

Sex and the Choir

By Aurelio Porfiri and Thomas Caplin, Choral Conductors and Teachers

Among educated people, there are topics that are not treated, because they are very sensitive or they go against the politically correct atmosphere that dominates our societies. One of these topics, *ça va sans dire*, is sex. There are understandable reasons for this: sex pertains to our most intimate sphere and is something so personal that merely mentioning it seems to violate a very private space. But at the same time we also know that sexuality plays a fundamental role in our lives. Both recent and not so recent books have taught us how sexuality influences our behavior and our perception of the world (Ryan, C.; Jetha' C. 2010). We know that Sigmund Freud put great emphasis on sexuality for his theories of psychoanalysis. We do not have to agree with all of this (and indeed today a lot of psychologists prefer to keep their distance from Freudian theories) but nevertheless it is evident that sex plays a great role in our lives. Despite this, to our knowledge, no one has ever investigated how our sexual life interferes with our choral activities. To make our point clear: does sexual attraction among adult people play any role in our choral life? That is the question that we will try to address in this short article. Only by knowing and understanding the nature and power of sexuality can we hope to understand if this plays any role in choral activity.

If we rely on common sense, the answer should be "yes". When asking if sexuality plays any role in other settings such as jobs, movies, arts, songs, etc, we should obviously say "yes", it does play a big role. So why not in choral music? People in choirs spend much time together and this can very easily

create a bond. Also, as music is the language of emotions, it can induce feelings in people. But usually we prefer not to talk about it – maybe we just take it for granted?

And after this first fundamental question (see above) should we maybe also take into consideration other issues: does the relationship between chorister and conductor change if the latter is perceived as handsome or pretty? What changes in or with the music? If the choristers feel sexually attracted to the conductor, will this change their musical performance or not? What about the opposite, the sexual interest of the conductor for one or more choristers; will this influence his conducting/leadership/methodology/pedagogy? These questions are not trivial, and many others arise from them.

What you do is what you get

When addressing the issue of what role sex plays between a chorister and his or her conductor, the same rules apply as in all other inter-human relations. It would be interesting to find out how many conductors have found their life partner in the choir. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare these findings with how many corporate managing directors have found their life partners among the employees. We know that there are several researches dealing with the issue of sexuality at work (see for example Bunk P. A., Aan't Goor J, Solano A. C., 2010) and how this affects the job itself. We would like to think that the number among choral conductors having found love in the choir is far higher than in corporate life, mostly because of the emotional connections brought about by the music.

As a hypothetical exercise, let us assume this is correct (speaking from our own experience we know the number is high, very high, but this would need to be investigated more thoroughly). What are the reasons for this? Has this anything

to do with sex? Yes, we believe it has. We are talking about exploring and showing emotions in music, exposing your inner self, group dynamics, and basic needs. The role of emotions in music is now investigated in a vast literature, starting with the book of Leonard B. Meyer published in 1956, "Emotion and Meaning in Music" (but there are some texts dating from the 1930s which investigate scientifically this issue, not to mention literature by music scholars from previous centuries). A conductor will, in most cases, act in front of the choir based on a more or less conscious understanding of the needs of each single chorister. He or she will try to make them feel secure and safe, give them a feeling of belonging together, show them love and appreciation for their efforts and give them room for growth and self-realization. In doing this, the conductor has actualized Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Anyone doing this for you will arouse a feeling of affection, which could also trigger physiological needs – love (sex) – in the choir. There is a strong connection between fulfilling your needs and the sensation of affection/love.

What you are is what you get

Now, will this inter-human relationship change with the sex of the conductor and the singers? Is it plausible that these fascinating phenomena on a sub-conscious level have something to do with sex? Or should we disregard these empiric findings in order to avoid a sensitive discussion? Ideally, psychologists and neuroscientists should investigate these topics scientifically, in order to break the ice and treat them as they deserve.

Transference

From our observations, we believe that transference definitely comes into play in the relationship between singer and

conductor, even though this term is normally used in psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud used this term to describe a process in analysis or therapy, where he noted that patients seemed at some point to begin to project certain feelings, such as romantic love or parental love, onto the therapist. Now, of course we do not see singers as patients or the conductor as therapist, but we do see similarities in behaviour. We mustn't forget that the charisma of a conductor has a strong emotional influence on the performers. We will not explore the nature of this charisma in any depth here, but we know that this element certainly has a great impact on choristers. Possibly also this transference becomes stronger depending on sex: the male conductor is showing alpha features of a leader – strong leadership, knowledge, tenderness, force, ability to listen ... features attractive to the female singer? And of course – is he competing with the male singers in the mixed choir? What about the female conductor in front of a male choir? How much of her leadership and influence on the male group is related to her as a professional? Or as a woman? And then there is also the overall issue of the sexual differences between men and women and the different effect on the choir of a male or female conductor. Should a female conductor behave more like a man in order to reach out to all the singers in mixed choirs? Should the male conductor develop his female features?

Is it totally out of place to ask whether it is plausible that a male conductor reaches out professionally more easily to a male choir than a female conductor, simply because sex is not getting in the way? Is it plausible that sex can either support or disrupt professional communication between conductor and singers? This is the real point: does sexual attraction, when present, help or not?

Some argue that it is essential for young boys in kindergarten and in school to have male teachers, in order to develop natural male characteristics. At least in the Scandinavian

countries, where there is a majority of female teachers, this is an ongoing debate supported by increased research in the field.. In Norway there are two major voluntary music movements involving all citizens from early childhood to seniors: the field band movement and the choral movement. Around 10 – 12 % of the population (registered) is involved in these movements. In the field band movement a vast majority of the conductors are men, whilst in the choral movement the opposite is true. Some 50 years ago, we had a majority of male choral conductors, congruent with a majority of male teachers in school. Now, assuming that there is a gender difference in communication, has this change of gender majority from male to female had any impact on how the choral movement has developed? Is there a correlation with the ever-decreasing numbers of male singers in our mixed adult choirs? This would be worth investigating.

Certainly this is only a first scratching-on-the-surface of the topic, a topic worthy of serious study and investigation. Really, we already know very well that not only our ears but also our eyes have to be wide open in conducting. And they do their job. How many times does the conductor ask the singers to look at him or her? Hopefully this issue from now on can become a subject for serious discussion.

REFERENCES

- Bunk P. A., Aan't Goor J, Solano A. C. (2010). Intrasexual Competition at Work: Sex differences in the jealousy-evoking effect of rival characteristics in work settings. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship*. Vol. 27, 5. Pp. 671-684.
- Ryan, Christopher, Jetha' Cacilda (2010). *Sex at Dawn. The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*. New York (NY), USA: HarperCollins Publisher
- Sinclair, Amanda; (1998, 1999, 2005). *Doing leadership*

differently. Melbourne , Australia: Melbourne University Press (available on the internet).

Aurelio Porfiri is an Italian organist, choral director and composer who is at present Associate Professor of Music and coordinator of the music program at University of Saint Joseph (Macau, China). He is also Director of Choral Activities for Santa Rosa de Lima School, English section. He is Visiting Conductor for the Music Education Department of Shanghai Conservatory of Music (China). He has published four books and more than 200 articles. As a composer he has published dozens of psalms, oratorios, hymns, responsorials and motets in Italy, Germany, and the USA. Email: aurelioporfiri@usj.edu.mo



Thomas Caplin is a professor of choral conducting and management. He is also a singer, conductor, clinician and choral pedagogue. He is frequently engaged as guest conductor and clinician, and as adjudicator in competitions in Norway and abroad. His publications include books on choral conducting in Sweden and Norway, as well as a number of compositions, arrangements and CD recordings. In 2004 he was awarded the recognition “Choral Director of the Year” by the Norwegian Choral Directors’ Association. He has received international recognitions for his leadership of the following choirs: □The Lund University Male Choir (prominent male choir from the University of Lund, Sweden, World Choir champions in Shaoxing in 2010), Collegium Vocale Chamber Choir (Norway) and Oslo University Male Choir (World Choir Champion in Xiamen,



China 2006). Internationally he is active in the IFCM mentor program "Conductors Without Borders". He is also a member of the Interkultur World Choir Council. Email: caplin@c2i.net