

CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHOIRS AND CHORAL CONDUCTORS

Geoffrey Webber⁸¹

University of Cambridge
gaw25@cam.ac.uk

John Rink⁸²

University of Cambridge

Marco Antonio da Silva Ramos⁸³

University of São Paulo

Susana Igayara⁸⁴

University of São Paulo

Miriam James⁸⁵

University of Cambridge

Abstract: Initial contact in 2012 between colleagues at the Universities of Cambridge (UK) and São Paulo (Brazil) revealed remarkable similarities as well as interesting differences of outlook and approach to the creative development of choirs and choral conductors. A collaborative project between the two universities was developed, funded by the British Academy, which exploited unprecedented opportunities for interac-

⁸¹ Geoffrey Webber is Precentor and Director of Studies at Gonville and Caius College and an Affiliated Lecturer in the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge.

⁸² John Rink is Professor of Musical Performance Studies at the University of Cambridge.

⁸³ Marco Antonio da Silva Ramos is coordinator of the Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory and Professor of Choral Conducting at the Universidade de São Paulo.

⁸⁴ Susana Igayara is Lecturer on Choral Repertoire and leader of the Multidisciplinary Group of Studies and Research on the Art of Singing at the Universidade de São Paulo.

⁸⁵ Mirjam James is a Research Assistant in the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge.

tion, investigating initiatives in both universities to enhance the theory and practice of choral singing. This paper outlines the theoretical basis of the project and the work undertaken in the successive, reciprocal residencies, including observational activity and participant-led experimentation, and provides a sample of the results that are now being gathered as the project nears completion.

Keywords: Choral performance; Group creativity; Individual creativity; Music in cross-cultural contexts

Within the flourishing field of Performance Studies, two major research projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK have played significant roles: CHARM, the AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, and its successor CMPCP, the AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice, based in Cambridge. Although choral music has had some place in these projects, such as the promulgation of many little-known choral recordings from the early 20th century, most of the focus has fallen on instrumental rather than choral performance. Research into choral performance has of course been taking place in various countries for some years, as is evident from the *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*, but the subject has remained relatively dormant in the UK, despite the global success and fame of its choirs.

Following some informal contact between musicians from the University of Cambridge (UC) and University of São Paulo (USP), a research grant was obtained in 2013 from the British Academy as part of its International Partnership and Mobility Scheme. The project set out to address this lacuna by focusing entirely on choral performance, building upon recent developments in both universities which sought to give greater weight to the training of choral singers and conductors. These include a new chamber choir formed at USP to provide greater focus on the pedagogical and theoretical aspects of choral singing, and the establishment of a new Master's degree in Choral Studies at UC with a strong focus on the training of choral conductors.

The main research questions that underpin the project as a whole are as follows:

1. To what extent do choral practices and cultures in distinct national, institutional and artistic contexts differ or resemble one another, and what might we learn from their similarities and differences?
2. With reference to these distinct choral practices and cultures, what new approaches to choral development might be defined through comparative analysis and collaborative experimentation, and what methodological and theoretical benefits would these have for scholars and practitioners alike?

3. Within these distinct choral practices and cultures, how does the creative development of individuals in vocal ensembles take place, and how does it relate to the creative development of the ensemble as a whole?

The research has been led by Professor John Rink (JR) and Dr Geoffrey Webber (GW) at UC, and by Professor Marco Antonio da Silva Ramos (MR) and Dr Susana Igayara (SI) at USP, with Dr Mirjam James (MJ) acting as Research Assistant. Four reciprocal visits were set up: the first two (in February and April 2014) included data collection, whereas the second two (in July and August 2014) were oriented more towards performance.

In February GW and JR were able to observe MR and musicians at USP at work with different choirs, and GW took rehearsals with the USP choirs working on English repertoire which were observed by the Brazilian musicians. In order to help deal with the lack of knowledge between the two choral cultures, seminar presentations were given by GW on choral music at Cambridge, MR on the choral activities at USP, SI on modern Brazilian repertoire, and JR on individual and group creativity. In addition, doctoral students in choral music at USP gave presentations on their work on a variety of topics. Finally, students in choral conducting and choir members were asked to complete written questionnaires about their work, and then the same students met the four lead researchers for informal focus-group discussions. Many of the answers to the written questionnaires formed the basis of further questions and exploration in these focus-group sessions, which were recorded and transcribed.

In Cambridge in April, a similar pattern of events was arranged, including data collection with questionnaires, and recorded and transcribed focus-group discussions with students in choral conducting and choir members from two different choirs. In July, the Caius choir recorded a CD of modern Brazilian repertoire with MR and SI in attendance throughout, helping with pronunciation and many different matters of musical interpretation. In August, the Caius choir visited USP as part of an independent tour to Brazil, and they participated in choral rehearsals with the USP Chamber Choir led by both MR and GW encompassing English and Brazilian repertoire. Also, students at USP ran workshops on Northeast Brazilian popular music, covering both modal and rhythmic aspects of the music, and including a certain amount of improvisation.

A final experiment in cross-cultural perspectives was also carried out, using “Cachôca de Caxangá”, a song arrangement by Villa-Lobos with a complex text based on social satire using many references to the natural world of Brazil together with obscure colloquialisms. The musical idiom of the song, which involved rapid declamation, exacerbated the difficulty of performing the text even for the Brazilian choir. The English choir had not heard a performance of the piece by any other choir, yet had already learnt and performed it in England with an English translation developed by GW

in consultation with MR and SI. Two consecutive performances took place: first, the English choir sang their version with the Brazilian choir listening, and then the English choir heard the Brazilian choir perform the piece with its original text. Members of each choir then provided written answers to two questions, the first asking them to identify differences in the performing style of the two choirs, and the second to assess what was gained or lost through the process of an English choir performing such a quintessentially Brazilian piece of music in English. Had we reached or perhaps exceeded the limits of meaningful cultural exchange?

The fruits of this collaborative project are now in the process of being assessed. At one level, much has already been gained in terms of answering the first of the main research questions with which we set out, dealing with knowledge of each other's choral traditions and working practices. Although this might be viewed as a fairly elementary exercise, in which the considerable level of ignorance on the British side about modern Brazilian choral music is confronted, and some basic similarities and differences in choral habits and techniques identified, these processes have nevertheless had significant returns over and above expectations. For example, MR has observed how his view of Brazilian repertoire has been enhanced by hearing an English choir perform the repertoire, bringing new perspectives and suggesting new performance possibilities, even though not directly wishing to copy the English choir's performance. As another example, one might consider the case of the piece *Metaphors*, by Henrique de Curitiba, dating from 1972–73. GW wished to perform the work, catalogued in an online dissertation by Deloisse Chagas Lima (Lima 2004, 75), which had as its premise the concept of exploring European music in a South American context, juxtaposing voices with sounds from the Brazilian rainforest. MR and SI had not ever heard this piece performed, but they located a copy of the manuscript score of the work in the Library at USP. Unfortunately, no copy of the tape could be found. However, a student at USP, Denise Hiromi Aoki, created a new tape under SI's guidance using the USP sound laboratory facilities, following the specific sounds indicated in the score including mosquitos, toads and birds. This enabled the work to be performed once again with a backing tape alongside the voices.

This initial fact-finding aspect of the project was also very important in providing an accurate and nuanced context for the more theoretical research questions being developed. In order to understand and appropriately evaluate the responses given by singers on both sides, it is of course vital to know the background and experience of each singer, and also to consider the consequences of the single most fundamental difference that exists between the two choral traditions in USP and UC, i.e. the fact that the *raison d'être* of most choirs at UC is primarily to sing services in the Church of England, whereas at USP the choirs have no religious dimension whatsoever.

However, at another level of investigation, work has now begun on analysing the data from the questionnaires and focus-group sessions garnered through the reciprocal visits – a task led by the Research Assistant Mirjam James. So far she has produced two interim reports, one covering the written responses from the students and the other from the focus-group discussions, using the “content and comparative keyword” analytical technique established by Seale and Tonkiss (2012). As a sample of this work, we shall quote from her analysis of the discussions.

In the Brazilian context, the two main areas of discussion that emerged were a consideration of the musical benefits gained from choral singing and of the experience of singing as part of a group, as discussed in Rossing, Sundberg and Ternström (1986). MJ writes:

The Brazilian students clearly consider that choral singing serves to enrich their general musical understanding. Not only amateur singers from across the University, but also the music students (including aspiring soloists) pointed out the importance to them singing in a choir in order to develop as a musician. What is interesting here is that the questions by the UK members of the research team were almost invasive in asking to what extent the singers were discouraged to sing in choirs while they progressed as solo singers. But the students’ understanding of it and also their experiences with their teachers, and what they discovered while singing in choirs or practising as soloists, proved to be the opposite:

[...] it was when I entered USP and got into this choral life, and I discovered there is a huge universe for me to use what is more natural to me. At the same time, I don’t feel that I lose one thing by doing the other, I don’t think there is anything that is technically conflictual in what I learned.

‘That’s what Emma [name changed] said, one thing is related to the other. When we *practise our singing [solo] piece, the teacher gives us a piece and we have to practise it, and then you have to do something technically, you can also take a choral piece, an excerpt of a choral piece, a vocal line that you’re studying.*

Researcher: *But is it not a problem? It’s not something that your teacher will say “Stop singing in the choir, it’s ruining your [...].*

Student: *No!*

The equivalent discussion in the UK focus-group session had a notably different emphasis, which MJ described as a concern for the “trained singer”.

The focus-group discussion underlined the Cambridge students’ musical training as being much more formal than the musical upbringing of the Brazilian participants.

Even though both groups have participants who started in early childhood as well as during secondary school years, more participants of the Cambridge group had prior lessons and focused experiences in choirs. These experiences – pushed by summer choral courses – seem to seal the love for singing as well as lead to the decision to apply for a choral scholarship:

I also did two Eton choral courses, both in Cambridge, so that really made me want to apply. I think that was probably the biggest push in the direction of the choral scholarship.

However, these more advanced early experiences come also with a price: the experiences of feeling pushed into a certain direction (e.g. playing a certain instrument) or forcing the voice into remote areas that may not have been suitable, particularly during the period when the voice breaks, were much more present in this group:

So, I found myself constantly pushed to go to the next exam and learn the next set of repertoire, to the extent that I, em, learnt all the stuff for Grade 8 when I was a really ropey tenor in Year 10, when I was 14, and then it was sort of so detrimental because I was pushing a voice that wasn't there at all.

Here the division between solo and choral singing appears more ingrained in the students compared to the students in Brazil. Personal preferences of either have led e.g. to conscious decisions when choosing a Cambridge college.

Looking for a place to encourage solo singers:

I think, so, the reason I chose to apply to [St] John's [College] is that I'd heard that it's a good place where singing kind of freely and openly is encouraged, which I think, for a lot of tenors, is a problem. Before I came here, I spoke to a number of singers from other places, [... who] genuinely said don't go and sing there because this conductor will tell you to [...] to tighten up top and not sing loudly or [...] well, not so much loudly, not freely, which is kind of an important thing.

Looking for a place to encourage choral singers:

I certainly looked at St John's College for a long while because I liked [...] my Department at the College, English, but what put me off it, fundamentally, was that I knew so much from people who'd said that sort of St John's was a factory of sort of opera singers and solo singers. Now, I mean, you know, brilliantly, there are loads of great names who've come from St

John's, and I just knew that that wasn't for me in the slightest, and so I wanted a place where the group choral singing was, you know, really fantastic, but that there wasn't this sort of sense of, em, producing these solo singers quite so much.

The strong voice within the Brazilian students, that choir singing enriches general musical understanding and is not seen as in conflict with solo singing, was echoed only a little in the Cambridge discussion.

The second main area of discussion came close to the third main research area being explored by the project, that of individual and group creativity in the two contrasted choral contexts. MJ writes concerning the Brazilian focus-group sessions:

Thinking as a group, and acting as a group, again does not contradict one's actions as a solo singer. It is adding another layer as a musician:

I feel that solo singing is very different from choral singing, because when you're singing solo you need to fill the space, you have to bring out a quantity of power that will make the music happen, you there alone, making it happen. When you're in a choir, I think it's not that you're going to change your voice or you'll not do some things. You will become the choir. You are not there listening to your own voice and thinking on what you're doing. You are there as an organism, in a state of expanded consciousness.

Well, when we're part of a group [...] first of all, what I noticed in my personal experience, we need to forget other things when we're there. And perceive the other; if we don't perceive the other, we don't do anything together.

In the UK focus-group sessions the discussion in this area was more focused on specific aspects of working together in choirs. Polarized approaches were identified which MJ categorised as "choral opposites":

Throughout the discussion there were various references to "ideal" choral singing or the right way for choirs to sing, stand, or create a good result. These different comments made by different people don't refer to the same ideal; quite to the contrary, they describe choral opposites.

A controversial point discussed was about the arrangement of choirs, i.e. whether to stand in voice sections or with the voice parts mixed up (Daugherty 1999). When one choir which sings mixed up most of the time decided that for practical reasons

due to the Chapel acoustic they would sing in a mixed formation, this was not seen as a perfect solution by the conductor himself. For the singers, the conflict lies in either concentrating on how the individual parts blend and sound together or in how the piece sounds as a whole, as well as focusing on oneself as a solo singer:

Yeah, I mean, if you're going to be standing with your parts, then you're going to be focused more on how the parts sound as a whole, but then you're not working on how the piece sounds as a whole.

[...] standing not within my own part or within even female voices is really actually beneficial in terms of advancing me as a solo singer.

Singing in sections can evoke various behaviours, not all of which might be seen as contributing to a good choral result:

1) wanting to stand out as a singer and not blending

Yeah, it just becomes, I don't know, I think it just becomes [...] it can turn into a bit of a competition, in, which I don't think should ever happen in a [...] in a choir.

2) but also feeling less responsible, which results in less attention
you get very sloppy and you pay generally less attention

3) having support when not at one's best

[...] if I had two other tenors either side of me and one of us was having a slightly bad day, that will affect it less so than if we're apart, because you naturally change to what's going on around you

The mixed vs. section singing was also discussed in terms of better tuning; here, too, no consensus can be found indicating that one is better than the other. In all cases it comes down to concentration and listening to people around you. The latter was also described as a key choir singing skill amongst the Brazilian students.

These samples from MJ's analysis provide a flavour of the type of insights into the internal and corporate workings of choirs that we gained during the project. In particular, they hint at how future strategies might be developed to form the second of our three research trajectories, that of generating new initiatives in the training both of choirs and, just as importantly, of choral conductors. Throughout the process of speaking with members of the choirs in the focus-group sessions, the two conductors present, MR

and GW, commented on how revealing it was to hear the singers talk about their contribution as individuals to the whole, an important aspect of group creativity which was hardly acknowledged, let alone properly gauged, in the ordinary course of the working practices of both choral establishments. Although many of the issues raised so far during this research collaboration inevitably grew from the particular contrasted situations at UC and at USP, many others are likely to have universal significance to choral practice, and it is these more fundamental aspects, especially the questions of the mechanics of group creativity in the choral context, and the role of the conductor in relation to these mechanisms, that we hope will form the basis of a future project.

References

- Daugherty, James. 1999. "Spacing, Formation, and Choral Sound: Preferences and Perceptions of Auditors and Choristers." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 47 (3):224-238.
- Lima, Deloise Chagas. 2004. "Henrique de Curitiba Morozowicz: A Biography and Discussion of Selected Vocal and Instrumental Works with Piano". MusD dissertation, Florida State University. *Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations. Paper 1349*.
<http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3087&context=etd> [accessed 03/11/2014].
- Rossing, Thomas, Johan Sundberg, and Sten Ternström. 1986. "Acoustic Comparison of Voice Use in Solo and Choir Singing." *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 79 (6):1975-1981.
- Tonkiss, Fran and Clive Seale. 2012. "Content and comparative keyword analysis." *Researching Society and Culture*, edited by Clive Seale, 459-478. London: Sage Publications.