1 Introduction: choral music – a dynamic global genre

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Many years ago, I was fortunate to have been invited to conduct performances of Handel's *Messiah* in Indonesia. It struck me several times during this visit that at the time Handel composed this eternal masterpiece, the ancestors of these Indonesian singers were making a music that was very far removed from the European baroque, and Handel, toiling away at a rapid pace in his tiny abode in London, would only have vaguely heard of the relatively recent exploration to what was then called the East Indies.

So much has changed in choral music in the last two hundred years, as these formerly distant worlds have come together; all over the world, choirs abound and repertoire has become global. The founding of the International Federation for Choral Music in 1982 and subsequent international collaborations of all kinds – festivals, competitions, symposia – have offered unprecedented prospects for learning, partnership, and development. Therefore, as a passionate participant in choral activities, it seemed to me that the omission of a volume on choral music in the Cambridge Companion series needed to be rectified. Easy to justify, but difficult to conceptualize! The rationale for the book was clear; choral musicians claim that singing in choirs is the world's most popular form of participatory music making. In the United States alone, Chorus America's 2009 *Chorus Impact Study* suggests that around 42.6 million Americans participate in choirs.[1] Worldwide, choirs are transforming the lives of their members and their local communities. The genre that started in European communal and religious life has spread throughout the world, and wherever it has gone, conductors and singers have made it their own. Far beyond conventional choral situations in churches and educational institutions, the chorus is part of prisons, hospitals, and slums. Communities that are marginalized, whether because of sexual orientation, political status, illness, or poverty, are finding opportunities for new expression.

In order to produce a coherent volume, it was vital to define what we mean by choral music. Although group singing traditions all over the world have variously been labeled "choral," they are distinctive, in some cases unique, bearing little relationship with the Western choir. To mine the riches of indigenous group singing traditions would have been way beyond the

scope of anything less than a series of books. Therefore, logically, the book should concern itself with this single genre, the Western choral ensemble, as it arose and developed worldwide. The substance of the book could have focused on choral manifestations all over the world, just informing the reader of the nature and depth of choral participation, or it could have been a historical overview of choral music. Perhaps, with conductors' endless appetite for professional development, the *Cambridge Companion to Choral Music* could have provided knowledge for achieving excellence in the choral art. None of these single objectives seemed to be desirable, particularly because almost all of these already exist in a variety of publications. The logical solution then was to design a book that accomplished many goals. First, it needed to put choral music in a historical perspective, not in an extended, encyclopedic fashion, but more in a situated, contextualized view of how and why choirs developed and how we got to where we are now, chorally speaking. Second, we needed to uncover and celebrate the wide diversity of the choral enterprise as it exists globally, to shed light on the extent and excellence of choral music in parts of the world about which we know so little. Third, to honor choral activity and contribute to its advancement, a section should be devoted to practice and pedagogy.

Fortunately, Cambridge Companions are not encyclopedias, and therefore are liberated from the mission of being comprehensive and exhaustive on any given topic. Hence, readers will find in these chapters perspective and insight combined with information and analysis. All of the authors have constructed different lenses even where the tasks may appear similar.

The beginning of choral music as we understand it is contentious, particularly in an age where just about any music from any period is sung chorally. Most choral singers believe that choral music existed in the Renaissance, while others choose to recognize its surfacing considerably later. Andrew Parrott takes us on a journey that begins towards the end of the fifteenth century, describing the emergence of the genre, with careful consideration of repertoire, civic and liturgical life, the role of instruments, and so on. With reference to a wide body of primary sources, he succeeds in resolving some controversies and in creating new ones. In a very thoughtful discussion of culture and context in the nineteenth century, Chester Alwes brings the people, the nation building, and the rise of secular choral life together. He describes some of the key trends in the development of specific compositional styles in this formative period. In like manner, Nick Strimple casts a wide net over the development of choral music in the past hundred years or so, not only in Western Europe and North America but also in a host of other countries. In particular, Strimple delves into choral music in the ugly period of World War II, looking closely at choral activity by Holocaust victims in concentration camps.

The final chapter in Part I, by Paul Hillier, takes us from antiquity to the present day in a discussion of how choruses came about and how they function within themselves internally and in their interactions with audience and community.

The second part of the book describes the world of choral music through three large chapters and six smaller ones. While at some level the authors write with similar mission – to inform the readers about choral music in their part of the world – for each of them, it manifests differently. In his chapter on Europe, Leo Samama focuses on the present circumstances of choral music – a formidable task, to squeeze into one chapter what could take many books to write. Samama, like the other authors, writes with a broad descriptive brush, looking at trends in choral activity, and differences in several European regions. By contrast, the authors of the next two chapters on North America – Canada and the United States – Patricia Abbott and Victoria Meredith, Matthew Mehaffey and Kathy Saltzman Romey respectively, take us to the early days of choral music in their countries. Both immigrant societies with different social and political systems, Canada and the USA have vibrant and diverse choral cultures captured by these four authors.

Latin American choral music is part of the standard repertoire but how little many of us know of choral life in this immense continent, and who better to write about it than María Guinand, whose name is synonymous with Latin American choralism. Her focus is on the last hundred years with some historical background. Rich in information and description, Guinand's chapter provides the reader with a rare insight into the immense variety of Latin American choral music.

The vast continents of Asia and Australasia have been divided into geographical regions – East, South and Southeast, West and Central, and Oceania. Gene Cho and Jing Ling-Tam deftly survey choirs and composers in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea. East Asia with a population of many more than a billion is similar in size to the area of South and Southeast Asia, but the resemblance ends there. East Asia, influenced greatly by the West, was largely not colonized as South and Southeast Asia have been. In the chapter on South and Southeast Asia, I discuss how cultural, colonial, religious, and linguistic differences have had an impact on the choral cultures of these parts of the world. Understanding this part of Asia is vital if we are to recognize the immense potential of this region to change the course of choral culture in this century. Aida Huseynova had the challenging, but rewarding task of describing the Islamic antecedents and political realities of choral music in the Arab world and the republics of Central Asia that were associated with the former Soviet Union. Western in orientation, and building choral bridges to their indigenous cultures, Australia, New Zealand and their Pacific neighbors are the subject of Karen Grylls's chapter on Oceania.

In general, the choral world knows more about choral music in South Africa than anywhere else on the African continent. Rudolf de Beer and Wilson Shitandi do their best to unveil the treasures of African choirs, their forms of organization, and their repertoire.

Finally, in the third part of the book, experienced and distinguished choral leaders share their experiences. Rather than providing recipes and simple instructions, they employ a wide range of styles, from autobiographical to scientific and philosophical, to unpack some of the issues in choral leadership, conducting, and teaching. Francisco Núñez's work with the Young People's Chorus of New York City has positioned him to discuss the transformative role that children's and youth choruses can play in their communities. Mary Goetze, Cornelia Fales, and Wolodymyr Smishkewych explode several misconceptions held by our profession about the appropriateness and vocal health of various singing styles. Furthermore, they build a bridge between research and practice, discussing laryngeal position, registers, and resonance. Doreen Rao's discussion of authenticity and its link with "engaged musicianship" utilizes personal narrative to construct a large philosophical picture of excellence in choral music making. She constructs a much-needed new paradigm for socially responsible conducting practice in the twenty-first century. The tensions between individuality and consensus have beset choral conductors through the ages. Mike Brewer and Liz Garnett take on these issues and explore conflicting concepts. The final two chapters describe rehearsing from different perspectives. Ann Howard Jones brings years of experience of working with Robert Shaw, and her own valuable expertise to present a systematic look at preparing and planning for rehearsal. Simon Carrington transfers the insights gained from being a founding member of the King's Singers to the rehearsal processes of a large choir.

There are too many experienced choral directors, musicologists, and writers, people I admire greatly, whose voices could have been heard in this book. The selected writers represent a broad cross-section of our profession, people with disparate views, with whom one could imagine long hours of stimulating conversation. If their writings provoke you to understand more about the origins of choral music, its worldwide manifestations, and professional practice, and most of all, if this book leads you to greater personal and community transformation through choral music, it has achieved its goal.

PART I

Choral music: history and context

2 A brief anatomy of choirs *c.*1470–1770

ANDREW PARROTT

Josquin des Prez, Tallis, Victoria, Monteverdi, Charpentier, Bach – the great choral composers of the past may be presumed to have understood the inner workings of their choirs comprehensively well; most had received a choirboy's education and virtually all spent a lifetime amongst their chosen singers. But to what extent do we share their understanding? Was Dufay's body of singers little different from those that Handel knew some 300 years later? Has "the choir" somehow managed to remain essentially one and the same thing through the ages to our own time? Though much transcribed, discussed and performed, music written for choirs in earlier centuries generally reaches us through a filter of more recent choral expectations, with unfamiliar features disregarded, overlooked, or misconstrued. Thus, while close attention is routinely paid to specific works and their composers, and to compositional genres and choral institutions, the focus here will instead be on the very nature of those diverse musical bodies we call choirs.

Since for much of the period under consideration choral performance was nurtured almost single-handedly by the Church, it will suffice to define a "choir" provisionally as "An organized body of singers performing or leading in the musical parts of a church service."[1] This has the merit of making no attempt to prescribe *how* such a body is musically organized (whether for unison singing, or for music requiring just three solo voices or a multiplicity of voices intermixed with instruments), and it therefore encourages us not to concentrate unduly on familiar aspects of "choral" performance as we now understand it.

Improvised polyphony

The bedrock of the Church's music making was plainchant, much of it sung from memory,[2] and the evolutionary link between solo or unison chant and later composed choral polyphony lies in the hidden (and little explored) world of extempore chant-based singing. This could take many forms (variously named), from simple note-against-note affairs to the

The author is indebted to Hugh Griffith for his expert assistance with various texts and for invaluable advice at the final stages of preparation of this chapter.

intricate counterpoint of highly skilled singers;[3] by the mid fifteenth century English clerical singers were practicing at least three such techniques – faburden, descant and "counter."[4] Different techniques tended to attach themselves to different portions of the liturgy: at the church of Our Lady in Antwerp (1506), the Alleluia and Sequence were to be performed in *discant*, the Communion with *contrapuncte*, and the Introit "without singing upon the book."[5] Though not required in this instance, the technique of singing "upon the book" (*super librum*) is perhaps particularly relevant to the story of the choir. Its underlying principle, according to Tinctoris in 1477, was that

> when two, three, four or more people sing together upon the book, they are not subject to one another. In fact, it is enough for each of them to accord with the tenor in regard to the rule and ordering of consonances.[6]

Was something of this sort what Thomas Morley (1597) had in mind?

> As for singing uppon a plainsong, it hath byn in times past in England (as every man knoweth) and is at this day in other places, the greatest part of the usuall musicke which in any churches is sung. Which indeed causeth me to marvel how men acquainted with musicke, can delight to heare such confusion as of force must bee amongste so many singing *extempore*.[7]

We may well share Morley's scepticism (and a Neapolitan writer likened the results to "music made by cicadas"),[8] yet Banchieri (1614) assures us that "In Rome in the Chapel of Our Lord, in the Santa Casa di Loreto and in countless other chapels" such extempore singing (*contrapunto alla mente*) was "most tasteful" to hear:

> It is a general principle that, with as many as a hundred different voices singing in consonance over a bass, all are in harmony, and those wicked 5ths, octaves, oddities and clashes are all graces which create the true effect of improvised counterpoint . . .[9]

Although small numbers of skilled singers are likely to have produced more consistently "correct" results, this particular method of improvising over chant seems to have been capable of accommodating more than a mere handful of solo voices:[10] in mid eighteenth-century France there were still churches where "almost everything is sung according to *chant sur le livre* [upon the book]," perhaps by "thirty or so musicians . . . all at the same time; some according to the rules and others completely at random."[11]

Extempore traditions of one sort or another were clearly a major part of choral practice far and wide.[12] From St. Mark's, Venice, at the end of Monteverdi's tenure as *maestro di cappella*, it was reported that "ordinarily they sing from the large book, and in the *cantus firmi* they improvise counterpoint."[13] And, as a Dutch traveler observed at the basilica well over a century

earlier in 1525, the elaborate liturgy of a major feast day demanded that the choir's duties were variously distributed amongst the singers present:

> Outside the sanctuary there is a beautiful round large high *stuel* [tribune/pulpit], decoratively hung with red velvet cloth of gold, where the *discanters* stand and sing. And those who psalmodize sit on both sides of the choir, on the one side plainsong, on the other side *contrapunt* or *fabridon* (whichever name you prefer); these three [groups] each await their time to sing, up to the end of the Mass . . .[14]

This serves to alert us to two recurrent difficulties in establishing the size and nature of earlier choirs. Just as the institutional strength of a choir will not reflect any extra singers brought in on a temporary or occasional basis, so too does it fail to take account of absences, rota systems, the function or importance of an event, and – not least – such divisions of labor within a service as have just been noted. As for depictions and documentary tallies of singers, it is exceptional to be certain whether composed or improvised polyphony or even simple chant is being sung.

These questions arise with a source that may otherwise appear to be a key guide to the performance of composed choral polyphony at the Burgundian court in the time of Busnoys. New ordinances for the court chapel drawn up in 1469 specify that

> for *chant du livre* there shall be at least six high voices, three tenors, three *basses-contre* and two *moiens* ["means"] without including the four chaplains for High Mass or the *sommeliers* who, whenever they are not occupied at the altar or in some other reasonable way, will be obliged to serve with the above-mentioned.[15]

First, by proceeding to ensure "that the service be always provided with two tenors and two *contres*,"[16] the ordinances remind us that this institutional complement (or "pool") of singers will not have been expected on all occasions. Second, "*chant* du *livre*" may well be no more than a synonym for "*chant* sur le *livre*,"[17] an improvisatory technique both suited to fluid numbers of singers and requiring a good spread of voice ranges – a technique, moreover, used "when they sing each day in the chapels of princes" and notably by "those from across the Alps, especially the French."[18]

Composed polyphony

With the music of Dufay we are on slightly firmer ground. In his lengthy will drawn up at Cambrai in 1474, the composer requests that on his deathbed – "time permitting" – two pieces of music be heard; first a chant hymn sung softly (*submissa voce*)[19] by eight Cathedral men, then his own *Ave regina coelorum*[20] sung by the (four to six) "altar boys, together with their master and two

companions."[21] Instead, as time did not permit, both items were apparently given in the Cathedral the day after his death, together with Dufay's own (lost) Requiem,[22] for which he had specified "12 of the more competent vicars, both great and lesser" (about half of the total).[23] Dufay's will also provides for a mass of his to be sung on a separate occasion by "the master of the boys and several of the more competent members of the choir," the allocated funds allowing for exactly nine singers.[24] It is worth noting that the precise location for this, and almost certainly for the Requiem, was not the choir of the Cathedral but one of its chapels.[25] Indeed, the (private) chapel, whether part of a church or an independent structure, arguably counted as "the most important place for music-making in the late Middle Ages," perhaps explaining why the chaplains of a princely chapel, whose duties were many and varied, frequently outnumbered the singing body of a great cathedral.[26]

Substantially larger vocal forces than those specified by Dufay were certainly heard from time to time, but only in exceptional circumstances. In 1475, for example, at a Sforza wedding mass in Pesaro two *capelle* sang "now one, now the other, and there were about 16 singers per *capella*."[27] A century later Lassus annotated the alto, tenor, and bass parts of a twelve-voice mass by Brumel with the names of thirty-three men – including himself as "Cantor"[28] – and for the Medicis' extravagant 1589 *intermedi* a madrigal *a*30 was sung in seven choirs by sixty voices with opulent instrumental support.[29] By contrast, the musical establishment at Florence Cathedral in 1478 comprised just four boys, their master and four other adult singers.[30] Ensembles of this nature were evidently something of a norm:

- Venetian ambassadors traveling through the Tyrol in 1492 enjoyed "the singing of five boys and three masters";[31]
- as "song master" at St. Donatian's in Bruges (1499–1500) Obrecht was "obliged to bring with him to each Salve, besides his children [choirboys], four companion singers from the church, and those who sing best";[32]
- Jean de Saint Gille's testament (1500) promises a *pour-boire* to six named singers and "several" of the boys at Rouen, who were "to sing the Mass for the Departed that I have composed."[33]

Some of these boys may have been the equivalents of today's eleven- or twelve-year-olds, but the more complex polyphony of the period reminds us that boys' voices were commonly not changing until sixteen or even later.[34] Northern Europe led the way in training young singers, and in France (1517–18)

> there is not a cathedral or major church where they do not have polyphony constantly and more than one mass sung every day; each one is supplied with six or eight little boy clerics who learn singing and serve in the choir, tonsured like little monks and receiving food and clothing.[35]