

# Multitasking: Choral Management

A description of the job and where to learn it

The higher the musical ambitions of a choir, the higher the organizational burden. But what exactly is the job of a choral manager? Is it possible to learn it? And if so, where?

## Looking for somebody capable of doing everything

*By Daniel Schalz, Editor of Chorzeit, das Vokalmagazin*

Wouldn't it be a dream if you as a choral conductor could devote yourself exclusively to your musical work? Reality, alas, is quite different: "Concert programmes have to be made, scores ordered, rooms rented and equipped, money raised, posters printed, tickets sold; and even the singers require a certain administrative effort"; this is a list set up in "Schott Masterclass Chorleitung – vom Konzept zum Konzert", Schott 2011 (Schott Masterclass for Choral Conducting – from the Concept to the Concert). And the author adds: "Even I am spending half of my time organizing and planning; many hours each day..." [1]

Please note that the author of this book is not a choral conductor of an amateur choir: he is Simon Halsey, chief conductor of the *Rundfunkchor Berlin* (Berlin Radio Choir), a professional top ensemble. Even for this choir, organizational tasks are a normal part of the conductor's work, even though he has experts for tour planning, PR and events organization at his disposal.

The more ambitious an ensemble is, the more extensive its organizational tasks are. This is why the much quoted "egg-

laying woolly milk-sow" (a very German expression for an all-round talent; translator's note) is required to manage a choir. This is at least the impression given by Cornelia Bend, choral manager of the SWR Vokalensemble, who lists as some of her most important tasks: responsibility for the staff, the budget and the programmes; handing out composition commissions, acquisition (of sponsors, clients, funds etc.; translator's note), contacts with events managers, setting up of contracts, marketing, PR, coordination of radio, CD and television programmes, promotion of the importance of vocal music by networking with associations, projects with sponsored choirs, music offers for all ages...". Such an amount of work is not possible without certain concessions: "It is necessary to learn how to deal with the fact that it is never possible to reach completely one's own goals", says Bend, "or to fulfil all the wishes of the ensemble."

### **The professionals have learnt most of their skills on the job**

This is even truer for amateur groups, as in general all the work has to be done by very few persons, in some cases even by the choral conductor alone. But this endless to-do list is frequently asking too much of him, not only in terms of time spent but also in terms of knowledge, for as far as amateur choirs are concerned there are few possibilities of practical training courses (cf. interview in the following article).

As far as the top is concerned, things are not that much better. As a matter of fact, there exists a series of basic study programmes in "cultural management"; however, choral management is almost never dealt with in these courses. One of the reasons is that in Germany there are only about two dozen choirs and vocal groups which can afford to employ a manager on a permanent basis, and even they frequently are not full-time staff. This means that there are practically no jobs for graduates in this field.

In addition, every choral conductor – professional or committed amateur – is above all a cultural manager in the wider sense. “Choral management is just a small aspect of this job which is much more complex”, says Bernard Heß, choral manager of RIAS Kammerchor in Berlin. “It is irrelevant whether one directs an orchestra, a choir or a folk dance group; the requirements are the same: Marketing, PR, fundraising, etc.” He does not consider himself a choral manager but a cultural manager working for a choir right now, using his expertise, his long-time professional experience and a good network. With similar success, he has managed in the past a foundation, a festival, an international competition and a Baroque orchestra. “And there is nothing to be said against someone coming from a completely different profession”, says Heß, “if his or her work results in success.”

Indeed, many professional choral managers in Germany have learned their trade by experience and not by studying. Oliver Geisler, manager of the Dresdner Kreuzchor, has a doctorate in philosophy; Susanne Eckel (Deutscher Jugendkammerchor) studied music education. Christopher Hartmann (Regensburger Domspatzen) is an economist, but already during his university studies he created a concert agency and together with his brother Ludwig Hartmann and Stephan Schmid, founded the “Tage Alter Musik” (Early Music Days) in Regensburg. After graduating he started working as the managing director of the Fachakademie (now Hochschule) für katholische Kirchenmusik und Musikerziehung Regensburg, before becoming the Manager of the Domspatzen, with which he had sung as a child. “Since my time in school I have come up with many ideas for my work through ‘learning by doing’”, says Hartmann. “Even then I helped with the organization of events for concert agencies – from ticket sales, poster campaigns, and managing cloakrooms to entrance checking.”

Also, many choral managers have studied arts. Jürgen Wagner,

who has been responsible for Chorwerk Ruhr since 2008, studied singing. Cornelia Bend (SWR Vokalensemble) studied the oboe as well as musicology, history and philosophy. She also took cultural management courses at the Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg. "As far as my experience is concerned, a study course in cultural management alone is not sufficient without other specialized courses and some experience with an ensemble in order to carry out the many different management tasks", she says.

Hans-Hermann Rehberg, since 1990 director of Rundfunkchor Berlin, has a similar opinion: "I think that it is not possible to learn management." After having studied singing at the Hochschule für Musik in Leipzig, he sang for five years at the Musikalische Komödie and then for nine years in the Rundfunkchor Berlin; he continued his management training by work shadowing at the Musikhochschulen in Hamburg and Berlin.

Just like Rehberg, many choral managers have themselves sung or are still singing. "This is an absolute prerequisite of the job", says book author Alexandra Jachim ("Erfolgreiches Chormanagement" – Successful Choral Management). "One must know what makes a choir tick." As far as the semi-professional and amateur choirs are concerned, which means 99 percent of all choirs, this prerequisite is almost always self-evident. For example Jazzchor Freiburg: Nina Ruckhaber, an alto, has been taking care of all things organizational since 2012. She has been singing in choirs since childhood and very early on she was interested in what was going on around her. "In my school choir I checked the lists of people present," she remembers. "During my senior classes I helped with the organization of concerts. And at university I worked as an assistant to the music director and as such I was co-responsible for the university choir."

**There are only a few possibilities for further training for**

## amateurs

Ruckhaber, who studied music education at Koblenz University, acquired further know-how in a training course for choral management of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Bonn, as well as one for music management and music law at the Musikhochschule Freiburg. She also took further training seminars with music associations. By doing so, she practically exhausted a great part of the existing possibilities of further training. True, there are a few seminars offered by the larger regional choral associations; most of these are centred on legal aspects governing associations. For instance, the Chorverband NRW, in co-operation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, offers a seven-module course "Management of Associations in Choral Practice". If you ask the Bundesakademie für kulturelle Bildung (Federal Academy for Cultural Education) in Wolfenbüttel about this subject, they will refer you to general courses on cultural management – there are no special courses for choral management.

Faced with such a scant offer, some top ensembles take initiatives themselves: the WDR Rundfunkchor regularly offers internships within their own management. The senior classes in the boarding school of the Windsbacher Knabenchor complete "P-Seminars" in choral management. Since last year, the Chorjugend im Deutschen Chorverband has tried to help with further training courses in choral management (cf. third article of this dossier).

For most choral organizers in Germany, however, the only possibility is learning by doing – and to compensate lack of knowledge with a maximum of passion. For work can be very fulfilling, if it bears fruit. "My volunteering for the SonntagsChor Rheinland-Pfalz is so much fun", says Werner Mattern; he is an engineer who spent several decades planning chemical works all over the world. Now he organizes up to twelve concerts each year. "I work with very interesting partners, for instance the ZDF (*a German television channel*;

*translator's note*), the SWR (a German radio station; *translator's note*), the lotto or choral federations – this colours my life!”

The price to be paid is an intense personal expense of energy and time: “The Jazzchor Freiburg pays me half-time”, Nina Ruckhaber says, “but, as a matter of fact, I invest a lot of time in volunteering.” This is also true of professional staff: “Often I work fifty or sixty hours a week,” Cornelia Bend (SWR Vokalensemble) tells us. “I am unable to count the hours I spend working in a week”, says Hans Rehberg (Rundfunkchor Berlin) – and adds immediately his personal justification: “It’s a way of life!”

*Translated from the German by Jutta Tagger, France*

*Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy/UK*

[1] Simon Halsey, Schott Master Class Chorleitung – vom Konzept zum Konzert; Praxisbuch + 2 DVD (4 hours of music), Schott 2011 (information added by the translator)