

The Introduction of girls in cathedral choirs: A new mode for the twentieth century

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It is befitting that Isidore of Seville, writing in the sixth century, should define music as “a modulation of the voice, and also an accordance of several sounds and their simultaneous union” (Lacroix, 1996). While history has witnessed the unfolding of various modes, introduced initially to regulate the performance of psalms, hymns and anthems within the Latin Church, one can only surmise at Isidore’s perception of an “accordance” of several sounds. To what degree is the purity of religious music preserved within the confines of all male choirs? Traditionally, Latin Church Music has been performed by males and it is a distinctive trait of Anglican Choral Services that the melodic line is sung by boys with unbroken voices. It is thus not surprising that the English Cathedral Choir Tradition has evolved as an all-male institution, excluding female members. In 1991, ground breaking news revealed the introduction of girls choirs alongside their all-male counterparts. Wells Cathedral in Somerset took the innovative step in 1994 and in 1998 nine senior girls advanced to the final phase of their choristerships. Hence, a unique opportunity presented itself to research the extent to which the girl choristers had developed an identity compatible with that of their male counterparts or, alternatively, exhibited signs of aligning themselves to a distinct and separate tradition. Were the girls in fact conforming to the Medieval custom that the boys had complied with for generations or were various inflections and modifications distinctly aligning them to a new mode for the twentieth century?

The research methodology was framed by concepts drawn from the established literature on music education and the sociology of music. Fundamentally, three broad foci assisted in the collection, organization and deciphering of data:

1. Perspectives
2. Age and Tradition
3. Vocal Characteristics

Perspectives

Derived from “The Divided School” (Woods, 1979), the first of the above three concepts acknowledges the fact that the social world is constructed by people who, in their attempts to make sense of their surroundings, assign meanings and interpretations to

events. According to Woods, students develop frameworks through which to understand the world around them and these "Perspectives" differ according to cultural background, for example male/female experiences, as well as by institutional and curriculum factors such as values, rules and strategies. In tune with Symbolic Interactionism, this approach emphasizes pupils' and teachers' own subjective constructions of events rather than the sociologist's assumptions of them:

Perspectives refer to the frameworks through which people make sense of the world. They are the essential starting-point for a study of school life, for it is through these that pupils and teachers construct their realities. There are both group and personal perspectives, those that are held in common with others, and those that are differentiated within the self. (Woods, 1979, p. 237)

Woods further observed that there is a strong connection between social class and the development of group perspectives, the latter of which, as defined by Becker, refers to modes of thought and action developed by a group which faces the same problematic situation (Woods, 1979):

Society is divided, and to a certain extent teachers are forced into reproducing these divisions. Pupils aid their own stratification through group perspectives, and the supporting frameworks of these perspectives are driven further in by teacher policy and school organization. Divisions also result from institutionalization. (Woods, 1979, p. 140)

According to Woods, group perspectives grow as a result of group interaction and what is more, they are specific to particular situations. Two broad types of group perspective are classified as 'conformity' and 'dissonance', both of which contain subdivisions which bring one closer to the 'pupil reality' of the school (Woods, 1979). Illustrating how pupil and teacher strategies and adaptations take place within an institutional setting which is related to the general educational system and ultimately to society, Woods cites the work of Weber, who saw western civilization as having developed from supernatural to rational bases of action:

The world has become 'disenchanted', no longer living by faith, but by rules and regulations, laws and records and systematic processes to discover adequate means of achieving clearly specified ends. We are in the era of the 'right solution', the division of labour, and the 'expert' and 'functionary'. Bureaucracy - the form of social organization adopted by institutions in advanced industrial societies - epitomizes the effects. (Woods, 1979, p. 18)

Hence, Woods contends that it is the bureaucratic apparatus of a school, rather than its educative function that divides and oppresses all pupils. This study proceeded to expose the theories expounded by Woods to the environment of Wells Cathedral and

attempted to disprove the supposition that the school's bureaucracy was playing a role in barring the girls of the opportunity to develop an identity compatible with that of their male counterparts.

Age and tradition

The second concept outlined above incorporates Howard Becker's theories regarding rules. Furthermore, "Informal Sanctions" and "Inherited Roles and Scripts" indicate two focus points within the concept of "Age and Tradition". With respect to the former, Becker postulates that all social groups make rules, the actual operating rules of which, are kept alive through attempts at enforcement:

Rules which represent informal agreements encrusted with the sanction of age and tradition, are enforced by informal sanctions of various kinds. (Becker, 1963, p. 2)

Likewise, Woods is careful to distinguish between the official rules of the institution and the informal, implicit rules that apply in practice and are arrived at through complex negotiations:

School life is a continuous process of 'negotiation' and bargaining. This is particularly evident with regard to "rules". Both teachers and pupils are very rule conscious. But there are two kinds of rules. There are formal rules of the institution, and there are the informal rules, often implicit only, of the classroom and everyday interaction. The latter constitute the reality for the inmates. Such rules are not immediately obvious, and knowledge of them is a matter of entering the negotiation. Often such rules are far removed from both letter and spirit of the formal rules. (Woods, 1979, p. 242)

Moreover, when a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it is, according to Becker, regarded as an outsider. Throughout his book "Outsiders", Becker (1963) is not so concerned with the personal and social characteristics of deviants but rather focuses in on the processes by which they have come to be regarded as outsiders and their reactions to the judgment. This study examined the concept of "Informal Sanctions" while approaching the members of the girls choir as "deviants". Furthermore, with respect to "Age and Tradition", steps were taken to divulge the extent to which Wells Cathedral had succumbed to the public pressure of outsiders (i.e. society at large) by consenting to admit girls into the choir school. Becker alludes to societal influence and the tendency for groups to conform to various trends:

There is a variation over time. A person believed to have committed a given "deviant" act may at one time be responded to much more leniently than he would be at some other time. The occurrence of "drives" against various

kinds of deviance illustrates this. (Becker, 1963, p. 12)

Becker maintains that rules are, by and large, made for young people by their elders and states that the normal development of people in our society can be seen as a series of "progressively increasing commitments to conventional norms and institutions" (Becker, 1963, p. 27). Hence, the tradition of boy choristers has been passed down by elders within the church for generations, a fact which is reinforced through the presence of inherited rules and scripts. However, Becker further asserts that the enforcement of any rule goes through various stages, which he labels its "natural history". Rules, according to Becker, are made and enforced by way of a process; people develop specific rules more closely tied to the realities of everyday life.

Vocal characteristics

The third and final concept devised to frame the research methodology for this study incorporates ideas from the writings of John Shepherd. Within "Music and Male Hegemony" it is Shepherd's position that men control women as necessary subordinates to their identity development and their incursions into the 'real world', and by doing so are led to deny symbolically the course of "social relatedness" (the process through which people and societies are created, maintained and reproduced). (Shepherd, 1987). Hence, men control women through isolation and objectification. Moreover, Shepherd states that male hegemony is essentially a "visual" hegemony which requires, conceptually, that life must not be allowed to originate above the level of the material, where it can be seen and controlled. Consequently, the fact that music is based on the physical phenomenon of sound constitutes a serious threat to visually mediated hegemony. According to Shepherd, the answer, to music's 'threat' for post-Renaissance men has been to isolate pitch, rhythm and timbre. The first two elements have been "objectified and frozen through a 'fully analytic' notation" (Shepherd, 1987, p. 158), while in the case of 'classical' music, timbre is constrained through an insistence on standardized purity, which students are carefully taught to achieve. It is of great interest that Shepherd describes the typical vocal sound of "woman-as-nurturer" as being soft and warm, based on a relaxed use of the vocal chords, with the formants of the chest producing a rich, resonating sound. While the typical 'boy next door' vocal sound is, according to Shepherd, also soft and warm, the sound depends not so much on the use of formants in the chest as it does on the use of head tones:

. . . the sound is typically light and thin compared to the dark, rich tones of the woman-as-nurturer. The music of the vulnerable male is thus essentially 'head' music, an appeal for emotional nurturance that does not, however, abdicate the supposed supremacy of traditional rationality. (Shepherd, 1987, p. 167)

Shepherd's theory suggests that the traditional choirboy belongs to a very specific male dominated genre which cannot allow itself to be imitated by an influx of females. Hence, the third and final objective of this study was to gather evidence which might lead to the conclusion that the girls were in fact being taught to achieve the same degree of standardized purity of timbre as the boys.

Results

Turning back to the concept of "Perspectives", an inquiry into the question of what factors enhance and/or threaten the identity of both male and female choristers has revealed that comments relating to identity, taken from samples of both male and female junior school pupils, are directly linked to their impressions of the impending hierarchical structure or "ranking system". Furthermore, a theme of dissatisfaction prevailed with respect to the ordering of "ranks" and distribution of "plus" and "minus" points amongst both the male and female choristers from the middle school. In refutation to Wood's assertion that there is a strong connection between social class (i.e. male/female identity) and the development of group perspectives, comments from both boys and girls, all of whom gave their opinions in response to the execution of the same hierarchical structure, leaned towards a sense of 'dissonance' as opposed to 'conformity', thereby suggesting that the group perspectives of the male choristers and the female choristers are, in this particular instance, identical.

Comments from both adults and children reveal that the general perception amongst those involved with Wells Cathedral Choir, is that the boy and girl choristers maintain their own unique qualities. Out of a population of 22 female choristers and 21 male choristers, 18% responded from each group. Along with 2 key adults, 4 of the girls and 2 of the boys indicated an awareness of differing characteristics between the boys and girls choirs. This finding relates to the fact that the bureaucratic apparatus of Wells Cathedral has influenced the foundations upon which the Girls' Choir has been based. While some rules which have historically been associated with the traditional male chorister are administered to both boys and girls alike, key adult figures have indicated that the two choirs have been groomed to represent two distinctly different traditions:

MASTER OF THE CHORISTERS: We decided we'd try and keep the two traditions quite separate. I think it is nicer to keep the boy's and girl's choirs separate and they then keep their own characteristics. My feeling is it would be a shame to mix them.

PRECENTOR: I think that there is an anxiety because the experience of many churches in this country has often been that the presence of girls, and then of women, drives out the boys and that is a very sad thing and that is one reason why, in order to counter that anxiety, we have said we would only have two choirs separately but not a mixed choir because we think that might endanger the boy's tradition. So, we maintain the boys tradition and we have alongside it another tradition with girls. The boys and girls are both parts of our choral tradition, but they are two different strands which are now twined together.

Evidence suggests that Wells Cathedral has had to confront modern gender issues and in the process has devised a plan of meeting society half way by admitting girls to the choir school, yet maintaining them in a distinct and separate tradition to that of the boys. While the Church has a long established history of inherited roles and scripts, societal influences and issues specific to the realities of twentieth-century society have played a part in the allocation of girls to the choir school at Wells.

Conversations with adults and children at Wells Cathedral Choir School have revealed that there appears to be a tendency for both experienced and inexperienced musicians to assign masculine and feminine characteristics to vocal music. While the techniques used for training are reported to be the same for boys and girls alike, several choristers give a variety of responses when asked to describe how they physically produce a head tone and furthermore, boys and girls are also inconsistent in their descriptions of the inherent characteristics of male and female voices. The following comments relating to vocal pedagogy were analyzed in order to ascertain the extent to which girls were being taught to achieve the same degree of standardized purity of timbre as the boys:

MASTER OF THE CHORISTERS: I have had to do a lot of work with girls on the upper register to get the girls upper register to ring as much as boys do on top.

ORGAN SCHOLAR: If you are not careful, the girls can start to make a very hard sound. This is to do with the fact that they are going into puberty and their voices are changing slightly. You have to work quite hard to get that ring sometimes, on the top notes. The boys and girls are taught exactly the same vowel shapes, so when you have them together there is no problem with vowels being discoloured because they sing them all in the same way.

PRECENTOR: Girls were only gradually introduced into the life of the Cathedral according to the standard of their singing, so that we were not going, at any stage, to have to apologize for the fact that we wanted to have the girls, no apologies at all; we wanted it to be on a footing of equality.

ASSISTANT ORGANIST: In the beginning, we had the girls sit in and listen to evensong once a week for a term. The boys tend to have a strong top and strong lower register, but a weaker patch in the middle.

MONA (Middle School): The little ones haven't mastered the head tone and the singing of one complete straight tone . . .singing with other people that have got it will help them.

While evidence suggests that there is an intent to teach the girls how to achieve the same degree of 'purity of timbre' that boy choristers have aspired to for generations, boys and girls at Wells Cathedral employ a wide variety of analogies in their attempt to describe just what they have to do to achieve a pure tone:

MONA (Middle School): The way you get a head register is you smile and you feel it coming out of your cheek bones. The Choir Master says 'smile the vowels and feel your cheek bones rising so the sound lifts out of your cheeks'.

HEATHER (Junior School): To get a clear, ringing head tone, I imagine aiming the noise at the back of my front teeth.

JANE (Junior School): The Choir Master used to say like, take the note and put it in a little jar and put it on a shelf, a high shelf. You have to do it really delicately and like, pretend it is a gem or something.

ANNE (Junior School): When we were probationers, what we had to do in our practice is aim the note at the Choir Master's finger, which he held out in front of his mouth.

JOE (Middle School): Everyone tries different mouth shapes until they find one way that works. To get a clear ring, I focus the sound by not letting so much breath through my vocal chords; I make the air thinner.

GEORGE (Junior School): You have to make a clear lazer beam tone.

PETER (Junior School): Some people think they can get a clear tone by moving their eyebrows in a weird way like if you are trying to get something high. Some people have mouth habits (demonstrates); different habits that make different noises.

HENRY (Junior School): If you are, like, in the dark and the person next to you is in the light, you try and show that you can be just as good by trying to sing really loudly, and to not such a nice tone, but then you realize your voice is good at singing quietly and clearly with a good tone and loudly with a good tone and when you get confidence, you realize that you are good for what you are.

Although four key adults at Wells Cathedral, all of whom are involved with the chorister training program, indicated that a "strong top" or "clear ringing head tone" constitutes a common focus for boys and girls alike, perceptions of how the sound is achieved and what the effect is, varied considerably. Of the individuals sampled, 80% detected differences in the sound qualities of male and female voices, while 20% indicated that they were not aware of any great distinction between the two voice types:

MASTER OF THE CHORISTERS: Girls have a rounder sound. The boys have a cutting edge to the sound. When you get to age thirteen or fourteen, the girls suddenly develop a much more mature sound. I suppose the boy does as well, actually, because just before the boys voice breaks you get this bloom.

VICAR CHORAL: Boy's voices are more flutey; they are lighter. Girl's voices are like an oboe.

CHORAL SCHOLAR: Girl's voices are focused more to a lazer pin point accuracy, in terms of tone quality. Boy's voices have greater colour, more richness.

MONA (Middle School): Girls have sweeter tones than boys. Boys have more of a pin point sound and its more exact, more on the note.

JANE (Middle School): The boy's choir sounds higher; ours older.

LUCY (Middle School): If you get a very good girl and a very good boy, sometimes you can't tell the difference.

ALBERT (HEAD BOY CHORISTER): The boys have a more pure ringing sound. The sound of the girls is much different from the boys.

HENRY (Junior School): Boys have a more solid voice. Their sound is louder and not so empty.

PETER (Junior School): Boys give a thinner sound. Girls give a thicker sound. It's like mixing two colours and making a new colour.

A variety of responses from participants at Wells Cathedral Choir School reveal various interpretations of how boys and girls voices compare or contrast with one another.

While parallels may be drawn between the aspirations of male and female choristers at Wells Cathedral, it is evident that the girls choir operates under the discretion of informal and implicit rule systems which are set in place to maintain various inherited roles and scripts within the Anglican Church. In addition, the phenomenon of assigning masculine and feminine characteristics to vocal music prevails in the discourse of both adults and children alike. Following in the footsteps of their Medieval counterparts, the girls at Wells are indeed traveling in the same direction but have been directed to take a different path. To use a more appropriate analogy, the introduction of girls within the Cathedral Choir has created a new mode for the twentieth century.

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