

Remaking Musical Traditions: Voice, Performance and Gender in the Cathedral Girls' Choir
Lynne Rogers
PhD Student
University of Manchester

I teach singing at a Cathedral choir school and am responsible for the vocal health of the girl choristers. The choir has been in existence for 5 years and working with girls who sing intensively on a daily basis was new to me. As my work has progressed I have become increasingly aware of the struggles of these girls who suffer from sore throats and complain of their voice 'not feeling like it will come out' more regularly than other girls I teach. The breathiness that develops in girls' voices, to a greater or lesser extent, as they enter puberty, for my non chorister singers, is something they notice, but can be managed because their singing is directly influenced by me. I can choose repertoire that suits the voice as it changes and reassure the girl that what she is experiencing is perfectly normal and will one day stop. This explanation is accepted and we carry on much as before. However, the main person of influence for the girl Cathedral chorister is her choral director. Some choristers become distressed and annoyed by the breathiness they begin to exhibit. They compare themselves to their female peers and to the younger boy choristers. They are incredibly disappointed that they can no longer produce the tone that their choral director expects of them. This realisation brings with it a sense of disharmony and dissatisfaction with their voices which leads them to questioning whether they are good enough to sing.

My growing realization of the adolescent experience of girl choristers led me to look more closely at their training and to explore what the potential consequences of this training are on their long term vocal health. I have begun by asking questions about how Cathedral choral directors deal with their girl choristers and what the expectations of tone and timbre are from child singers. My main aim is to better understand the preconceptions of Cathedral choral directors when dealing with adolescent female singers and relate this to healthy vocal practice.

I sent out a questionnaire to the 98 Cathedrals in Britain, 41 of which advertise a girls' choir and received 35 responses. As the questionnaires were anonymous I have no way of knowing if these 35 responses were from separate Cathedrals, or completed by a number of employees at the same Cathedral. Questioning aimed to explore 3 main areas:

To what extent does understanding musical performance as a creative practice balance the actuality of the physical capabilities of a voice which is 'in flux'.

Is the timbre and volume expected of young female choristers in Cathedral settings effective in allowing the physical development of these voices without causing vocal damage? and

If girls in Cathedrals are required to imitate the sound of pre-pubescent boys, does this impact not only on their vocal health, but on their perception of their own gender identity?

The first Cathedral girls' choir was formed in Britain at Salisbury Cathedral in 1991 accompanied by a media storm. A number of Cathedrals have now followed suit with a small amount of Cathedrals having a mixed choir of boys and girls, (for example Manchester, Bradford and Edinburgh) but mainly choirs are kept separate. Girls' choirs have little upon which to model their choir, other than that of the boys and so each Cathedral is building its own new tradition of girls' singing that seems to be distinct and separate from the other. Equality of educational opportunity is often cited as a reason for girls being given the freedom to join a Cathedral choir. Supporters of girls' choirs see Cathedral musical training as having many valuable musical and general benefits; benefits which should be offered to children irrespective of their gender. Detractors, of which there are many, even after 20 years, see the girls' choir as a challenge to the most basic tenets of the cathedral music tradition. The

independent girls' choir or, even worse, the mixed choir is regarded by some to be a mistake which will continue to cause the demise and possible end of a very particular British tradition, which some people hold to be almost sacred in itself. In 2006 when interviewed about the creation of a girls' choir at Ely Cathedral, Peter Giles of the Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir said "We are sacrificing a wonderful, ancient tradition of men and boys' choirs for political correctness. It's a different kind of choral music, so we are losing the repertoire and the musical tradition is being weakened." (BBC News 15.11.06). However, to counterbalance this argument, David M Howard of York University replied "So long as [girls] are singing the same material with the same acoustics and have had the same training, people simply can't tell the difference. It does depend upon the material though. If they are singing something that includes the notes from the C above middle C to the F above that, those can give the game away." (ibid) It is perhaps no surprise that Cathedrals use the same argument to justify the presence of girls in their choir stalls.

Each Cathedral girls' choir is building its own new tradition as it goes along, but how each individual choir works has very little in common with any other. Each girls' choir has grown directly from the needs of the individual Cathedral which has created it and it has taken on a shape that is derived from its particular surroundings. Each Cathedral boys' choir has a tradition, a history and a shared experience. With the exception of how the boys are formally educated during the day, the Cathedral singing experience for a boy is similar no matter where it takes place. As can be seen in figure 1., the age of Cathedral boy choristers follows a similar pattern; they usually sing with the men, they begin as probationers at age 6 or 7 and then stay in the choir either until their voices begin to change, or to the end of their middle school education at 13. This is not the case for girls who sometimes sing with the men, sometimes alone and as figure 2 shows, their age range can have huge variance from Cathedral to Cathedral. This can have implications for how these girls are trained.

Although we have a long tradition of not having girls' choirs in Cathedrals in Britain, the concept of girls singing in important ecclesiastical settings is not without precedent. Centuries ago women married earlier than they do today, so what we hear as our young voices, certainly at the age of 15 or 16, may very well have been the voices of married women at the inception of Christianity. In the Hebrew Bible women's prayer songs had a prominent place, but as worship became more formalised, women's role diminished and by 3rd century CE singing by women in Hebrew worship was forbidden. Christianity offered a place for women outside the traditional role of social privilege. Men and women of all classes came together to worship and, in so doing, challenged the traditional Roman hierarchy. However, by 2nd century CE men began to reassert their dominance and as Christianity became more institutionalised, so women's voices began to disappear and by the late 4th century women were once again silenced by the emergence of choirs of men and boys who led worship known as the capella, which became the dominant form of music making in formalised Christian worship.

As time went on women found a new place which nurtured their musical expression within the confines of the convent. (It is worth remembering that this depended somewhat on the rule of the religious order. Some orders were stricter than others and offered some nuns less freedom than they would have found outside the convent walls, but this was not always the case.) Singing was one of the mainstays of medieval monastic life and up to 8 services were sung each day. The convent offered a place for women where they could be educated and most importantly, free from male influence on a daily basis. It also provided important leadership roles, one of which was the Cantrix- the woman who oversaw the music of the convent and was in charge of the musical training of the nuns. Many convents offered education to boys and girls until the age of 12 and girls who wanted to stay in the convent after this age became novices, making their profession at the age of 16. The influence of

children in worship was so great that in the Benedictine rule very direct guidance is given about how to deal with children who make a mistake in the music: ‘When anyone has made a mistake while reciting a Psalm, a responsory, an antiphon or a lesson, if he does not humble himself there before all by making a satisfaction, let him undergo a greater punishment because he would not correct by humility what he did wrong through carelessness. But boys [and presumably girls in the convent] for such faults shall be whipped.’ (St Benedict, Rule 45) Thankfully, we have more enlightened pedagogical methods in our 21st century Cathedrals!

Trying to discover what was taught to the children of the medieval convent is difficult as musical writing was in its infancy and, as still happens today in singing lessons, much of the information imparted was via aural and oral communication which allowed for the transfer of immediately useable information. In any study of vocal pedagogy there is a lack of written evidence. Books often struggle to find a vocabulary for something which is, in essence, experiential. And often these books open themselves up to criticisms from practitioners who employ a ‘different method’. When looking at how girls were taught in the convents we are searching for a pedagogical practice that was transferred through listening and participation and therefore, it becomes difficult to quantify a set method or standard of learning and performance technique. However, Anne Bagnall Yardley has found evidence at Wherwell Abbey of a ‘Guidonian hand’, an early method used for teaching basic notation. She has also discovered a set of exercises that mimic very closely modern vocalise. (2006) This gives exciting indications that singing was taught in a methodical manner in the medieval convent. It is well known that the singing of girls in the fourteenth century *ospedali* of Venice shows that girls were and remain more than capable of singing complicated repertoire and that people found the sound of girls’ choirs so attractive that there were queues at the Church doors; so much so that the Council of Trent which met between 1545 and 1563, eventually banned external musical training and performance in convents. Its reasoning was that the noise of those who had come to Church to hear the nuns sing would distract these holy women from their main task of prayer and meditation.

One major difference between the singing experience of the *ospedali*, the medieval convent and the 21st century Cathedral, is that the women of Venice and England were removing themselves from a male dominated society (albeit under the auspices of a male institutional hierarchy) into a woman led environment in which women could find musical expression, authority and autonomy. One only has to look at the example of Hildegard von Bingen to see what the convent could potentially offer a musically gifted woman. Hildegard, the 12th Century German visionary and composer founded the convents of Ruperstberg and Eipingen, wrote theological texts and composed liturgical songs. After years of controversy over her exalted position in the church she was eventually officially sainted in 2012. Hildegard felt able to write and compose only because she had been instructed by God in a vision to write down what she ‘heard’. The belief that her desire to write came directly from God not only gave her freedom of musical expression, but acceptance by patriarchal society. It seems unlikely that Hildegard would have been able to have intellectual and musical autonomy outside the convent walls and we can assume that there were other women who had a similar experience. However, the Council of Trent did eventually put a stop to this and girls who perform in a Cathedral environment in the 21st century are now steeped within a patriarchal institution where women are under represented both musically and amongst the clergy.

Anne Bagnall Yardley states that ‘the sound and style of the cantrix’s voice is formative for the nuns in the convent, and especially for novices in training. Her voice is an exemplar of

good singing. The vocal leadership of the cantrix helps to create the specific sound of the nunnery choir.’ (2006:65) So what happens when this role is replaced by an adult male, or indeed a pre pubescent boy? Although times are changing, there are very few full time female Cathedral musicians in Britain. Of my 35 respondents only 5 were women, which is less than 15%. This means that girls singing in a Cathedral environment are being heavily influenced by a male musical hierarchy. In addition, 40% of choral directors have only had singing lessons as an adult and almost 46% had no experience of being a Cathedral chorister either as a child or an adult. Therefore, they have no experiential knowledge of the vocal, physical and emotional requirements that being a chorister entails.

Girls not only sing in a strongly male biased institution (especially girls in a Roman Catholic setting), but are strongly influenced by male musical culture and expectation. One only needs to listen to commercial recordings of any choir, Cathedral or otherwise, to hear that the timbre of the choir changes over time, which, more often than not, reflects the change either of directorship of the choir, or the changing taste of the resident incumbent. Therefore, the taste of the choir director plays an important role in the musical education of adolescent girl singers. My research so far suggests that, with a couple of notable exceptions, Cathedral choral directors still have quite a fixed view of what they perceive to be good sound and how they should go about encouraging their girls to sing in that manner. When asked about the ideal tone from a child singer not one person responded that ‘breathy and light’ was the way forward (figure 3). However, if one looks at the physical capabilities of adolescent female singers, one might conclude that breathy and light is the healthiest way a girl can produce her sound.

Up until relatively recently the lion’s share of research into the changing adolescent voice has focussed on the boy’s singing experience. However, more recently there have been a number of studies that aim to better understand the physical changes girls undergo at puberty and how these changes impact on timbre and volume. Whilst there are new studies emerging all the time, the search for understanding can be traced at least as far back as 1935 when George Seth and Douglas Guthrie were studying the female voice, before the creation of most of our modern medical instruments. They identified a ‘change’ of voice which happened in boys around the age of 14 and girls around the age of 12 which led to a huskiness of tone. This huskiness was caused by the sudden growth of the larynx which leads to the growth of the vocal cords by up to 1cm in boys and 3/4 mm in girls. The huskiness that this causes was, in their opinion, caused by the incomplete closure of the posterior part of the larynx, which they believed was often misdiagnosed by doctors as laryngitis. ‘The local changes in the larynx, redness, swelling, etc. disappear as normal function is restored. And local treatment should be avoided.’ (1935:202) At the end of the twentieth- century Robert Sataloff, a very prolific writer in the field of speech and language therapy and also a choral singer (in collaboration with Kate Spiegel, and Joseph Emerich) concluded that ‘voice maturation is most active between ages 12½ and 14, and is usually complete in both sexes by age 15. Mutational voice change usually lasts about 1½ years but can last as long as 3 years. Voice mutation occurs because of laryngeal growth. Male vocal cords grow 4 to 11mm, or as much as 60% in length, whereas female vocal folds grow 1.5 to 4mm or as much as 34%. The superficial and intermediate layers are well defined with a mature vocal ligament by age 16.’ (1997:139) Contemporary research has served to reinforce these conclusions and it is now an accepted fact that girls and boys both go through a process of laryngeal mutational change. This growth brings with it changes to tone quality, volume production and possibly most significantly, can lead to adolescent singers of both genders questioning their vocal identities.

The maturation process of girls’ voices is very subtle and can be almost unnoticeable. However, Lynne Gackle has identified 4 systemic problems that arise in girls during the

period of vocal change: i. Breathy voice quality; ii. Difficulty initiating phonation; iii. Decreased pitch range and tessitura; iv. Register-transition fluctuations, including abrupt breaks. (1991 and 2011) It is vital to remember that these changes happen to a greater or lesser extent in every adolescent female singer and the impact of that change is very individual. Some singers are hardly aware of the change their voices are undergoing whilst others are affected in a significant way. Cathedral choral directors stated that they had greater problems encouraging their girls to sing 'with passion and enthusiasm' than their boys. 48% said they had difficulty encouraging the girls, whilst only 24% had the same problem with boys. However, if girls are going through vocal mutation and experiencing even one of the four problems with phonating that Gackle identifies, perhaps their passion and enthusiasm can simply not be communicated through a voice which is 'in flux'.

Susan Monks has undertaken a longitudinal study of 30 students to ascertain their perceptions of their own voices and vocal training. (2003) Her study is purely exploratory and makes no claims to impartiality, as Monks explores her own students' experiences. She concludes that the physical and emotional changes that adolescents are going through are often manifested in their voice. How adolescents deal with the world on a day to day basis changes with how they perceive themselves. It is little wonder that the adolescent singer may have difficulty expressing herself through her instrument if that instrument is changing on a daily basis. Monks suggests that if adolescents are assured that the change their voice is undergoing is normal, as is the consequent lack of stability the singers experience, then adolescents are more likely to enjoy their singing throughout the period of change. However, if these singers are challenged by choral directors to produce a tone that mimics that of a younger voice, I would posit that feelings of 'failure' may well be reinforced.

Graham Welch and David Howard's seminal study of 2002 *Gendered Voice In The Cathedral Choir* explored whether the gender of child singers in a choir was discernible from just aural perception. Participants were asked to identify whether they were listening to a boys' or girls' choir who were all singing the treble line of the same piece of music, along with the same ATB underlay. Initial studies of untrained choirs concluded that there were, in fact 'perceivable gender characteristics in untrained children's singing voices. Gender confusability decreased with ascending age, suggesting that boys' singing voices become identifiably more 'masculine' as they get older. No such trend was observable in girls.' (2002:108) However, data concerning trained choirs produced very different results. Participants who were singing teachers, choral directors and cathedral music directors, showed they were unable to identify the correct gender of the trained choir above the level of chance. This implies that the training itself changes the timbre of the voices making both boys' and girls' sound similar. Welch and Howard's study further indicates that there are no discernible timbre differences between boys and girls until around the age of 8 years of age. At this stage boys become more stereotypically 'boyish'. As girls begin puberty much earlier than boys it is possible that some girls have started the initial stages of vocal mutation at this young age. Until the onset of puberty a girl's voice and a boy's voice have very similar characteristics. Vocal fold length is the same so, in theory, the sound produced by those folds should be similar. Once puberty begins, it is difficult to suppose that girls who have begun puberty should sound the same as boys, who have not.

Georgina Hinchliffe Toole (2003) suggests that vocal modeling and cultural expectation may, in fact, be as important as physical growth and that a girl's musical background may be more important than her physical development. Girls and boys being trained in a Cathedral environment will, almost unconsciously, produce a sound which they find pleases the choir director. If the choir director prefers a timbre that is more stereotypically 'boy' sounding, then the girl will reproduce this sound. Ray Kent and Hourii Vorperian state that 'any physical

changes that occur as a result of the onset of puberty are likely to be mitigated initially by an education and training process that has already had up to two years' daily activity to induct choristers into the dominant performance culture. Such induction practices favour particular vocal timbres. Over a period of time, this vocal rehearsal will favour particular vocal muscle behaviour patterning that, in turn, can strongly influence the development of skeletal tissues, particularly around the oral cavity. This increases the likelihood of similar vocal production habits in the future.' (1995:149) This raises the question of whether girls who sing in a Cathedral environment will continue to produce a similar sound into adulthood. Only a longitudinal study following adolescent girls over an extended period of time will provide enough data to show whether these vocal habits will have a long term impact on the singer's vocal health.

So we may conclude that girls and boys are different. If this difference is accepted by Cathedral choral directors then I would posit that there is an exciting future ahead for those Cathedrals who are busy building their own new traditions of Cathedral girls' singing. The following sound clip demonstrates a choir that I believe sounds identifiably female. Vaughan Williams' 'Lord Thou Hast Been Our Refuge' is being performed by Liverpool Anglican Cathedral's girls' choir as part of a live Broadcast for Radio 4. Sound clip <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYYOg7A9pw> (start at 6 mins 45 secs) If the age range of girls in Cathedral choirs is older, and even if it is a similar age to boys, then the question must be asked 'why should we not be able to tell a girl and boy apart?' Why should the defence of the Cathedral girls' choir be that 'so long as [girls] are singing the same material with the same acoustics and have the same training, people simply can't tell the difference.' (Howard, op cit) If the process of mutation is accepted as a natural part of growing up, and the 4 systemic problems that Gackle identifies are embraced, then the softer tone that girls produce during this period can be appreciated for its own distinct beauty, rather than in comparison to that of the boy's sound. A distinctly female sound is perhaps also an indicator that the choristers are being allowed to sing in a naturally healthy manner. This also has wider implications for the girls' sense of vocal identity and self esteem as female performers performing in a male environment. Perhaps, only by accepting the naturally breathy sound that adolescent girls make will these girls feel free to assert their own musical identity within the Cathedral environment. I hope that our Cathedrals will produce more of this sound in the future and if so, we may have exciting aural experiences ahead if we can just accept what our girl singers have to offer.

What is the age range of the boys in your Cathedral choir?

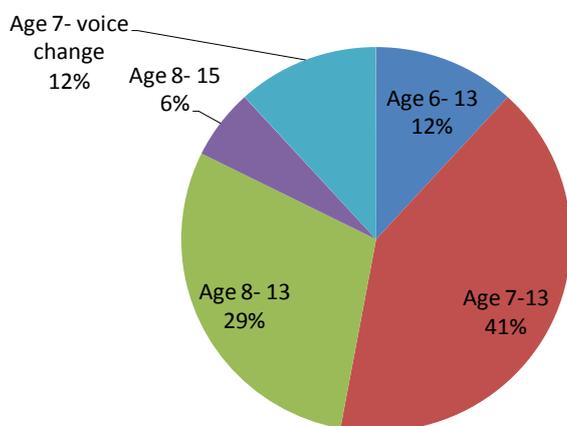


Figure 2.

What is the age range of the girls in your Cathedral choir?

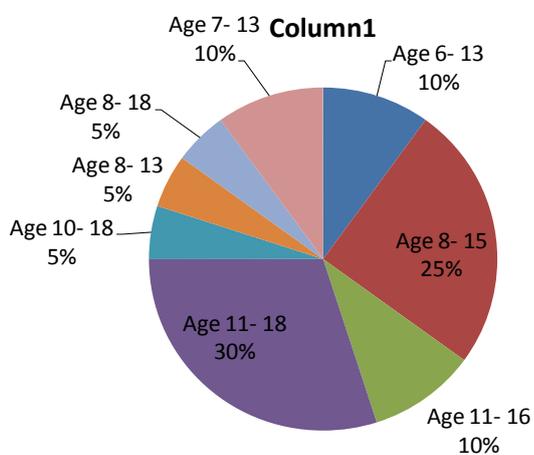
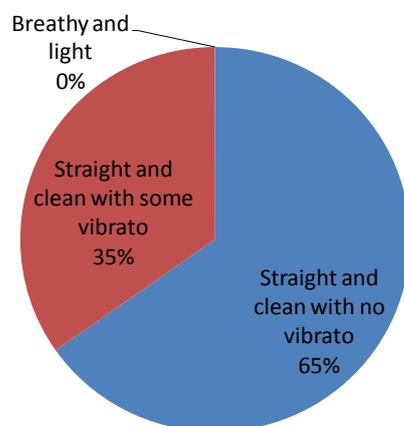


Figure 3.

What is your ideal tone from a child singer?



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