The Art and Science of Lifelong Singing

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As a short prelude to the lecture, let us listen to the world-renowned male vocal ensemble, Chanticleer, perform the choral work, "I have had singing".[1,2] The text of the work follows:

> The singing—There was so much singing then,
>
> and this was my pleasure, too.
>
> We all sang—the boys in the fields,
>
> the chapels were full of singing, always singing.
>
> Here I lie. I have had pleasure enough.
>
> I have had singing!

The words, set to music by composer, Steven Sametz in 1993, were adapted from an interview with Fred Mitchell, an 85-year-old Welsh horseman. The interview was recorded in a book by Ronald Blythe entitled *Akenfield: A Portrait of an English Village*.[3] The horseman's words reflect sentiment shared by many people around the world, namely, that singing with others brings joy to life.

In current scientific research, amateur choristers are frequent subjects. The acoustics of choral singing groups and performance spaces have been studied and quantified. These studies have measured a variety of ways that people sing together. "Most singing around the world is done by amateur singers in choirs, whether they are affiliated with schools, religious institutions, communities, barbershop quartet clubs, or other organizations".[4] This lecture investigates the musical history, vocal demands, and potential personal benefits of singing with others. Many of the tools required to achieve a lifetime of singing can be found at the intersection of voice science and the choral experience.

THE NATURE OF AMATEUR CHORAL SINGER

Most people begin to sing as children and persist into adolescence with little or no formal singing training. For many, singing is a hobby that brings satisfaction, because amateur singing includes everyone. The very derivation of the term "amateur" or "volunteer" seems to say it all. Amateur singers volunteer as singers in a choir for the love of singing, for a chance to belong, and an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves. This does not mean, however, that amateur choristers necessarily know how to sing in a healthy way. Every singer, whether untrained or highly accomplished, performs with an instrument one can neither see nor touch. To the amateur, singing is a glorious mystery, a vocal gift to be enjoyed from "cradle to grave." Expecting to sing for a lifetime, amateur singers join choral groups in the hope of learning more about their beloved hobby.

THE VOCATION OF CHORAL CONDUCTING

The choral art is fragile, based upon the "charisma" of a conductor and the devotion of singers. It is ironic to note that one need not be a trained singer to be a choral conductor. This author has often noted that many choral conductors are instrumentalists who "got lonely." It is not uncommon for a singer to approach an instrumentalist for assistance in mastering a musical passage. Many untrained singers lack basic rudimentary musical skills, such as rhythm and sight singing. Because most instrumental musicians practice in a solitary space, the arrival of a singer on the scene can be a welcome diversion. If the instrumentalist succeeds in helping the singer, other singers will follow. Given any opportunity at all, the instrumentalist senses a "calling" to the world of choral music. The newly "anointed" choral conductor may not realize that the singers are seeking much more than a leader. The singers in a choral group generally expect the conductor to be an authority on the singing voice, the choral art, and musical fundamentals. For choral conductors, this expectation may be puzzling. Instrumental conductors expect rightly that each player in the band or orchestra has had some amount of individual instruction. Choral conductors frequently assume wrongly that amateur choral singers, also called "choristers," grasp the basics of singing.

THE NATURE OF CHORAL SINGING

What does it really mean when a person identifies himself or herself as a "chorister"? A chorister sings with others to express the musical and interpretive ideas of the choir's conductor. Unlike the solo singer who seeks to display vocal abilities while sharing textual meaning, the chorister subdues the "singer ego," delivering those ingredients of his or her voice that benefit the overall sound of the choral ensemble. The governance of a choral ensemble is not a democracy; it is a benevolent dictatorship. Only by following the explicit guidance of the conductor will a choir become a coherent, expressive musical instrument, capable of interpreting the essence of a choral composition. In other words, the conductor is the shepherd and the choristers are the choral flock. To provide proper guidance, choral conductors need vocal training that complements their conducting skills. Although the American choral culture has long espoused "cradle to grave" singing as one of its most cherished goals, a pedagogy that would train individuals properly for a lifetime of age-and size-appropriate singing was not easy to establish.

THE CREATION OF CHORAL PEDAGOGY

Because of its many facets, choral singing has proven somewhat illusive to quantify. In 1987, Johann Sundberg noted that ". . .almost all research on the singing voice concerns operatic

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singing."[5] As voice science evolved, music educators and singers began to seek a "vocal approach to choral music," one that could provide specific skills for healthy choral singing. A discipline called "choral pedagogy" developed, an interdisciplinary initiative that unites vocal pedagogy, choral conducting with voice science. To understand the significance of this new interdisciplinary approach to choral repertoire, it is necessary to understand the history of the choral art in the Western world.

CHORAL SINGING IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

Choral singing in the Western world began as an *a cappella* art, designed "for the chapel." It involved the chanting of repetitive texts in ecclesiastical circumstances where the architectural and acoustical circumstance featured vaulted ceilings and extensive open spaces. To be heard in such spaces, the monks slowed their speech, extending the vowel sounds into a "grateful" space, one that amplified and circulated the sounds in a nearly "celestial" fashion. The coincidence of this singing style with the heightened acoustics engulfed both performer and listener in waves of rich vocal tapestry. Monks, who were expected to repeat the liturgy several times daily, ornamented the phrase shapes to express the text more fully and to vary the musical affect. These early chants were codified under Pope Gregory I (590–604) and are therefore referred to as "Gregorian Chant."

THE A CAPPELLA IDEAL

A school was established to teach boys, falsettists, castrati, and young men to sing in liturgical worship services. At first, the music was "monophonic," or sung in unison. As the singers matured and the vocal forces expanded, polyphonic choral works were composed. These works exploited the vocal possibilities and timbres of the singers in an age- and size-appropriate fashion. The liturgy was in the Latin, a language replete with pure vowel phonemes. Composers took full advantage of the acoustical properties of the room by creating melodic material that would soar through the acoustical space. Frequent rests were placed between the phrases to allow for reverberation without confusion. To enhance the meditative nature of the liturgy, the music incorporated numerous repetitions. The perception of this connection of breath to text held a power for the listener that was spiritually invigorating as well as aesthetically pleasing. The effortlessness of the singing was a hallmark of this choral genre. At some point, the method of singing was codified, taught from singer to singer, and deemed to be beautiful singing—or "Bel Canto."

DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY OPERA

In the Italian Renaissance, a period of opulence and invention, a committee of artists, musicians, philosophers, and politicians known as the *Florentine Camerata* (ca 1580) found a secular use for this singing technique. The group sought to examine the human condition by developing an interdisciplinary art form that would use the human voice to "elevate" speech. Texts from Roman legend and Greek mythology were rewritten in a manner that would invite musical adaptation. The melodic material was designed to exploit the timbres of the human voice and "lift" the text from its customary utterance to a more dramatic, colorful level. The *Camerata* created a template for the newly invented musical work or "opera." The action of the plot would be contained in segments that would be performed by a solo voice in a recited tone or "recitative." The character's emotional response to the action would be expressed in a poetic text designed to "air" the dramatic qualities of the plot circumstance. The "aria" was composed to allow for flights of vocal and musical expansion. When the plot required commentary or conversation, composers constructed duets, trios, and larger ensembles that met the musical and theatrical demands of the plot. The earliest opera singers were mainly young men who had gained their vocal training through the ecclesiastical choral tradition. In early opera, the range of the repertoire was generally within the interval of a tenth, accommodating the abilities of the amateur singers. As the singers aged and developed vocal skill, the range and tessitura of the repertoire expanded. Notes outside one's range could be rewritten at will. Arguably, one might say that the history of opera is an extension of the ecclesiastical choral tradition. It is perhaps for this reason that the earliest treatises regarding vocal technique mention little to nothing about the most basic elements of singing. Relaxation, posture, and breath were techniques that had been thoroughly mastered by every pupil trained in the papal choir tradition. The manner of performance was intimate, using instruments that could respond spontaneously to the expression of text. Giovanni de' Bardi, a member of *Florentine Camerata*, summed up the way to sing chamber music as follows: ". . .whoever wants to sing well had better do so very sweetly, with a very sweet manner. . .and while singing, you will strive to behave in a seemly way, so similar to your normal (i.e. speaking) manner that people will be left wondering whether the sound issues from your lips or from someone else's."[6]

SINGING WITH INSTRUMENTS

Conversely, these operatic ideals influenced the development of the choral art. Heinrich Schütz, a church musician who served the community of Dresden, Germany, sought strategies for music making in troubled times. Schütz, himself a gifted singer and an instrumentalist, lived and worked during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and a time of bubonic plague. Early in his career, Schütz became a widower, losing his wife and a daughter to the perils of the time. Admired and trusted by his employer, Schütz was granted not one but two sabbatical leaves. These study trips were opportunities for exploring Europe and gathering new musical impulses. On one of those trips, it is thought that the Dutch master, Rembrandt, used Heinrich Schütz as a model for the portrait known as "Portrait of an Unknown Musician." While in Venice, Italy, Schütz studied first with Claudio Monteverdi, the so-called "Father of Opera" and later with Giovanni and Andrea Gabrieli. The Gabrielis were notable virtuoso brass players, who also composed choral works for multiple choirs. The architectural spaces of Venice's *Basilica San Marco* were used to "embody" the music by placing choirs of singers and instrumentalists in a wide variety of locations throughout the church. Heinrich Schütz apparently recognized this performance practice as not only thrilling but also very practical. The expansive palette of musical colors made it possible to include even the weakest of singers or instrumentalists in the music