

# Studying Choral Conducting around the globe: Europe, Finland

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Finland has a venerable tradition of choir conductor training. A basic course has been included in teacher seminaries and church music training programmes since the late nineteenth century. As a result, choral life in Finland largely relied on school teachers and church musicians well into the twentieth century. Amateur choirs began to proliferate not only in cities but also in rural areas around the turn of the twentieth century, in the period of national awakening leading up to Finland's independence from Russia in 1917: choral music proved to be an effective means of disseminating nationalist ideals, censorship being avoided with poetic euphemisms. Many choir conducting students learned their trade not only through formal education but in practice, from the conductors of the advanced choirs in the cities where they studied and through exposure to the repertoire of those choirs.

An important impulse for choir conducting came from music education in the latter half of the twentieth century, as Erkki Pohjola's work with the Tapiola Choir turned it from a school choir into an instrument of international calibre. Inspired by his example, young music educators suddenly developed an increased interest in choir conducting and sought further training at summer courses. The *Klemetti Institute*, based in the small town of Orivesi in central Finland, became a force to be reckoned with, offering a series of summer courses providing training for choir conductors and also for advanced choral singers; after six decades these are still going strong. Well-established basic training, further

education and above all the wide range of practical experience available served to form a generation of Finnish choir conductors whose enthusiasm and active efforts made choral singing a truly widespread pastime. For these conductors, technical skill was not really the main thing. They saw themselves primarily as educators and choral music as an element contributing to the growth of children and adolescents.

The fact that church musicians and music educators have played a key role in the development of Finnish choir conducting is still apparent in the compulsory choir conducting classes included in their degree programmes at the *Sibelius Academy*, Finland's only music university. Music education and church music students are required to take a one-year and a two-year class in choir conducting, respectively. A remarkably high number of students also take the optional advanced class. These classes largely cater to practical needs in terms of both repertoire and technical skills.

Professional choir conductor training properly got under way in the 1970s, when the *Sibelius Academy* introduced choir conducting as a subject in which it was possible to complete a diploma, the highest qualification available in the field of music at the time. Thanks to determined development efforts since then, choir conducting has established itself as a subject in its own right, and one or two students graduate from the *Sibelius Academy* choir conducting class each year.

A major advance came in the mid-1980s with the establishing of the *Sibelius Academy* Vocal Ensemble, a group of sixteen professional singers available for the choir conducting students to work with for four hours each week. This facility allows the students to explore technically challenging and varied repertoire. Although the ensemble rarely performs outside the *Sibelius Academy*, it can with reason be described as Finland's only regularly operating professional choir, apart from the Chorus of the Finnish National Opera, since the

disbanding of the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir by the Finnish Broadcasting Company in 2005.

Choir conducting studies are graded into five levels. The basic qualification can be completed at various music institutes and at summer courses. This qualification is an excellent resource for deputy conductors of amateur choirs, besides laying the groundwork for further study. The examinations leading to professional qualification are labelled, in ascending order, levels D, C, B and A.

Music education and church music students are required to complete a level D choir conducting examination for their degree. This gives them the basic competence needed for working with a variety of amateur choirs. The course leading to the examination covers rehearsing and conducting a choir, voice coaching, basic repertoire and knowledge of the principal stylistic periods in music history. The particular features of children's and youth choirs are addressed in special modules.

The level C course involves a more in-depth artistic approach and a wider variety of repertoire. At present, a level C examination can be completed not only at the Sibelius Academy but also at the universities of applied sciences in Tampere and Jyväskylä in central Finland, and on a summer course at the *Klemetti Institute*. A level C examination is a pathway for music professionals to retrain as choir conductors.

The aforementioned courses focus on improving technical and artistic skills and on understanding the fundamental characteristics of the choir as an instrument. Voice coaching and choral sound have come to play an increasingly important part in the curriculum, and recently the communication skills of the choir conductor have come into focus. The interaction between conductor and instrument is of vital importance to choral development, to finding a shared sound and musical approach. A good choir conductor must be an 'instrument

builder' in addition to being a well-grounded musician. In the level C and D examinations, candidates are required not only to conduct but also to rehearse the choir.

The next level, B, is defined as belonging to 'advanced studies' in the university curriculum. Its purpose is to prepare students for independent repertoire planning, rehearsing and concert conducting. In practice, teaching at this level is only available at the *Sibelius Academy* in Helsinki and at the Kuopio unit in central Finland. The level B course covers a wide range of core choral repertoire from various periods and styles. Works with orchestral accompaniment are also included, although the main focus is on a cappella repertoire. There are various themed modules which focus on the stylistic requirements of historical periods, the conductor's personal development and the teaching of choir conducting. The examination takes the form of a concert whose programme includes choral works from various major periods and also a choral work with instrumental accompaniment. If the candidate conducts a choir of his or her own, that choir may be used for completing the examination. The course takes two years and is completed by four or five students each year.

The level A examination leading to a Master of Music degree can only be completed in the choir conducting class of the *Sibelius Academy*. This examination requires a broad knowledge of repertoire, with a particular emphasis on contemporary music. The examination takes the form of a concert involving the candidate's own choir and the professional Sibelius Academy Vocal Ensemble. The studies required for the level A examination are largely artistic, focusing on content analysis in particular. One or two level A examinations are completed each year.

There is thus a variety of pathways and levels of accomplishment available in Finland for those wishing to become choir conductors in some capacity.

Having said that, we should note that Finnish training opportunities in the field are becoming increasingly concentrated. Beyond the *Sibelius Academy*, university-level education leading to an academic degree or vocational qualification is now only available in Tampere and Jyväskylä. Professional choir conductors are, perhaps surprisingly, quite rare in Finland: it is extremely challenging to make a living solely by conducting choirs. There are only a handful of full-time choir conductor positions in the entire country. Most choir conductors work as freelancers, earning their income from a variety of sources besides (or instead of) choir conducting. Yet despite the financially difficult times we live in, efforts continue to develop choral music and choir conducting to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow while relying on a solid foundation of tradition.