be 'technicians' whether in terms of the voice, the collective sound or interpretation.



*abcd* Vice Presidents John Rutter CBE, Pamela Cook MBE and Brian Kay cut the 25th Anniversary cake  
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Often the British can seem inflexible and even arrogant about their traditions. But it is also the British way to self doubt. We can not help feeling that our national football

teams, no matter how well they start in the World Cup, will inevitably fail. It took us a few days into the Olympics to realise that we were going to have a successful games, even beyond our dreams. Maybe our strong tradition has simply prevented the development that we see in other countries. Is it a fair judgement to say that we are insular, defensive or complacent? The truth, as always, probably lies somewhere in between.

I sounded out some key members of *abcd* who between them have a wealth of experience of choral music around the world. Collectively they have worked or participated in competitions and festivals in Northern, Central, Southern and Eastern Europe, North and South America, China, South Korea, Australia, Africa and Israel. Many British choirs have won the most exacting international competitions, as have a number of non-British choirs led by British choral leaders. But I soon realised how little I know in terms of defining and measuring 'successful' British choral development in an international context.

From my friends emerged a number of themes, the first of which was the lack of training in the UK. It seems that this is left to *abcd*, and we run a number of basic, intermediate and advanced courses each year attended by 80 individuals. A few universities also pitch in, but without any systematic or comprehensive national programme. (One friend illustrates how well training is resourced in South Korea where, for an annual week's choral course, all the music to be studied, which usually is taken from recent publications, was assembled in one book with a CD.)

The lack of available training may partly arise because there are comparatively few paid posts. In the UK, choral directing is not a big 'profession'. There are few salaried posts outside the BBC, the cathedrals and the college choirs of Oxford and Cambridge. Many of our best choral directors overstretch themselves in order to scrape a living, or

complement their choral work with teaching in other music fields. Another inevitable reason for a lack of training may be lack of aspiration. Many amateur choirs are undemanding of their choral leaders, not realising how much better they could be under someone better trained and better travelled. One of the jobs of *abcd* should be to help choirs choose a leader who will take them to new heights, rather than just finding someone with whom they can work.

In the USA, South Korea and parts of Europe there is a strong and populous professional infrastructure, where universities employ choral professors for a wide variety of groups, and where substantial church budgets fund a director and other resources as a matter of course. A number of our best British choral leaders have moved away in order to take up key positions in other countries.

So if the funding of training and the infrastructure is a vexed one, then financing travel similarly falls into question. We see choirs from many other parts of the world with much better access to this kind of funding. Essentially (and ironically), in spite of there being excellent initiatives to bring foreign musical groups of interest into the country, there is little or no public money available to enable UK choirs to travel abroad. Even our world-class National Youth Choirs and prize-winning amateur groups cannot generally access public funding. Rather, any choir wishing to travel has to find its own funding – from parents or businesses or events. Again, traditional collegiate choirs tend to be an exception because they often have wealthy foundations – some even have lucrative recording contracts – to fund extensive travel programmes.

Related to this issue is the one of accessibility. Travelling with choirs has become less of an option for young people or choral directors who are school teachers. There is a mismatch between our educational year and continental Europe – and the USA and Australia too. *To quote a friend working abroad:*

*“Unlike the results/exam/curriculum-obsessed UK education system, the schools in Italy, Germany and other countries are far more relaxed about kids taking time out to experience opportunities in which they would otherwise be unable to participate.”*

Parents have become less inclined for their children to spend so much time singing in case they fail to prepare well for essential exams. They want to be sure about exactly who is looking after their children, and they are less willing to accept home-stays for their children in other countries. With young people, singing competes with an increasing amount of other activities, not to mention our mounting petrol costs.

Many UK choirs treat their travel as a holiday, whereas others see it more as an opportunity for improvement by comparison. Tour companies thrive on choirs visiting pleasant locations, but not necessarily commanding audiences. A lesser number of choirs travel in order to share experiences, and they generally attend competitions or festivals, planning their itineraries and accommodation through networking with choral groups overseas. A few years ago *abcd* announced that it had set aside some money to fund individual choral directors to attend festivals in Europe. There was no take-up. It is likely that many people are afraid of comparison and competition; organizations such as IFCM and *abcd* need to work hard to break this pattern and allow choral leaders and their choirs to see the benefits of travel broadening the mind.

Some of the UK's most internationally recognised composers, such as John Rutter and Bob Chilcott, have gained particular recognition by being prepared to undertake a huge amount of travel throughout their careers, not just promoting their own music but listening hard to the repertoire of other composers too, and the choirs that sing it.

So why do we need training and comparison? It seems that UK choirs have a lot to learn, particularly in terms of

preparation and sound. We are rightly proud of our sight-reading but unfortunately this ability can engender a culture in which good sight-reading is equated with less rehearsal time. This flies in the face of the ethos of the best choirs who work hard over long periods to hone their performance skills. They do not see the rehearsal process as note-learning. Rather they recognise a need to work on the interpretation, the sound, the story and the cohesion. Comparison will also encourage us to improve our language skills. As an island nation, and with the wide general usage of the English language internationally, we are not incentivized to master other languages in the way that other countries do.

To quote once again my friend, *who works elsewhere in Europe*:  
*"In a sweeping statement, I would say that UK choirs often have a broader repertoire than European ones, but their standard of performance is often not as good. For me, choir hopping is another frustratingly bad UK habit – we all know the good sight readers who sing in two or three different choirs per week – and often do not seem too happy. When I talk to them about vocal colour, blend, ensemble, spiritual uplift, flow of text, etc., they look at me with incredulity. Generally speaking, where I work, folks will sing in one choir only – often with two rehearsals a week – and some of the performances can be amazing."*

Finally, regarding our choral organisations: it is interesting that two colleagues, who have worked abroad for a significant amount of time, had not even heard of IFCM. The UK used to have a seat on the IFCM Board, but for some reason this ceased. In any case, *abcd* would have to fund such a seat. How much of a priority would this be over items such as the training programme or the web site?

And that, to me, articulates the key issue for *abcd*. To what extent is it prepared to support the idea that a wider window on the world would bring great benefits to the British choral

movement? If the answer is yes, then we must find funders, and work with IFCM and our fellow bodies around the world to promote the idea of 'improvement through movement'.

In the 1840s, the German poet Heinrich Heine toured England, and having soaked up quite a lot of the early Victorian cultural scene, he wrote: "These people have no ear either for rhythm or music and their unnatural passion for piano playing and singing is all the more repulsive. Nothing on Earth is more terrible than English music," he opined, "except English painting."

I will defend English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish music and music-making – our Island and its noises – to the end. But that does not mean to say that our choral singing can not be improved immeasurably by broadening its horizons.

## An *abcd* Timeline

- 1985** Andrew Potter and John Rutter attend the ACDA Conference in Salt Lake City and wonder why the UK does not have an organisation for choral directors
- 1986** First Convention held at Christchurch, Oxford, funded by Oxford University Press Walter S. Collins, then President of ACDA suggests the neat abbreviation *abcd*  
Andrew Fairbairn, Chair of the British Association of Young Choirs, pays £20 as the first subscription  
Brian Kay appointed first Chairman and later Vice-President
- 1987** Sir David Willcocks appointed President
- 1988** first newsletter published
- 1989** *abcd* delegation visits its Swedish counterpart  
Föreningen Sveriges Körledare
- 1991** Anthony Philpot becomes first Honorary General Secretary
- 1994** *abcd* delegation to Hungary
- 1997** membership reaches 500
- 1999** First *abcd* training course takes place
- 2000** *abcd* delegation to Finland and Estonia  
First professional General Secretary appointed
- 2001** John Rutter Appointed Vice-President
- 2002** Pamela Cook appointed Vice President
- 2003** Chair and General Secretary attend ACDA convention in  
New York
- 2008** *abcd* appointed flagship organisation for the national  
'Sing Up' campaign.
- 2011** *abcd* celebrates 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary at 25<sup>th</sup> Convention  
New choral work commissioned from young composer Kerry Andrew  
Gala concert, plenary session at conference with  
distinguished panel including all three Vice-Presidents
- 2012** the Members' Area of the website (the Podium) launched  
with specially commissioned articles and over 100 archive  
articles from past editions of *Mastersinger*  
Partnership formed with *Choir and Organ* magazine
- 2013** First Advanced training course scheduled