

# In Search of a Definition for Children's and Youth Choirs

*Anne Kankainen*

Choral singing means a group of people singing together in unison or in parts, with or without instrumental accompaniment. Another prerequisite of a choir as an instrument is that each part consists of multiple singers. When thinking about children's and youth choirs, this definition does not sufficiently describe the subject. Characteristic features such as the sound quality, the physical aspects of the voice of young people and – above all – the age range in these ensembles are essential to define what kind of instrument we are talking about.

One might ask why a definition of children's and youth choirs is necessary. Is it needed because each ensemble, led by its conductor, must decide the criteria and manner in which to group the young singers in relation to the pedagogical approach, the artistic goals, the structure of the choir, and time available? The answer is yes, as long as the ensemble is not taking part in particular choral events, such as festivals or competitions. A clear definition of age for children's and youth choirs becomes more important when the ensemble becomes exposed to the national and international choral scene. Specifically, competitions demand standard categories in order to guarantee the same – or at least similar – conditions of competition.

In order to give an idea of the current situation in the international field, I have compiled some definitions of ensembles for the categories *Children's Choir* and *Youth Choir* as stated in the terms of participation for different choir

events around the world. By studying them we can attempt to generate a definition that comfortably fits the international choral scene.

***Zoltán Kodály International Children's Choir Festival 2010 (Hungary):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 16 years old or younger
- *Youth Choir category:* Non-existent
- *Other criteria:* None

***European Music Festival for Young People 2010 (Belgium):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 14 years old or younger
- *Youth Choir category:* Singers must be 25 years old or younger (for ensembles with both equal and mixed voices)
- *Other criteria:* None

***Il Garda in Coro International Choral Competition of Children's Choirs (Italy):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 16 years old or younger
- *Youth Choir category:* Non-existent
- *Other criteria:* Choirs can participate in two different categories:

1. Sacred
2. Secular

***Cork Choral Festival 2009 (Ireland):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Non-existent
- *Youth Choir category:* Singers must be 24 years old or younger
- *Other criteria:* Choirs can participate in 3 different

categories:

1. Primary school choirs
2. Equal voices – post-primary
3. Mixed voices – post-primary

***International Choir Festival Tallinn 2011 (Estonia):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 16 years old or younger
- *Youth Choir category:* Singers must be 20 years old or younger
- *Other criteria:* None

***International Anton Bruckner choir competition & Festival 2009 (Austria):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 16 years old or younger
- *Youth Choir category:*
  1. Singers must be 19 years old or younger (women's choirs)
  2. Singers must be 25 years old or younger (men's choirs)
  3. Singers must be 25 years old or younger (mixed choirs)
- *Other criteria:* None

***World Youth Choir:***

- *Children's Choir category:* Non-existent
- *Youth Choir category:* Singers must be between 17 and 26 years old
- *Other criteria:* None

***Pacific Rim Children's Chorus Festival 2010 (Hawaii):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be in grades 6 to 12 (which corresponds to approximately 12 to 18 years old)

- *Youth Choir category:* Non-existent
- *Other criteria:* Treble children's choirs only

***International Youth Music Festival Bratislava (Slovakia):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Subdivision:

1. Preschool
2. 12 years old or younger
3. 16 years old or younger

- *Youth Choir category:* Subdivision

1. 21 years old or younger (equal and mixed voices separate)
2. 30 years old or younger (equal and mixed voices separate)

- *Other criteria:* None

***German Choir Competition 2010 (Germany):***

- *Children's Choir category:* Singers must be 16 years old or younger, and the average age must not be greater than 13 years old
- *Youth Choir category:* Singers must be between 13 and 22 years old, and the average age must not be greater than 16 years old
- *Other criteria:* Singers in boy's choirs must be 30 years old or younger

***Coastal Sound Festival 2011 (Canada):***

- *Children's Choir category:* No age limit
- *Youth Choir category:* No age limit
- *Other criteria:* None

This comparison shows some variation in terms of age range. The information provided refers primarily to age *limits*:

## **Children's choirs:**

- If there is only one category, the maximum age varies from 14 to 17. Some competitions set an average age for participants. For example, the *German Choir Competition* requires that only an average age of 13 years is allowed for singers in children's choirs.
- If there is more than one category for children's choirs, further distinction is made for younger groups. For example, 12 is the maximum age for singers participating in the *International Youth Music Festival* in Bratislava.
- Children's choirs have a common feature because the repertoire is voiced equally. One exception is the *Cork International Choral Festival*, where two categories for school choirs are defined: one for equal voices and the other category for mixed voices (The age required is: "after preschool").

## **Youth Choirs:**

- The maximum age for youth choirs in the examples provided is 30! The 'lowest maximum age' is 19 years old for girl's choirs, which is required at the *International Anton Bruckner Choir Competition and Festival*.
- The category "youth choir" needs to be subdivided into treble and mixed voices. Youth choirs which sing in equal voices are usually girl's choirs. Some competitions offer an extra category for male choirs (see: *International Anton Bruckner Choir Competition and Festival*).
- Youth choirs with mixed voices can be either boy's choirs or mixed choirs. The age range in boy's choirs ranges from about 10 years (sopranos and altos) up to 30 years or more (tenors and basses).

One aspect that must also be taken into consideration when

determining definitions for children or young people is their legal status. In Germany the situation is as follows: "children" are persons who have not reached the age of 14 years. The following group called "Jugendliche" describes minors who are 14, but not yet 18 years old. Furthermore, according to the social security statutes, persons from 18 years up to 27 are called "young people". When applying these guidelines to our topic, it shows that children's choirs often "exceed" the age limits by several years. In the case of youth choirs, the broader definition of "young people" applies to many ensembles.

Finally, a word should be said about young voices and their characteristics. A child's voice – if used naturally – usually sounds bright and straight, which means no vibrato is used. Furthermore, the voices are not yet very strong in terms of dynamics. During the years of pre-puberty and puberty, the actual voice and the voice quality of boys and girls changes dramatically because of the physical growth of the organs involved in the singing process. Naturally, the age of puberty should play an important role in the conceptualization of children's and youth choirs. That means, for example, that boys who have reached puberty should be placed according to the restricted possibilities of their voice at that time. Boy's choirs have to 'plan' accordingly so that their singers can stay in the choir for a longer period of time. This becomes more and more difficult when considering the fact that puberty often begins earlier than anticipated. In regard to young adults, the voices in youth ensembles can sound more mature and develop more volume compared to children's choirs. This, of course, depends on the vocal education and individual voices in the youth choir.

The acoustic criteria used to differentiate between children's and youth choirs are important and should also play a role in the conception of choruses. As stated above, the musical background and individual development of each singer is also

significant. In other words, age prerequisites are not always helpful when a choir conductor has to decide which ensemble is 'right' for one singer or another.

Nevertheless, as I have already pointed out, an international guideline would be helpful in providing an orientation for choirs and choir conductors and make it easier for those who want to participate in choir events and competitions abroad. I suggest that we use the following criteria to define these ensembles:

1) Children's Choirs (equal voices):

- Young children's choirs (boys and girls): maximum age 12, with an average age not older than 10 years.
- Older children's choirs (boys before puberty and girls): maximum age 16, with an average age not older than 13 years.

2) Youth Choirs (Girls' Choirs, Young Male Choirs and Mixed Choirs in separate categories): maximum age 26, with an average age not older than 18 years.

3) Boy's Choirs (S-A-T-B): ages from 10 to 26, with an average age not older than 18 years.

The advantage for these suggestions would be that there are no strict age limits but rather average age prerequisites. For the second children's choir category, the average age of not more than 13 years guarantees a clear focus on young voices, taking into account the legal status "child" (see above) at the same time. The maximum age of 26 years in youth choirs seems quite high compared to some guidelines stated before in this article. Requiring an average age of 18 years provides that there will not be a majority of, for example, 25-year-old choristers in a youth choir (who would have a broader experience in choral singing than 17-year-olds, have a more developed vocal instrument, and also might sound differently).

My recommended categorization is only a suggestion. It cannot take into account all the different conditions and traditions concerning choirs made up of children and young people around the world. Nevertheless, it can be considered a starting point for a discussion about defining and standardizing children's choirs and youth choirs as choral ensembles, and, in addition, it also provides specific requirements for choral events at an international level.

*Revised by Diana Leland, USA*