

# The Places Where the Choir Performs and Has its Being

Not just a question of space...

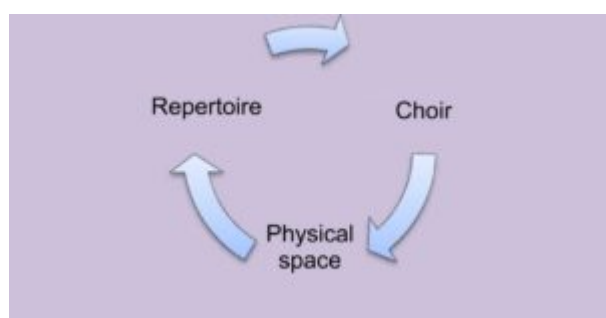
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If we think about choral music in the context of physical and environmental spaces, we find we must think about a very changeable aspect of our musical activity compelling us to look at – albeit quickly and not in depth – the entire history of the choir as an entity. The places where a choir sings vary according to the different periods in the history of our civilisation, and these changes should be seen as indicating a vitality synonymous with ongoing development, both musical and social. These two dimensions are closely connected: the *place* where the choir performs is part of its *existence*.

But where, today, can we find information on this subject? There are a number of sources (which historians define as “direct” or “indirect”) including: images (known as “musical iconography”), narrative (not always strictly musical), chronicles and court registers, epistolary sources, treatises, documents pertaining to church administration, etc. A notable mass of material providing information which, if read and cross-referenced, allows us to reconstruct with a reasonable degree of reliability the evolution of a very special aspect of “making music together”, which has always been a feature of human experience.

Researching the spaces used for choral activity involves also thinking about the relationship that actual space has had in the conception and development of the choral repertoire: we

could begin with the Gregorian monodies institutionalised by the Benedictines in their monastic context of *Ora et labora* and continue up to the popular Renaissance repertoire performed at court during feasts and on other special occasions. This is a subject which could be developed through an almost endless number of examples, leading us to define a first significant circular relationship:



The composition of choral groups has not always been the same, but has varied from small groups of just a few singers, through large bodies of up to fifty or sixty members, to the huge choirs of the nineteenth century. This great numerical variation has had a notable effect on the venues used for musical events and on the organisation of spaces.

The first stage in our ideal exploration is to look at the pre-Christian cultures where choral music was an integral part of religious ritual and of theatrical performances, thus making choral music socially legitimate and important. In the case of religious ritual, the choir is grouped around the altar, conducting a direct dialogue with its co-celebrants and with the divinity. This close contact denotes a significant cultural dimension, suggesting that the choir is an integral part of human existence.

When tragedies were performed in the theatre, the chorus stood in a dedicated semi-circular space in front of the stage,

called the "orchestra", where they could sing and also dance. The chorus was regarded as one of the actors, participating in the entire performance.

We know that the hard-fought affirmation of Christianity did not overlook choral participation, although there is very little documentation available. Images found in the catacombs in the Rome area suggest that singing together was a regular element in early liturgical services.

In the Middle Ages the experience of singing in a choir and the spaces where this took place were connected with the space occupied by music in contemporary society. The link between two dimensions of human life – education and faith – is especially significant. Choral music was usually sung in enclosed private spaces, such as the churches, monasteries, and educational institutions of the time. There were many more sacred spaces than there were secular, although it seems certain that much of the mediaeval repertoire of secular music was intended for choral performance.

That St Benedict of Norcia (480-547) devoted part of his Rule, the *Regula Monasteriorum*, to the practice of choral music bears witness to the significant role assigned to it, a role which remained constant through following centuries. The physical arrangement of the choir is a metaphor for the harmony, ordered and measured, existing between body and spirit. The positioning of a monastic community for sung prayers is a functional expression of the desire to render praise and honour to God, and this is the key to understanding the precise ordering of standing, sitting, interacting, and so forth. This is no sterile rigour, but an expression of the values at the foundation of monastic experience.

In the late Middle Ages (1000-1492) certain theatrical performances which drew their inspiration from the Gospels were performed in churches, and here the role of the choir was of vital importance. This was the first step in a process

which would lead to the development of specific repertoires – lauds – for the bodies entrusted with their effectuation: the confraternities. Thus, choral performance generated social aggregation.

The Renaissance was an especially fertile time for choral music, both sacred and secular. The rise of the Court as a model of social organisation gave notable support to the proliferation of choral performances at significant times, and the spaces devoted to the choir included wonderful ornate reception rooms and that new invention, the court theatre. Choral repertoires developed and flourished through a fertile relationship with poetry, and the spaces devoted to choral music at this time emphasised the social and cultural dimension of the courts, which became a driving force for the arts.

At the same time, the production and performance of sacred music flourished hugely, aided by the proliferation of church music schools (*scholae cantorum*) which were founded with the aim of training professional singers who would be able to provide the necessary numbers for the various structures used in performing polyphonic music. Competent professional singers were required because choral music had become much more complex (*counterpoint*) and required not simply generic singing ability but notable expertise in emission and expressiveness. These schools gave rise to a huge number of musical events in all the most outstanding seats of Christianity, places noted also for the great beauty of their decoration, resulting in a kind of dialogue between the visual arts and music: and at the centre of it all was Man and his voice.

At this time the division of music into two sections, sacred and secular, was evident at various levels – written music, formal organisation of pieces, venues for choral music – and the practice of choral music developed in a dynamic cultural context. In secular music, the first musical instruments began to make an appearance, determining – as can be seen from

paintings of the period – certain requisites in their positioning and in the way they were balanced with singing voices.

An important aspect of this was the development of polychoral music in Venice: two choirs, separated spatially, sang in alternation. This type of music was determined in part by the architectural design of St Mark's basilica, and was one example of that circular relationship mentioned above.



*An example of sacred choral music concerts in the Baroque age. The miniature shows the ceremony at which Alfonso Litta was elected a cardinal by the Papal Legate, cardinal Carafa, in 1666, and is taken from "Insignia degli anziani del Comune dal 1530 al 1796", in E. MAULE, *Momenti di festa musicale sacra a Bologna nelle Insignia degli Anziani (1666–1751)*, in «Il Carrobbio», XIII, Luigi Parma, Bologna 1987, p. 261. The choir can be seen placed at the centre,*

*with two musical ensembles  
at the sides, and two  
organs behind.*

With the advent of melodrama in the sixteenth century, choral music rediscovered its scenic dimension: the theatre. We may see this as regaining a space which had always belonged to the chorus. There was no longer an exclusive physical space, functional to their activity; instead the chorus was assigned a place on the stage, just like the other players. The prominence of the chorus in an opera varied greatly, from one century to another and from one European country to another, in terms both of space and time.

Music history studies have always held that the positioning of the chorus in relation to the orchestra had its own significance, and here too we can see notable variations, from its presence on stage to its position behind or beside the musical instruments. Each situation required its own strategies, functional both to the sound output and to the requirements of an emerging and sometimes uncertain type of orchestral direction, which was often entrusted to several people. Thus there was no single arrangement, but a number of different arrangements, frequently hybrid. The numerous designs of theatres or of particular performances provide interesting information in this respect.



*Joseph Cristophe, Baptism of the Dauphin in the presence of Lully, oil on canvas, Versailles, the castle museum, in Ritratti di compositori, Officine grafiche De Agostini, Novara 1990, pp. 42-43 (various authors, edited by G.Taborelli and V.Crespi)*

In deciding where to place the choir much depends, and has always depended, on the conductor's style of directing. The use, or non-use, of the conductor's baton, and the development of a theory of conducting, have been determining factors in the choice of one position on stage rather than another: in front of the orchestra, behind it, or to one side.

Giuseppe Verdi made the chorus an important element in his operas, often entrusting to them the delicate task of embodying and giving voice to the values of a given society.

This reflection has been based mainly on musical performance in places and spaces visible to the audience. We should also think about choral performance in monastic communities, often – especially under the very strict rules of the past – unseen by others, where choral singing, then as now, was functional to the practices of faith. Are performance and listening the

same? Do the basic parameters change? And what about sound output? What relationship is there between sound and vision in our concert performances?

Another important consideration concerns the choice of building materials for the places where choirs perform: why was stone so widely used in the Middle Ages and later? Was this simply because it was available, or was it a conscious choice? This may seem a matter of little significance, but how many choirs see their hard work thwarted by poor acoustics when they perform in reinforced concrete buildings?

These considerations are important in a society largely inclined to the visual dimension, even where musical performance and listening are concerned. It would be a good thing if choirs – in the sense of all the choristers involved – could take these aspects into account when planning a musical event. All too often the choice of venue and positioning of the choir is determined by the director or the organisers. The matter should be discussed, pointing out that placing the sopranos on the right or on the left, the choir in front of the organ or behind it, are aspects that make a difference.

I hope these reflections can stimulate critical awareness of the many aspects of choral music in all who practise this art, whether professionally or as amateurs, and that they may realise that the experience of our predecessors is not a body of knowledge destined only for an elite of refined connoisseurs, but rather living knowledge which – even after centuries – can kindle enthusiasm and help us to develop our skill in “making music”.





*Here, as well as the instruments, we can see two alternating choirs, together with the organs. In the presbytery of San Petronio Church, the saint's feast day is being celebrated, in the presence of James III of England (the "Old Pretender") and his wife Maria Klementyna Sobieska, 1722, in E. MAULE, Momenti di festa musicale, Op.cit., p. 260.*