

Studying Choral Conducting around the globe: Africa, South Africa

Rudolf de Beer, teacher and conductor, IFCM Board Member

Edited by Lore Auerbach, Germany, and Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy

Music, dance, and singing (individually and in groups) were always, as with all ancient cultures, a part of everyday life in Africa. Since colonisation the singing tradition changed and a more structured form of group singing, choir singing, became an essential part of cultural activities on the continent. The huge role that the church played in this is to be seen in the many church choirs still existing today. The foundation that was laid down by the missionaries through the teaching of European hymns to the Christianised Africans was the start of four-part choir singing by non-European groups. This can be seen as the first 'education' in choir singing in the region.

In South Africa this tradition developed to become a marriage between African and European cultures, each standing solidly planted on its own feet while also incorporating aspects from the other culture. Following the English tradition, competitions became a major part of choral life in South Africa. Many of these later incorporated training for conductors.

A number of educational institutions, from schools through educational colleges up to university level, were also hosts to some of the country's best choirs, which again resulted in the establishment of courses in choral education at some of these institutions, though mainly as part of general music

education studies in the case of most former European Afrikaans-speaking universities. Conductors of these choirs went to Europe to study choral conducting, for example Philip McLachlan, who was a lecturer and conductor at the University of Stellenbosch and who visited Germany to learn from Kurt Thomas.

The English-speaking universities followed in the footsteps of the United Kingdom as regards music courses, importing into South Africa Royal Schools and Trinity examination graded systems for most instruments and music theory. The Afrikaans community established their own equally popular examination system under the University of South Africa (UNISA). All these graded examination systems later included examinations for choirs and conductors, although without the possibility of formal training in conducting technique for candidates. As with the other disciplines, these conductors had to find private teachers.

Philip McLachlan and his wife Helen Radloff, in 1944

Both European and African choirs organised gatherings for choirs and/or conductors. However, the African choirs focused on competitions while the European groups focused on symposia and workshops such as the regular national gatherings of the South African Choral Organisation. The church, however, still played an important role in developing the choral tradition and the education of choral musicians. Anglican Church musicians were educated in the English tradition, which included training as choral directors. This tradition is still very important in South Africa.



Even before the first democratic elections for all people in South Africa, many choirs and conductors travelled abroad on concert tours, or to take part in competitions. These conductors also registered for courses, workshops, and master-classes at many choir festivals and symposia. The need for the formal training of conductors became stronger and stronger. One reason was that the average choir could not compete with many other choirs for example in Europe, where education for choral musicians was already more established.

But it was not until 1994 that a major shift in focus of the training of conductors took place when universities started to expand their curricula in order to educate future choral conductors more comprehensively. After the change in political policy in South Africa, the first Scandinavian choir to visit the country after a long cultural boycott was Schola Cantorum

from the University of Oslo. Its conductor, Kåre Hanke, who was also secretary general of the Norwegian Choirs Association, convinced this organisation to find ways to support the new democracy, in the first place to establish a national choral organisation for all the people of South Africa, and secondly to educate choral conductors. The Norwegian government offered financial support for these efforts, and contributed extra funds to establish academic courses in South Africa. These funds were utilised to establish the courses at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and Hanke was the first lecturer of these courses. Other universities started to establish their own courses, of which the Universities of Pretoria, Kwazulu Natal, Bloemfontein, and Stellenbosch are examples.

Informal courses, linked to competitions and festivals, also developed to educate conductors in different aspects ranging from score analysis, preparation and interpretation, to conducting and singing techniques. Some of these festivals are the National Choir Festival sponsored by Old Mutual, and the Animato Choir Competition of the ATKV (Afrikaans Language and Cultural Association). However, these courses focus on the music chosen for each competition or festival, and not directly on conducting technique as such.

Today it is possible to study choral conducting either as part of certificate or diploma courses, or as part of formal degree programmes at many higher education institutions in the country. It is even possible to choose choral conducting as a main practical direction instead of an instrument at the University of Stellenbosch.

Not all courses include a comprehensive education for conductors, and prospective students have to find the correct information, for example in brochures of universities. The range of aspects taught in choral education modules include aural abilities, singing technique and ensemble singing, score reduction, keyboard harmony, church music, conducting

gestures, the history and didactics of choral training, and music history and theory. Though some universities only touch on some of these aspects, others educate their students intensively in all these disciplines so that they become all-round musicians and choir conductors.