



Research informed practice in choral work – long overdue for impact

Trustee Martin Ashley introduces a new *abcd* initiative

It's a peculiar state of affairs that there are more research journals for music education than almost any other subject, including the 'important' ones such as English and Maths! Those of us whose research into choral singing is at best peripheral to education, however, have hitherto had rather less choice. Almost all my output on boys and choral singing has been in American journals. Indeed, for over two decades I have been reading American journals in order to climb the 'shoulders of the giants', carrying out some field work with English choirs and sending the results back across the Atlantic!

This is perhaps an odd state of affairs given the extent to which we laud and extol the so-called 'English choral tradition' whilst simultaneously venerating its antiquity. But the English choral tradition is largely a tradition of practice. It has produced relatively little research and there are conspicuous areas of choral activity where it is hard to find examples of English practice that have changed as a result of research, certainly research carried out in England by English researchers. My own field, as some readers may well know, is the adolescent male voice and the participation of boys in choral work. The giants in this field are almost all American and over the last couple of decades their work has begun to

influence English practice. In our cathedrals we have seen a growing movement against boys singing 'too high or too long'. This is an idea that has come from the States. In our youth choirs, we have seen a gradual acceptance of the idea that boys continue to sing whilst their voices change, perhaps through the use of 'cambiata' vocal parts. Another idea imported directly from the States.

My own contribution has been to adjust some of these big ideas at the edges, critique them, attempt to communicate them to teachers and conductors, and evaluate the success of such endeavours. Looking back over a long career in what is supposed to be retirement I am encouraged by small pockets of success (*abcd*'s own Cambiata North West being one of them) but saddened to see that in all too many cases, things have hardly moved on at all¹. People are still asking the same questions that they were twenty or thirty years ago. Why can't I get boys to join my choir? An elementary question. If they'd only read the research, they'd find some answers! Equally, there are the persistent myths and legends that are perpetuated by a preference for somebody's assertion on social media over studying the painstaking output of scholars. Boys didn't reach puberty until the age of 18 in the time of Bach is a classic.

So why don't practitioners engage more with research and scholarship? Well, of course many are exhausted simply by the daily stresses of keeping their particular ship afloat. Social media is much more accessible than erudite academic writing. One has this idea of one's GP settling down to read the *Lancet* after a day in the surgery, but then one reads of the stresses our overworked doctors are under and wonders how many seriously do. Then there is the question of whether the research is actually worth reading. Is there a choral equivalent of the *Lancet* that tells of a new treatment that may improve patients' lives?

An act of faith by *abcd* trustees has seen the launch of a new British choral research journal. With modern metrics we'll know who's reading it and where. What will be the impact on the lives of singers who join choirs? There has been some excellent work over the years by British scholars in early music and historically informed performance. I have found Andrew Johnston's work on Tudor performing pitch particularly fascinating and it has prompted me to take my own work on boys' voices further by investigating whether modern boys can sing like sixteenth century means. That's potentially a direct impact on the lives of boys who might join choirs and maybe an impact upon listeners and music critics. Maybe it's a challenge to see if there is a female equivalent to the mean voice. But only

¹ See Ashley, M. (2013) Broken voices or a broken curriculum? The impact of research on UK school choral practice with boys, *British Journal of Music Education*.

if enough conductors read the research and experiment.

If I'd had a pound for every claim about how good choral singing is for you, I could endow my own music festival! Well, is it? How good? In what ways? What does serious, peer reviewed research actually say? What's the real evidence? Does it stand up or are you merely perpetuating myths perpetuated by wishful thinking? Might you even be causing harm by practices that might be condemned by research? For quite a few years now, the Sydney De Haan Research Centre based at Canterbury Christ Church University has been working in the field of arts and health. *abcd* should be supporting such initiatives and will be through the creation of a journal that pulls relevant work together all in one place and is read by choral conductors.



What about the brain and singing? There have been so many advances in neuroscience and much is written about supposed positive effects of singing together. This is particularly a topic for community and elder choirs. So, you wish to make the point in a grant application for a new choral venture? You're going to need serious evidence and a newspaper article isn't really going to convince a grant funder who knows their business. In fact, take it from me, the so-called 'mainstream' media just make things up. I'm still waiting for the letter from the solicitors acting for King's College Cambridge about a totally fictitious quote, allegedly from me, but entirely made up by the *Daily Telegraph*! It was a few years ago now. Thankfully, King's solicitors have better things to do. Meanwhile, you might be pleasantly surprised at how much your own thinking might

advance and how much your grant application might improve through reading the relevant research – and citing it!

So how, then, are we to proceed in this new age of 'fake news' and social media? That's perhaps one of the most interesting questions of all and it would merit in my view a research article! There's no doubt that there's a lot of sharing of ideas and debate between choral practitioners via social media. It's valuable as evidence of interest, a source of ideas and I look at it myself, sometimes contributing. *abcd*'s own Facebook discussion group often makes interesting reading and evidences the extent to which conductors, singers and listeners have a thirst for ideas and a willingness to share knowledge. ACDA's Choralnet is well known to many *abcd* members and I've had alerts to debates of interest on Choralnet over the years. But would you want to be operated on by a surgeon whose knowledge had been gleaned entirely by reading what people had said on Facebook about how, in their opinion, a heart bypass should be executed?

The gold standard for advances in human knowledge is still peer review in scientific journals. For me, the extent to which the analogy between medical research and choral research stands is the crux of the whole matter. When we see recently published research cited and debated on *abcd*'s Facebook pages I will know people are reading it and it's impacting their thinking. Here's a starter for ten! A Capella pitch drift is a topic as perennial as the grass. You suffer and you decide that you are going to start auditioning your singers. Can you expect an improvement in your choir's pitch holding? I'm eagerly awaiting a paper on this topic from colleagues at the Open University. It will be presented at this year's Choral Leaders' Festival and hopefully a version will appear in the first issue of *abcd*'s new research journal. I haven't entirely given up myself. A choir with singers whose pitching accuracy can



be as poor as 40 cents from the target note sounds good? How come? A journal that offers the opportunity for audio samples to be integrated with the text is going to be really helpful here and *abcd*'s new one will do just that!

Professor Martin Ashley will Chair the Editorial Board of our new research journal. He is Emeritus Professor and former Head of Research in the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill. If you would be interested in submitting a paper, do get in touch with us.