

Youth Choir in a multicultural context: the Qatar Youth Choir

Alena Pyne, conductor, Qatar

As with any choir, the Qatar Youth Choir (QYC) has had its share of triumphs and challenges. That said, QYC's home in multicultural Doha, Qatar means that some of QYC's experiences are truly unique. From its founding in 2013 as the first community-based youth choir in Qatar, QYC enjoyed 6 exhilarating years of rehearsals, concerts, international travel, collaborations with other wonderful choirs, prizes and recordings, as many youth choirs experience. And just as for choirs around the world, Covid-19 put a stop to many of the fundamental aspects of the choral experience our young singers. However, as the world begins to open up and we can participate in normal life again, we are gifted with a fresh appreciation of what a choir brings to our lives and to the universality of its reach. We are reminded that diversity and inclusivity are two cornerstones of what choir means to the singers of Qatar Youth Choir and singers everywhere.

Today, Qatar has a population of 2.9 million. Qatar nationals represent less than 15% of this figure. Viewing this statistic in terms of my home country, how differently would Ireland be if less than 15% of the population were Irish born? Coming

from Ireland, a country with comparatively little diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture, Qatar is immediately and obviously so much more diverse. People from India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh represent 50% of the population, and around 250,000 Philippine nationals comprise another sizable chunk of it. This is reflected in the demographics of Qatar Youth Choir, as today around 65-80% of our singers come from South-East and South Asia.

In relation to the population of Qatar and how it impacts our choir, retaining singers after every summer has been a challenge. Every year a large proportion of employment contracts come to an end and those employees – along with their families – will leave for pastures new. Each year we are faced with dealing with the impending departure of a large cohort, and consequently, the imperative of finding new singers to replace them. To illustrate this, in early 2014 we had 43 singers, and by September of that same year, we had 13. Although 2014 was particularly severe in this regard we can expect at least 20% turnover every year. As such, the possibility of having a repertoire of songs that can be pulled out of our backpocket, which is a normal standard for most choirs, becomes a challenge. However, Qatar Youth Choir is used to challenges, and strives to meet them head on, which translates into our approach to diversity and inclusivity.

One major challenge that we have experienced as a choir, which originally perplexed me, was the difficulty of recruiting Arabic singers in significant numbers, and specifically Qatari singers. Although we have Arabic singers in choir, they are more difficult to reach than singers from other cultures. This can be for many reasons, including that the number of choirs across the Middle East is small, which in turn lends an absence of appreciation for choral art. Singing is certainly less common in Gulf-Arabic culture, and as a music teacher in school, I encounter a reluctance to sing among children of Arabic heritage simply because they do not tend to sing in

their home environment. Yet once they try, and realise they can be successful, they become naturally more open to singing. One way we tackled the problem of recruiting Arabic singers is by expanding our repertoire of Arabic songs, and illustrating that we can perform them authentically. However, an ongoing challenge for us is how to bring our performances into more local environments. When we have done so in the past we received increased interest, but such opportunities are less common. By continuing to expand our Arabic repertoire and performance locations we hope to demonstrate that choir is an inclusive space for Arabic singers too.

From a conductor's perspective I have a duty to ensure the repertoire reflects the multicultural make-up of our choir. Teaching the singers the great western classical songs is of course important, but for the choir's demographic, repertoire selection must also be diverse and inclusive. Unlike most other choirs we are unable to perform sacred music in public concerts. This has obliged me to really trawl the publishers, seeking enough quality secular repertoire for all levels of ability, and has informed me also to see choral music outside of the traditional association with the church. In doing so, we have discovered a broad repertoire from previously unfamiliar languages, cultures, and sounds. From Spanish, Arabic, German, French, Czech, Hungarian, Estonian, Latvian, Croatian, English, Portuguese, and many more, perhaps Chinese is the only major language that we have yet to master in song! As a choral leader in an extremely diverse environment, I actively seek out those songs that will connect with everyone in the choir and that we can perform authentically. I have learned the hard but valuable lesson of also choosing repertoire that is *relevant* for singers today. These singers are growing up as global citizens, and are aware of global issues such as the growing number of refugee children in the world. Last year we learned a programme of beautiful music on this theme and the singers truly felt these songs emotionally and recorded them with intense feeling. With an eye towards

competition I would welcome any mixed repertoire recommendations from readers of this article – my contact details are in the bio.

Choir should be a safe space, and protecting it as such is critical. From the beginning I worked hard to make everyone feel included in the choir, sharing their personal successes in their own lives, and creating a social diary of events so they could bond even better. I created the normal leadership roles so that more senior members can grow in their responsibilities. I have become more sensitive to some of the challenges that a diverse environment brings. We are all different and we have different value systems, aspirations, priorities and ways of expressing ourselves. All of these factors create a potential for disruption of a common community spirit. Thankfully we have never had any negative experiences in this regard but the potential is always there and part of the way to deal with it is to be aware. We have discussed this issue altogether about how the choir can best support every singer in this regard. But we must also remember the fact that opening up to a figure of authority can be a daunting task. As a result we have adopted a code of well-being and appointed one male singer and one female singer as alternatives to speak to for singers who may struggle to speak with an adult about such matters.

The education system in Qatar is somewhat different to how many of us experienced it growing up. Private schools are more common than public schools, however the funding level for each individual one and how it spends its money is not consistent. The far too common victim of underfunding is the music department, meaning that many students in Qatar develop little appreciation for the study of music. Parents of these students seeking to give their children an opportunity to study music will find it lies outside of the mainstream curriculum. One's voice is the cheapest instrument, it is a one time purchase without refund! Similar to elsewhere in the world, choir

therefore presents as a very affordable method of providing a musical education for children from all socio-economic groups in Qatar. As a choir, we are proud of our ability to provide musical education to children in Qatar, and we see a real opportunity for Qatar to embrace our work and create a national choir school. We are actively working to make the music scene in Qatar more inclusive to singers from all walks of life. Personally, one of the most rewarding aspects in this choir's story, and of my journey as conductor, is when choir members choose to study music at third level, having gained all their subject knowledge through choir.

Now that we are finally back in the rehearsal room I can feel that old energy returning, that total commitment to the choir is reappearing. The diversity of our community here in Qatar may result in extra challenges, but it is also what gives our choirs so much resilience, adaptability and courage to embrace the new. May I never again take an in-person choir for granted. I am so grateful for every day I lead choir. In a recent ChoralSpace Academy lecture by the incredible Dr. Walt Whitman he said, "There are two great days in a person's life: the day we were born and the day you discover why". Since that day when I chose choral conducting, I have never looked back.



Irish conductor and Founder Director of Qatar Youth Choir (2013) and Qatar Junior Choir (2015), **Alena Pyne** is also deputy conductor of Qatar Concert Choir. Formerly she worked as Director of Music at King's College Doha.

Currently she leads choirs at the Swiss International School of Qatar and is a MYP Music teacher under Qatar Foundation. She is a founding member and first chairperson of Sing Qatar, the Association for Choral Singing. Alena offers choral workshops and has experience leading large-scale choral singing festivals like the annual Qatar Choral Festival. Alena is often invited as a choral competition jury member

nationally and internationally, most recently for the Rovdo International Choir Competition in Minsk, Belarus when she also presented the lecture “Approaching Arabic Choral Music”.
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