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The role and importance of the
choral conductor

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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The role and importance of the choral conductor

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Studies of the leadership and management of artistic organizations have gained ground in recent years (Durrant, 2009) and in particular the (potential) leadership skills of the choral musical director have been the subject of some valuable (Bell, 2008). These include Colin Durrant’s studies “Shaping Identity through Choral Activity: Singers’ and Conductors’ Perceptions” (2005) and “Communicating and accentuating the aesthetic and expressive dimension in choral conducting” (2009). Helen Richards and Colin Durrant’s “To Sing or Not to Sing: A study on the development of ‘non-singers’ in choral activity” (2003) is also an interesting take on an under researched subject that perhaps indicate a more sinister side to choral organization than is often portrayed. Patricia O’Toole’s “I Sing In A Choir But I Have “No Voice” (1994) also explores this theme of a “darker side” of choral singing and finally, Cindy Bell’s critical overview of recent studies in the field “Towards a definition of a community choir” (2008) is a useful source for anyone interested in understanding choral leadership studies more generally.

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a qualitative study of a community choir in Southwest England. According to the interviewees, the conductor is no ordinary person; he or she must be exceptionally gifted and musically confident, with good technical skills and be able to present the music to the choral members in a compelling way. The conductor must have a good ear, perfect pitch and good sense of rhythm. And humour! The conductor must also have a superior understanding of the music, hear what sounds right, correct errors and solve technical problems. However, rather than describing the organized, managerial type that Durrant presents, the interviewees emphasise the need for the conductor to be a good listener. The conductor must have the skill to listen carefully both to the individual members when they share their knowledge and when they are making music.

Theoretical background

The role of the choral conductor as a leader is, according to the researcher and conductor Colin Durrant (2005), fairly new within the Western musical tradition. In effect the “conductor” has evolved from being a person solely responsible for time beating, to becoming a “great musical director” interpreting the great oratorios during the romantic period in the early-middle 19th century Europe (Durrant, 2005). Durrant compared the nature of choral participation and the role of conductors in Sweden and Finland and concludes that the legend of the “great conductor” is both controversial and debatable. On the one hand studies have shown that musical directors can affect singers and instrumentalists in a negative way and therefore have harmful influences on the singers’ and instrumentalists’ performances. On the other hand, Durrant assumes that conductors are required to have a positive impact on the choral

members in terms of inspiration, musical- and vocal training and general encouragement. The results of Durrants study in Sweden and Finland indicated that most choral members regarded the musical director as one of the main pillars in the choral activities. They emphasized that the conductors' own interest in their profession was essential in order to be able to influence and encourage choral members to enhance the quality of their performance, both in terms of musical skills and interpretation of the choral works. The conductors, however, considered themselves to be mentors who had to identify the musical and vocal skills of the choral members, as well as the choir's character and development (Durrant, 2005).

Patricia O'Toole (1994) is more critical than Durrant in her analysis of the power relationship between the conductor and choral members. Her approach is grounded her own experience as a seasoned choral singer and conductor, and her research is influenced by critical feminist theory and Michel Foucault's analysis of organizational power. O'Toole assumes that the roots of the power "struggles" between conductors and choral members can be traced to the masculine discourse that is dominated by men and written by men. Although criticising the dominant position of the conductor, O'Toole emphasizes that it was not her intention to blame conductors for the alleged "silence" of the choral members but to demonstrate the effects of the Western male-orientated conductor's tradition.

In *Discipline and Punish – the Birth of the Prison*, Foucault describes the body as a docile, malleable site for inscribing social power through rituals and institutional practices (Foucault, 1991). Foucault's assumption is that discipline, through systematic play of spatial distribution, coding of activities, accumulation of time and composition of forces, creates individualities with characteristics that correspond to these organising elements (Foucault, 1991, bls. 167). By controlling the individual's body and its activities, the governing system of command has total control over every aspect of the person, shaping and forming its disposition to fit the dominant ideal of manageability.

It is noteworthy that the development of the modern choral society coincides with the development of the disciplinary system that Foucault discusses. And his influential critique of modernity helps to highlight the importance of investigating the relationships between power, knowledge and bodies within the Western classical musical traditions. For instance, by using the *Panopticon* as a metaphor for modern 'disciplinary' societies and its pervasive inclination to observe and normalise, Foucault draws the attention to institutional procedures and habits, such as the processes of the classical concert, and forces us to look at them critically (Sigurjonsson, 2009). However, in the concert auditorium it is perhaps the conductor's all-hearing ear rather than the gaze of the all-seeing eye that "observes" the behaviour of both the orchestra and the audience (Bergeron, 1996, bls. 4).

Research findings

The research approach was based on grounded theory using data obtained from a case study which combined participant observation with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were anonymous (named with pseudonyms) and participation was voluntary. Five participants (three women and two men, age range 40 – 60) were asked to describe the perfect or ideal conductor and some fairly interesting comments emerged which are presented and discussed in the article.

The ideal conductor

The respondents all replied to the question of how they would describe the perfect, ideal conductor in terms of musical/technical skills and interpersonal skills. They all

agreed that the conductor is the most important person in the choir's activities, as Jane¹ noted: "*Without somebody to keep you going, you're like a headless doll, aren't you?*" She described the ideal conductor this way:

I mean it's somebody who's got the technical knowledge but doesn't ram it down your throat, you know – can share it with you in bite-size peaces that you can take on board – you know, we're not there to take a degree or something so - but has the knowledge to in part to you, can stretch you but let you enjoy it so you go through this journey where you're learning something, you're being challenged – you perhaps perform it and get the real feeling of accomplishment and you feel good about yourself and the choir at the end of the day, so if you get this, you know, the perfect MD [Musical Director] I think that's what you want and someone you can have a laugh and a joke with along the way.

This quote reflects what all the respondents agreed on: The conductor must be very talented and musically confident, with good technical skills and be able to deliver the music; have a good ear, perfect pitch and good sense of rhythm; hear what is going wrong and where and thus correct errors and solve technical problems. He/she must have a good knowledge of the music; the style and its characteristics and the ability to put the music into a perspective which is accessible and understandable to the choral members. Paul² explained that:

[One conductor] changed the whole way we felt about [the music] - she concentrated on how the sound develops and how you get the different sound sets that are appropriate to the music because it is a spiritual sound and it just transformed with understanding and appreciation of what we were doing - and that's what a conductor is about, you know - it's partly about knowledge but it is mainly about leadership and projection . . .

As can be seen in the quotes above, technical or musical ability on its own is not enough. Respondents all agreed on the importance of the personal skills of the conductor. The conductor should be someone who is able to communicate with the choral singers and has the ability to teach, train and coach the choir. At the same time he or she should be good at organization and an experienced conductor. They also mentioned the importance of the conductor having a good sense of humour and not being self-important, yet being quite firm and in control at the same time. Since the community choir is small (30 people or less) it was evident that interviewees considered it important to build up a close relationship with their conductor:

I think it [the interaction between the conductor and choir members] is quite intimate because we're small, it is quite intimate and they do learn where everybody is quite quickly and what response they're going to get from different areas . . . (Julia³).

"But at the end of the day ... you want a musical director that you can repoll with, that you hope you'll become a friend to or with – do you know what I mean? (Jane)"

It was also evident that the interviewees considered it vital that the conductor had the ability to develop the best with all choir members, allowing them to develop musically, giving encouragement and having positive influence on member's

¹ Interviewee 1 – a woman in her fifties

² Interviewee 5 – a man in his forties

³ Interviewee 4 – a woman in her fifties

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confidence by managing stress and the ability to address difficult issues regarding choral members (such as declining voice and pitch with elderly members, communication problems, etc.). As a result, being a conductor requires a range of different talents and abilities.

A choir-oriented or conductor-oriented organization? – Some administrative issues

The main idea behind the position of the conductor is that he/she is the centre of the choir’s operation and that the conductor has an undisputed authority. Paul claimed that in some cases the conductor can play an important role regarding the choir’s self identity:

I . . . had a number of difficulties in my other choir where the MD had something that came to be a minor nervous breakdown and left us standing just three weeks before the Christmas concert . . . that was quite stressful because he did define what the choir was about - what the program was about, how we did things, how we were reigning for, what sound he wanted and actually that’s what was good about it . . . the thing I like about singing is the simplicity of the relationship and the fact that there is somebody in charge which is something that I actually on the whole get on quite well with rather than chaos, everybody talking at once and complete democracy . . .

What Paul is describing is his appreciation of the centrality of the conductor, which does not seem to be the case in this community choir. He goes on:

I think actually one of the interesting things is that they as a group of people, most choirs have this fiction that they employ the MD and the MD is not to say where it goes, it is not ‘his’ choir . . .

This quote suggests that the conductor is considered as an employee of the committee. Julia, a committee member, described one conductor who was willing to receive comments and guidance from the choir, thus gaining knowledge from the long experience of choral members:

. . . if there’s any problems during that year then obviously we feed back to him and say “they are unhappy about this or they are unhappy about that” or whatever, so he’ll get feedback. Apparently, I spoke to the chairman of one of his other choirs and he said that he’ll be asking for feedback . . . The chap we had last year – we did have to give him some very serious feedback and his reaction was “well, that’s me” and I thought oh – but he did take it on . . . yes, he learned a lot from us.

However, it is worth noting that in the case of this community choir, there have been frequent changes of conductors over the past five years which has had, according to one of the interviewees, a negative influence on the atmosphere of the choir. Evidently there have been some difficulties with some of the previous conductors:

He was rather an unpleasant man – he started off everything, was all friendly and then – I think the main problem was he didn’t know what democracy was . . . he wasn’t prepared to listen to us. It got quite upsetting and in the end we sacked him . . . I mean you’re never going to have conductors that get on with everybody wonderfully all the time (Jane).

. . . [He] was a disaster because he was full of his own self importance and wouldn’t take criticism, couldn’t count which is pretty crucial, very important . .

. This other guy couldn't take humour . . . the banter just stopped, we couldn't do any because it was pointless because we weren't allowed to make any jokes . . (Julia).

[The choir] lost a couple of members and we had a piece of music that everyone hated . . . He said "You'll like it", oh... and after another year it was becoming ridiculous, we were in danger of losing half a dozen people . . . He wouldn't do stuff for the committee . . . he was very expensive, he wouldn't cut out spending and it was just becoming ridiculous . . . (Elisabeth⁴).

Julia, who had been a committee member for many years said that

. . . We did hire someone before where we didn't actually consult with the choir and the choir was not happy with him and then you got a miserable choir, they didn't want to perform or sing and there were a lot of them who at that point were thinking "I really cannot do this" it was too miserable.

As is evident in the quotes above, the interviews contained several narratives of conductors who were both good and not so good in certain aspects. As an example, Jane described a difficult experience with a conductor in one of her previous choirs:

[I moved] and I joined a local choir ... but I found the choir quite cliquey and at that times their conductor – I used to see people run out of practices in tears. We weren't getting it right and he would really have a go with people and I thought "no this is not what I sing for". I sing for pleasure, not to get shouted at and told I'm useless and can't sing. I know I'm not very good at singing but when you're told you can't – I mean there was one thing we were doing for a concert and it was quite tricky and we were at one practice and I'll never forget it, he just looked at us and said „You sopranos are useless, you are never going to get this“, and we never did. We completely fudged in concert and ... I thought if a person that is teaching you says you're not going to get it ... you need a bit of encouragement, you don't need to be knocked down ... and with that, plus I was just missing the people in [my previous choir – the community choir in this research], I went back again . . .

Jane also described another conductor who was a nice person that everybody in the choir loved but he lacked certain technical abilities: he did not hear wrong notes or bother to fix missing bars here and there. Even so, the importance of being challenged is evident:

. . . It was very different and really stretched us but you get a real sense of accomplishment when you do something like that and I think without the challenge you don't get the feeling of an accomplishment and it just becomes a [sighs] . . .

Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this research echo some of the issues raised both by Durrant (2005, 2009) and O'Toole (1994) such as Durrant's three interrelated attributes of effective choral conducting: "philosophical principles of conducting, musical abilities and interpersonal skills". According to Durrant, principles like knowledge of the choral repertoire and the history of music; knowledge of the human

⁴ Interviewee 2 – a woman in her forties

voice and awareness of the aesthetic potential of the music are important for choral conducting. Moreover, the conductor must have a good pitch, identify inaccuracies in the singing due to tone problems, entries, rhythms, language and interpretation. The conductor must also be aware of the importance of warming up and introduce the main theme of the choral works he/she is rehearsing. Finally, Durrant emphasizes the “interpersonal skills” of the conductor: the ability to create a positive and non-threatening environment and to be able to communicate to the choir members in an effective way, using gestures and body language. The conductor’s ability to encourage people and enhance their self-esteem with an effective feedback on their performance is important and he/she must direct rehearsals in an effective way, stretch the choral members and increase their musical and vocal skills without pressuring them too much (Durrant, 2005).

The findings of this study concur with the points Durrant raises. Not only must the conductor have good musical and technical skills and understanding of music, he/she must be able to teach and guide, to make the music understandable and accessible to the choral members and be able to challenge the choir, make them accomplish something they would normally not think that they are able to. The respondents from the small community choir also mentioned the importance of social aspects in the relationship between the conductor and the choir.

The interviewees also described their negative experience of arrogant, self-important conductors where in one case the conductor forced choral members to take the responsibility for the “inaccuracy” rather than questioning his own abilities and capabilities to identify and solve problems. According to O’Toole’s experience, (1994) the conductor seemed to blame the choral members for incorrect notes and wrong interpretations of the choral works and the singers seemed to accept his authority. These issues were addressed by the respondents but the main force of argument was to emphasize the conductor’s ability to listen – not only to hear the wrong notes and other errors, but also to hear what the choral members say and also what they don’t say – in other words to be able to read the group; identify, solve and prevent problems as they arise (akin to the all-hearing ear (Bergeron, 1996)).

According to Patricia O’Toole (1994), even though choral singers were usually content with their conductor, it depended on whether they could influence or affect their own performance and progress as choral singers. The narratives about the impossible conductors reflected the discussions of O’Toole where she argued that the conductor-centred Western choral tradition is based on masculine values of the conductor as the principal and the choral members as the object, a powerless musical instrument, and subject to the conductors will who gives little attention to the choral members.

O’Toole (1994) gives an example of a choir which is very conductor-oriented and where the conductor frequently ignores the members’ skills and experience. The singers are silenced and their comments often thought to be an unwelcome disturbance. The conductor’s primary intention is to produce „quality music“ that, in his opinion, matters. The choral members experience themselves as neutral instruments without a voice or free will.

This study concludes that describing the interrelationship between the conductor and the choral members is a tricky task, especially when it comes to a comparison with traditional structures and models within management’s studies. However, this study may be beneficial for conductors and choral organizations who may find some inspiration to improve the operation and function of choral activities.

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