

Another Sideswipe at the Choral Tradition

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Earlier in 2004, CTCC found itself answering yet another piece of research that purported to show that there was no difference between the singing voices of boys and girls. Yet, a year previously, it has recently come to our attention, the world of traditional choirs of men and boys had come under a very different spotlight.

In *Revisiting Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Education*, a paper delivered to the Gender and Education Association in April 2003, Dr Martin Ashley of the University of the West of England, Bristol, presented findings of “a detailed, longitudinal ethnography of an all-male church choir” he had carried out. In the Abstract to the paper, he said the aim of his research was “to discover how boys, attending city primary and comprehensive schools, positioned themselves in terms of gender construction and coped at school with comments such as ‘you sing like a girl’” The evidence, he concluded, supported “the claim that if girls were allowed in the choir, most boys would leave”. Additionally, he claimed there was evidence that “extreme forms of masculinity existed, with dominant discourses of football and boasts of beer drinking exploits among the men”. This “extreme masculinity seemed to co-exist with a male vulnerability and protectiveness”. The paper examined “the subtle ways in which boys are presented with a model of masculinity which constructs female primary teachers as musically incompetent and perpetuates a legend of male supremacy in an area outsiders might imagine to be feminine”.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Dr Ashley’s paper, I wish to make some remarks of a more general nature, which I would like the reader to bear in mind as he considers this particular contribution to the debate.

SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

For many, I suspect, learning and knowledge are a spectrum of soft, opinionated disciplines – literature, art, music and so on – and the hard, cold-fact disciplines – mathematics, physics, chemistry and the like. As for the many disciplines which have invaded academe in the modern era, their locus is not clear. While their practitioners may portray themselves as dealers in hard-nosed facts, they do not always enjoy the same status as those engaged in basic sciences.

As a general statement, the above is perhaps a fair enough representation of reality. However, it is too rough and ready to capture the subtleties. Putting to one side the contentious issue of which subjects might be considered ‘soft’ and turning to the monolithic ‘science’, we will readily admit that it breaks down into ‘settled science’ and ‘unsettled science’. Given that perspective, things can look very different. That, for instance, a molecule of water is composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, that the Earth goes round the Sun and phlogiston does not exist is very much ‘settled science’. Black matter, on the other hand, is very definitely not ‘settled science’ – however soon to be proved and likely its existence may be. To such elementary observations, we ought to add that, over time, there can be refinement of and movement between ‘settled’ and ‘unsettled’ science. Thus, Kepler’s laws of astronomical motion were subsumed under Newton’s more encompassing account. Then along came Einstein and reduced Newtonian physics by the Special Theory of Relativity.

Scientists are not machine-like beings in white coats, devoid of emotion. Before a scientific theory wins general approval, a great deal of passion can be generated among the academic community. Think of the Big Bang versus the Steady State Models of the Universe. Professor Fred Hoyle probably went to his grave believing in the Steady State Model. No doubt, at the time, there were cold facts in abundance in support of the two models, but there was also impassioned debate – Big Bang being the contemptuous label applied by the Steady Staters to what eventually turned out to be the winning theory. Unsurprisingly, scientists have a jealous regard for their reputations. Passion plays its part – even, on occasion, resulting in facts being fiddled. It follows then that the reader needs to bring all his analytical skills and, indeed, a fair dose of scepticism, to any piece of research; give it a fair hearing, by all means, but do not regard it *a priori* as sacred scripture. With such considerations in mind, I shall pick out some of the points made in Dr Ashley’s paper and subject them to my own brand of empirical scepticism. It should flatter him to know that what he has written is being taken seriously. However, I

give warning: obeisance does not come easily to me!

There is no substitute, of course, for reading the paper in its entirety. Those wishing to do so and with access to the Internet can find it at <http://edu.uwe.ac.uk/cred/bibliographic/pdf/ashley.pdf>. Here, I intend to focus on particular snippets which have caught my attention, freely admitting as I do so the problems associated with lifting them out of their context. However, I think they will give sufficient flavour of the original to intrigue and perhaps encourage a reading of the complete paper. (The headings are those given in the paper.)

THE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

(1) “Cultural practices such as prepubescent boys taking the women’s parts in Shakespeare plays generally died out decades if not centuries ago. One notable exception remains, however; - the all-male cathedral choir. Here, young boys take the high voice parts that might otherwise be sung by women, and females are rigorously excluded from an environment that is arguably more exclusively male than any sporting activity.”

Well, as one who played Caesar’s wife, as a boy, to raucous acclaim and who has not yet reached 100 years of age, I think the practice still has some life left in it. As to the assertion that “young boys take the high voice parts that might be sung by females”, while literally true, it misses the point. It is to impose an anachronistic view on a tradition which grew up hundreds of years ago. That was simply the way things were in the past.

(2) “Whereas in the past parish churches might have offered a similar, though watered down version of the cathedral diet, many have now assertively departed from this tradition in pursuit of styles of music rooted in more popular forms of culture which render four-part choirs redundant The tendency of many cathedrals to maintain independent, fee-paying schools as the source of their choristers has emphasised a divide in which ‘high art’ forms of musical culture have become increasingly the preserve of the privileged in educational terms.”

Note the word “assertively”. One senses the author’s approval of this lurch to “more popular forms of culture”. However, he tries to have his cake and his penny when he bemoans the (alas, true) fact that the ‘high art’ forms of musical culture have become the preserve of the privileged.

(3) “In the absence of a strong culture of boys’ singing, the sexist insult ‘you sing like a girl’ has gained some ascendancy ... This leads to a discourse which positions singing as a feminised activity improper for ‘real boys’ ”

It is interesting to have confirmation of this worrying state of affairs, for which there has been much anecdotal evidence in recent years.

(4) “At a time when the Church of England has recognised women priests, and when overt gender discrimination is widely regarded as unacceptable in society, that girls should have the opportunity to sing in cathedral choirs is difficult for all but the most hardened to deny.”

Note how it is assumed that if you are opposed to women priests you are guilty. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that people might be opposed to a feminisation of the priesthood on purely theological grounds. As for “gender discrimination”, I rather hope we may have more of it! To treat all children with fairness and give them maximum opportunities to develop their abilities and live interesting and fulfilled lives is surely what all sensible people want, but that does not mean we should ignore real differences. Such a policy does no favour to the girls whom it is supposed to help. In any case, cathedral choirs are not part of the education business with all its clucking assertions. The way Dr Ashley puts it, you would think the all-male cathedral choir one of the greatest evils of our time. Perhaps, he ought to ponder the many implications, not least the financial, of setting up parallel girls’ choirs. There is a lot more to it than a whining declaration about it ‘only being fair’. Where were the demands for girls to be choristers in the time of Maria Hackett when the boys led lives little better than drudges, or, further back in time, when they were snatched from their families to sing in the Chapel Royal? A little perspective in these matters would not be a bad thing.

(5) “Of particular significance is the fact that the near universal tendency in cathedrals and ‘high art’

churches has been to provide two parallel single sex choirs in preference to one mixed. Broadly, the justifications for this fall into two categories. The first would be musical ... The second would be more related to gender issues; that boys may lose interest and motivation in singing if girls are introduced, and that such loss of interest might affect adversely the cultural development of boys. The first category has attracted significant interest from serious researchers whereas the second has not and this is of itself of interest and significance. In place of serious research evidence about the gender issues and cultural effects on boys, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that boys will indeed be a small minority in mixed choirs, and the primary source of comment would seem to be what has been written by choral directors rather than publication of research.”

Do we not see here the Elevation of the Sacred Cow of Research, a rite reserved exclusively to its hierarchs? I would think the near-universal belief by practising choirmasters that boys would tend to lose interest and motivation if choirs were mixed, however anecdotal its nature, was as worthy of consideration as any research carried out by academics comfortably ensconced in their studies and specialising in gender issues.

(7) “Boys’ voices are credible in a cathedral liturgy, but outside this context, when performances of the music take place in a secular context and a concert hall requiring greater power and projection, women’s voices may be better.”

It is a matter of some debate whether a traditional cathedral choir is able to project itself in a concert hall. The countless appearances of traditional choirs in the Albert Hall – and halls do not come much bigger – would seem to suggest they are up to the job. In any case, do they not manage to fill the vast spaces of our medieval cathedrals adequately enough?

Overtones of proselytism? Clearly, Dr Ashley thinks parents should not have the right to educate their children according to their own beliefs. It was precisely this charge of proselytism that led to the demise of the singing boy in churches in the Soviet Union. There are almost no boys singing in Russian churches nowadays. Lastly, is his fear of proselytism confined only to choristers, or would he have all children banned from church *tout court*?

(6) “My current research is thus preoccupied by the following two questions: (i) How necessary is it to introduce young boys to singing in order to ensure longer term cultural participation of males and a supply of future tenors and basses? (ii) To what degree might a decline in boys’ singing be associated with the rise of an arguably limiting football monoculture and the perpetuation of masculinist hegemony?”

Anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that when we are standing up we are not sitting down. Of course, a lot of expensive and time-consuming research could confirm this definitively one way or the other. Most reasonably-minded people, however, would think that a waste of time and money. Likewise, if it is the considered opinion of experienced choirmasters that the future supply of tenors and basses depends crucially on whether young boys sing, then that ought to be the end of the matter. Even if it were not the case, is there not still an overwhelming case for introducing young boys to singing, whether or not they will sing tenor or bass as they grow older?

No doubt, there is some truth in the second point. Yet, while football might loom large in boys’ lives, it surely cannot be true to talk about a monoculture. Is there really nothing outside football which interests them? But, ah, yes – masculinist hegemony! We must not forget that. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, indeed. For is it not clear as daylight that all these mini football fanatics are in reality hegemonist thugs?

THE FIRST STUDY

(1) “Holy Trinity by the Bar in the City of Seachester is often mistaken for a cathedral, though it is in fact a parish church. It is one of England’s so-called ‘greater churches’ and, as such, straddles the cultural and economic divide between cathedral and parish church. It has no choir school, yet it aspires to maintain a choir of boys and men singing the traditional cathedral repertoire of ‘high art’ sacred music. As with other churches in a similar position, it experiences considerable difficulty in recruiting and retaining boys ... In past times, the choir consisted of between twenty and thirty boys, nearly all drawn from the local state primary and secondary schools. More recently, there have been between

fifteen and twenty boys and, at the time my original study took place, the derivation of boys was as follows:

State primary:	4
Independent junior:	6
State comprehensive:	6
Independent senior:	2 (1 assisted place)

This clearly reflects the point made earlier, that the independent sector of education is beginning to colonise the cultural 'high ground' in music which is clearly an issue of concern in relation to the Robinson Report on Culture and Education (DfEE*, 1999). Nevertheless, as evidenced by a recruiting campaign current at the time of writing, the will in the church remains to recruit boys from maintained primary schools."

Well, here, indeed, is cause for rejoicing - that even in these days of hegemonist footballers and gender sexperts, a church still manages to recruit 18 boys into its choir. Long may it thrive!

It is, without a doubt, a sad fact that choristers these days tend to come from the AB social classes. In the case of cathedral choristers, the fact that they traditionally go on to public school must mean that, on the whole, there are few working-class boys in choir schools. However regrettable this is, it is no simple matter of boys from humble backgrounds being excluded. The plain fact is that, if they do not present themselves for voice trials, they cannot be selected. (It might also be mentioned here that the much-vaunted girls' choirs in cathedrals are largely made up of the daughters of the well-to-do. Step forward Emily and Amanda!)

As to the colonisation of the cultural high ground, this really is a bit rich! Is it not the educational establishment itself which has been largely responsible in recent years for pushing 'popular culture' in state schools at the expense of the great cultural treasures of the western world? If blame is to be apportioned for this sorry state of affairs, it is clear where a fair share of it should go.

INTIMIDATING GIRLS EN MASSE: INSIDER VIEWS

"The fundamental issue that needs to be understood is that of why the general response to the introduction of girls by institutions which notably involve children in 'high art' singing has been to create two single sex choirs rather than one mixed choir. I have already established that, although some might maintain that boys' voices are fundamentally different to girls, acoustical research does not support this position. The explanation is much more likely to be one rooted in cultural preferences and the construction of gender identity. ... Several adults spoken to in the choir (including the director) seemed to accept as axiomatic that a boys' choir was a 'good thing' that merited preservation in spite of the obvious difficulties of recruitment. No justifications of this view were offered. ... To question it was perceived as bizarre or even disloyal."

Once again, I repeat, acoustical research does not support the simplistic belief that boys and girls' voices are fundamentally the same. Indeed, a careful reading of the research shows that no such bald statement is actually made. However, let us leave that aside and deal with the assertion that what we are dealing with is 'cultural preference and the inertia of tradition'. Quite clearly, there is a preference. But what is wrong about that? In any case, whatever the origin of the all-male church choir, over the centuries, a body of opinion has seen the boy's voice as particularly suitable for religious worship.**

GIRLS EN MASSE

"What of the boys themselves who had not yet been as deeply encultured? The statement 'you must understand that younger boys find girls en masse intimidating' was made by a fourteen year old ... It was a response to my question 'why do you think that in many primary schools there are more girls than boys in the choir?' ... Daniel articulated the classic sing like a girl insult: 'I'm teased and called a girl because I had a high singing part in *Oliver*. They think only girls can sing that high. They need education.' ... Thirteen year old Mark, one of the choir's 'star' soloists, was also a strong, well built boy who played in his comprehensive school rugby team. Asked

which he would value the more, he replied 'I'd always go to choir. Choir is more of a commitment. Rugby is more fun, but I won't be able to sing soprano when I'm twenty.'"

The boys, it is clear, were quite capable of articulating their thoughts, and possessed of enough character to field with style both the probing questions of a gender academic and the insults of their class mates. I particularly like the rejoinder 'They need education.'

CUBS ARE GIRLIE

"It emerged ... that the kind of repertoire generally experienced in primary schools is held in utter contempt by choirboys who sing Latin masses by Palestrina and contemporary choral works by Tavener.... 'Our school choir is embarrassing, they sing silly little songs like Red, Red Robin.' This rejection of the primary school singing repertoire was conflated with a parallel rejection of the reading material offered by the National Literacy Strategy:

'It's totally true that I don't like the literacy hour. You can't have a better word for it than hate.' ... What appears to emerge from 'cubs are girlie' is that the feminine is perceived as stupid or frivolous, and that the literary and musical material offered to primary school boys by mainly female teachers is also perceived as stupid or frivolous. By contrast, 'real music' and 'real literature' is to be found only when boys do 'real men's work' in choir."

It is wonderful to think there are boys out there who won't be patronised by the educational establishment. And surely the point is not that "the feminine is perceived as stupid or frivolous" but that intelligent children, boys or girls, will despise the mediocre.

"Childhood is thus encroached upon as young boys feign a machismo and sexual maturity that is beyond their years. My fear is that the expectations of boys that are now being created by the plethora of self-appointed experts on the 'problem with boys' may unwittingly make matters worse."

So, nobody is justified in expressing an opinion unless he or she is 'an expert', presumably like the good doctor. It is high time that experts of all kinds got off the backs of hard-working choirmasters and let them get on with their difficult task of ensuring boys continue to sing music of the highest quality. Blether, blether, blether: we have had enough of it.

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** In *The Art of the Choral Conductor*, Fr William J. Finn disputes that boys took the place of females, asserting that, not only do they pre-date the women in this function, but "their selection is approved by sound reason of aesthetic propriety". For this reason, he says, generations of choir masters have suffered the "small, wriggling, noisy and generally undisciplined male sopranos ...". In his view, the female sound belongs more properly in non-liturgical choruses by virtue of the emotionalism it brings to the dramatic soprano.