

# An Interview with Stephen Cleobury

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Sir Stephen Cleobury<sup>1</sup> (1948-2019) was a British conductor, organist, and composer best known for his work as the director of music at King's College, Cambridge (U.K.), a post he occupied with distinction from 1982 to 2019, where he conducted one of the world's most famous choirs, the Choir of King's College. In his developmental years, Cleobury was a boy chorister at Worcester Cathedral and went on to serve as organ scholar at St. John's College in Cambridge. One of his teachers was David Willcocks, whom he later succeeded as music director at King's College. In 1974 he served as sub-organist at Westminster Abbey, and in 1979 was the first Anglican to be appointed master of music at Westminster Cathedral in London.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Choir at King's College was already well known in 1982 through worldwide radio broadcasts of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols,<sup>3</sup> Cleobury enhanced the stature of the choir during his tenure. He expanded on its venerated tradition, instituting the annual commissioned carol for Christ-

mas Eve in 1984, making an invaluable contribution to contemporary choral composition. Examples of carols commissioned and premiered in the service include John Rutter's "What Sweeter Music," Judith Weir's "Illuminare Jerusalem," and Stephen Paulus's "Pilgrim Jesus." He also expanded activities in broadcasting, recording, and touring. Alumni have notably founded other world-renown ensembles, including Polyphony, conducted by Stephen Layton (himself an alumnus of King's), and The King's Singers.

Cleobury, fondly referred to as "Cleebs" within British music circles, conducted and recorded with other fine ensembles, including the BBC Singers (1995–2007) and the Academy of Ancient Music. He conducted the one hundredth anniversary of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in December 2018, his final Carols performance before his planned retirement. A few months after his retirement, Sir Stephen Cleobury died peacefully on November 22, 2019—the feast day of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians.<sup>4</sup>

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On January 28, 2016, Stephen Cleobury sat with me for a videoconference interview. He was one of six conductors whose work I was researching for my doctoral dissertation.<sup>5</sup> The contents of that interview are being published on the fifth anniversary of his passing so we may all learn from one who not only excelled in musicianship but also as a master teacher and mentor of so many. Our interview lasted about forty-five minutes, but (perhaps unsurprisingly) we covered much ground. Cleobury was personable and not at all pretentious. He had the ability to communicate a lot of information in a short time, was quite to the point, and showcased a good deal of wit and humor, albeit in the British way (he never let on when he was joking).

The interview questions were related to four distinct categories of examination: unification of sound, rehearsal technique, conducting, and leadership. In examining how Cleobury and other conductors respectively unify the sound within their ensembles, I was attempting to capture the essence of Cleobury's philosophy of training his singers to create a homogenous sound including rhythmic elements, vowels, volume, intonation, and even vibrato. In asking about rehearsal technique, I wanted to know about his strategies in planning rehearsals for such a wide range of maturity in his singers at King's.

The Choir at King's College comprises young boy choristers between the ages of six and nine as well as undergraduate choral scholars. It was important to know how he prepares choirs for weekly services as well as for frequent, high-profile concerts, broadcasts, and recordings each season. Questions about conducting were intended to glean Cleobury's basic philosophy in showing the music with non-verbal gesture. I also wanted to gain insight into the British methodology of conducting practice, since (as he had a bit to say) conducting pedagogy varies from country to country. The fourth category of examination was leadership quality, which is perhaps the central issue that separates *effective* conductors from talented conductors. The questions in this category dealt with a conductor's style or philosophy of personal leadership, including motivating musicians and managing group psyche. A summary of responses appears at the end of each category and includes some additional insight from the interview.

## Category 1: Unification of Sound

### **What do you consider to be important elements of unifying the sound of a choral ensemble?**

We're talking about blend of voices, which means trying to get everybody, first and foremost, to listen to each other and to be sympathetic to the people around them, and for the personality in front listening, trying to blend this group, it's about achieving similar vowel sounds, similar vowel colors, for example. It's about making sure everyone is singing at roughly equal volume; otherwise you have a voice obtruding and not agreeing on intonation.

### **Does the unification of vibrato play into that for you?**

Yes, it would. Of course, I should mention that. It depends on what groups you are working with, because obviously with young children, the question of vibrato doesn't arise so often, whereas it can arise in quite difficult ways in amateur adult groups. I'm often asked this question; I don't have a doctrinaire approach to vibrato, as to whether there should or shouldn't be.

**In 1998, you participated in a piece by Brian Robins in *Fanfare*, called "From Rutter to Rachmaninov."<sup>6</sup> In that interview, you are quoted as saying, "One thing that happens is that as soon as the language comes right, you start to get a change in color in the voices, particularly because of the vowels in the Church Slavonic. I very strongly believe that if you get the language right, then the color follows in its wake..." Can you elaborate?**

Well, actually, I think that happens in all languages, and I found particularly with children that someone has to work at it, even in our own language, English. Modes of speech have become lazier. I think the difference in how people speak to one another, colloquially, and how you should be pronouncing the language in, as it were, an art song is a bigger distance as every year goes by.



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I think in some ways as you say, “it’s harder,” because we don’t think we have to practice our own language, whereas if we were going to sing in Slavonic or Italian or French, we have to take some trouble about it. When I used to play for the Monteverdi Choir, we went to Ansbach, Germany, and the locals were deeply impressed by the quality of German vowels of the Monteverdi Choir.

**It’s a unique situation to be able to vocally train the singers in one’s choir. Would you please talk about your experience with this at King’s College and how you approach solo training in a choral context?**

We do employ voice teachers who are selected by me and with whom I keep in close touch. Obviously, I’ve made it my business to learn for myself about vocal technique and to impart things that can usefully be

said in the choir practice, but I have a quite strong rule, which is not to enter on matters in which I am not expert. So, I talk to our teachers so that I know how to back up what they are saying to our singers, and occasionally I would say to them, “So and so has such and such a problem; can you help us fix that?” and I would use such technical advice in technical terms as I believe I’m competent to use. You know the saying—a little knowledge is dangerous.

### **Summary of Unification of Sound Responses**

Cleobury’s approach to unifying the ensemble is not groundbreaking, especially given the fact that King’s has such a recognizable sound. Of course, the use of children’s voices contributes to their distinctive sound, but even among other cathedral choirs employing boys in the treble voices, the sound of the Choir of King’s

College is still quite distinguishable. Cleobury explains his philosophy of unifying an ensemble straightforwardly, emphasizing the importance of blending vowels and volume. Although this simple statement about blending voices may sound very familiar to the reader, it is an illustration that time-honored principles are time-honored for a reason. Further, one may ask how Cleobury approaches vowel color in blending voices.

In the interview relating to the 1999 recording of the Rachmaninov *Vespers*,<sup>7</sup> Cleobury emphasized the order of approach to language in singing, suggesting that vowel colors are not abstract nor subject to the whim of a director. Rather, the vowel colors directly precede from the sound of the language itself.

## Category 2: Rehearsal Technique

### What are your priorities in planning a rehearsal?

Firstly, that it should be conducted in the most efficient manner possible, so that means that indeed you have to plan it, as you've said. Secondly, there's a sort of predictable trajectory of attention span, as it were, particularly with the children. Each morning I have a rehearsal with the choristers of King's, which is fifty-five minutes duration. The first five minutes, we're getting everybody warmed up and switched on, ready for the work, and then I would expect to do the most valuable work, say, within the next thirty to forty minutes. So, if I'm wanting to teach a new piece or something that is particularly taxing, that would be when I would do that, and then I might try to finish with something a little bit better known.

I think you have to know your group, and you have to have a plan. You have to know what you want to achieve. You have to help them feel they've achieved something by not getting exceedingly delayed or bogged down at a particular point, knowing how much to say, how much to leave, keeping their interest. If you've got a mixed-age group such as I have with the choristers, you might have in front of you twenty-four children aged between nine and thirteen, and obviously the attention span of those varies, and you've got to try and

find a way of working quickly enough to satisfy the older ones while not working so quickly that the younger ones are completely baffled. In recent years I've increasingly split them up into groups—the younger group and the older group—so we can work at different speeds, and work on solo work and semi-chorus work with the older ones, while the younger ones work at a slower speed on basic repertoire.

### Do you have an established pattern for preparing a piece over several rehearsals? For example: when do you introduce text or articulation/phrasing in the process?

I'm told that the parts of the brain that deal with text and that deal with music (pitch, and so on) are different, so you're obviously having to engage all that. I think I can probably best answer that question by saying it depends on what the piece is—on what we're doing. In some pieces, you go straight for it, and other pieces may need separating out in the ways you described. It's not a definite pattern. It depends on the piece, and of course also it depends on the ability of the people you're directing.

### A few years ago, there was a much-talked-about piece in *Gramophone* regarding the twenty best choirs in the world.<sup>8</sup> Many British choirs were on the list, including yours. What do you think contributes to the perception of British dominance in choral music? And how is the British system of choral training different from the American system?

I don't think I really know enough about the American system. I know that here, there's an enormous variation in terms of what's taught and how it's taught. I think certainly in the cathedral collegiate tradition in which I work and professional groups like the BBC Singers, quite a strong premium is put on the ability to sight-read. The advantage of that is you can learn things quickly. You can have a large repertoire, and you don't get bogged down rehearsing the same piece for six weeks on end, or whatever it might be.

The other side of that coin is, of course, that we can

be guilty sometimes of not really getting inside the music and knowing it to a deep enough level. But that's the same certainly in the orchestral world. British orchestras are renowned for their ability to read very, very quickly. If you go to other countries, you sometimes find that the speed at which people learn and assimilate is not so quick. That doesn't mean to say that you don't get an excellent result at the end; you just arrive at it a different way. So, I would say from our point of view, what we're hoping to do in a choir like King's or a cathedral choir is to teach the members skills of musicianship so that they can read quickly and efficiently. Of course, that can sometimes be done at the expense of voice and sound. It's important to make sure that's not the end of all of it.

### **Summary of Rehearsal Technique Responses**

In the Choir of King's College, young children are singing in the same choir with developed male voices. This can cause issues related to the pacing of rehearsal and managing varying attention spans. Cleobury demonstrates a talent for understanding the disposition of his singers in musical ability and their general mood from day to day. His ability to sympathize with his singers, including how best to learn music together and keep their attention, enables him to refrain from forming rigid rules of rehearsal process.

The King's College Choir, although a chapel choir of developing musicians, functions much like a professional choir, rehearsing and performing great choral repertoire almost entirely throughout the year. And like most every other professional choir, they have developed traditions in rehearsal that reflect on their workmanship as musicians. In addition to the responses above, Cleobury also mentioned during our interview that over the years, the choir has created a system of self-correction where the choristers raise their hand during rehearsal to acknowledge a mistake they made. Apparently, this tradition started decades prior to Cleobury's residency with choristers staying after rehearsal to apologize for making a mistake. Cleobury paints this tradition in a positive light, explaining that this culture attempts to "create faculties of self-criticism" within

maturing singers and that it serves to save time in rehearsal. If he hears a problem in the rehearsal followed by a chorister raising his hand, he may discern that he can move on without stopping to correct it, depending on the experience of the singer.

### **Category 3: Conducting**

#### **How do you approach conducting gesture? What techniques do you employ in your own conducting or teaching conducting students that establish one "showing" the music?**

One of the things I most often try to stop myself doing (and certainly try to stop my students doing) is mouthing the words to the choir. I think it's not helpful particularly in polyphonic music, where all the voices are singing different words at different times. It doesn't help the basses if you're mouthing the words to the sopranos. The other thing I think we all tend to do, and should do less, is replicating with the left hand what the right hand is doing. Very often you see this double act. Sometimes I use it in church where visibility in choir stalls is difficult, but if you're standing in front of a group that's arranged in front of you, then my basic principle is to try to indicate as much as I can with my right hand.

Obviously, that's the hand that's involved with giving the beat and setting the pulse and all those sorts of things, but there are different or varying ways in which that can be done. You can affect the way a choir starts a piece by the way you give the preparatory beat and all those things. Then, if the left hand is used more sparingly, when it does enter the fray, it's more effective. If you're doing that all the time with two hands, there's nothing left for you to do.

Of course, gestures themselves are going to vary in size according to the group. If you're conducting three hundred people singing the "Hallelujah" chorus, you're going to be making more expansive gestures than if you're conducting the King's College Choir singing an Amen in evensong. Those of us who do a lot of work in the liturgical setting are to some degree constrained by

the sense that if you are overly flamboyant in your gestures, it is a distraction to the worshippers. I think that's a difficult one to balance, but if we're talking about a secular context in a concert hall, it's very different. The other thing, curiously, that one has to do with children, or with amateur choirs, is actually to teach them to respond to your gestures. I've seen lots of people in conducting classes being told how to do these wonderful gestures, but it isn't much good if the singers aren't going to follow them. On the other hand, with a really good professional choir, they'll follow everything you do, so you have to make sure you're very careful.

## **Is there a difference in the conducting styles between British and American conductors?**

I think it's true to say that in my limited experience in America, you have a much more organized instructional system of teaching, which until recently we haven't had here, but it's something that's developing. For example, in Cambridge we recently introduced a course in choral conducting...and I think, obviously, that is a good thing. When I was younger, I was never formally taught how to conduct, and most of what I do I picked up myself by looking at other people and seeing what works and doesn't work. Of course, it's true about conducting that however much you teach, and also however well you're taught, you still can actually only get your experience live on the podium. I sometimes think, however, that if the teaching method is overly prescribed, as it were, that it doesn't allow for individual expression to such a great extent.

I've also seen it in some conducting classes here [in the U.K.]; a teacher will say, "This is how you conduct. These are the gestures you use." Then you find a series of people coming out looking like that conductor. But they are different people. Gesture is incredibly important, because if you're good at showing it and you train your singers to respond to it, then you don't have to talk so much. I think the habit of talking too much in rehearsal is quite problematic. They want to see it, and the more they see it, the more they learn about the music.

## **Summary of Conducting Responses**

Cleobury views gesture as important because it prevents the conductor from having to talk too often. Music on the printed page is a logical representation of sound; but in a sense, it transforms a dynamic art, one that is revealed in time, into a static art. The way past seeing music as a static, prescribed presentation on the page is to see it in motion, which is where gesture comes in. Conducting gesture can show degrees of motion in the interpretation where the notated music falls short. When Cleobury says, "the more they see it, the more they learn about the music," he is referring to another dimension beyond rhythm, tempo, or dynamics—he is referring to motion.

When asked about conducting techniques applied in his own style and that of the students he teaches, Cleobury mentions several items to practice. One should avoid mouthing words to the choir, as it can be unhelpful particularly in polyphonic music. One should avoid mirroring with the non-dominant hand what the dominant hand is doing. Attention should be given to the size of the gestures, considering the size of the ensemble and the distance they are from the conductor. In addition, choristers young and old should be taught to respond to gestural communication from the podium.

## **Category 4: Leadership**

**Regarding nerves, you have said, "bring the choir up to a peak of performance but without making them anxious and nervous about it, so that they can give it their best."<sup>9</sup> Please elaborate on why it's important to keep in mind the psychological state of the singers in performance.**

This is extremely important. However good you are at detecting mistakes, or however good your gestures are, so on and so forth, if you misread the mood, as it were, of the room or the group, you're going to be in trouble. Certainly with children, during the course of my career, I've found that increasingly it works on "less stick and more carrot," to use that old expression. In



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other words, it doesn't do to tell them off straightaway. You need to start with encouraging or enabling compliments: "yes, very good, well done, that's getting better, now let's do this and try to improve more," rather than, "that was really awful." It's a basic didactic fact that most people will get better if they're encouraged. Of course, you can lose the attention of a room if you're too fussy with them and keep going over everything too many times. They either get quite cross or else very bored. You've got to be very conscious of reading the atmosphere. My rule to follow is that if you've tried something and it doesn't improve up to two or three times, best to leave it and come back to it. You can only exacerbate a situation like that.

Moreover, if you're working regularly with the same group of people, it's important to make sure you nurture them as people. They don't want you intruding on them or anything like that, but if I know that one of them suffered a bereavement last week, or if one of the children had been in trouble at school, just the very fact of knowing these things is important, in the sense of

how you're treating the singers. It's a difficult subject; it's more complicated really than talking about gesture. I think a high proportion of my work with any choir is how I deal with the people. You want them to do really well, but they're not machines.

### **What attributes (musical or non-musical) make a choral conductor a great leader?**

Recently we had a visit from some people in Norwich who are running some type of football academy connected with Norwich City Football Club. They were going around to various other kinds of institutions trying to look for what were the similarities. You couldn't get much more different than a chapel choir and a football club, but what the football coach had to do was the same as the conductor. It was very interesting, and it was a rewarding thing to converse with them and find out what they thought was important.

What's involved here are skills of leadership, which are expressed in different disciplines, through different




skills. Leadership is about being on top of your subject. Nobody is going to respect you if can't conduct five in a bar or if you haven't learned the score. It's about leading by precept, leading by example—being punctual, being efficient, being organized—hoping that people will want to emulate those various qualities. Obviously, some leaders are, how should we say, more forceful than others. That's the same in all walks of life, and in a way, I think what comes out in the differences in different conductors or different football managers, or whatever it is, in the end goes back to their own inherent personality.

Sometimes, of course, you've got to put on a bit of a persona. Most people who meet me in a social context think I'm reasonably a quiet and reserved person. But if you're going to conduct Mahler's *8th Symphony* in the Albert Hall, it's no good being weak and watery. You've got to project yourself. You've got to gain the respect of the people you're directing. Nowadays, by and large, I'm happy to say, respect is not accorded by virtue of the position you hold. You have to earn it, and indeed I would not want to be respected merely because I have a particular title, like Director of Music. I would prefer to be respected, if I am to be respected, by people saying, "This chap does a good job, he's professional, he prepares his work, he's efficient and doesn't waste our time, and we know that we're going to enjoy it and get a good result."

## Summary of Leadership Questions

Stephen Cleobury is keenly aware of the psychological state of his singers, particularly as it relates to performance anxiety. He learned from his viola teacher as a youngster that to overcome anxiety, he needed to concentrate 110 percent on the music to avoid thinking about the audience, and by extension, his own state of nervousness. This practice is passed along to his young singers, particularly the ones in their first year in the King's College Choir.

There is an annual tradition at King's that at the start of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, the choristers do not actually know who will sing the opening solo of "Once in Royal David's City," which has marked

the start of each Christmas Eve service for decades. As Cleobury and previous conductors have confirmed, the soloist is chosen merely seconds before the broadcasted performance begins. One can only imagine the kind of fortitude and trust that must be practiced to maintain that level of high-profile performance creativity. Cleobury appreciates the need of every musician to have some kind of relationship with their director beyond the perfunctory greetings and professional interactions, especially in groups that work together regularly. People need to feel encouraged and supported knowing that the conductor cares for the music, the ensemble, and their own well-being and development. 

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pronounced [ˈkli:bəri]
- <sup>2</sup> Ian Carson, "Cleobury, Stephen," *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed September 11, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> A program broadcast to listeners around the world since 1928.
- <sup>4</sup> Website of *King's College, Cambridge*, "Sir Stephen Cleobury (1948-2019)," website accessed on September 10, 2020, <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/news/2020/sir-stephen-cleobury-1948-2019>.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher M. Smith, "A Comparative Study of Select Choral Conductors' Approaches to Unification of Choral Sound, Rehearsal, Conducting, and Leadership: Frieder Bernius, Tõnu Kaljuste, Stephen Cleobury, John Eliot Gardiner, Weston Noble, and Robert Shaw" (DMA diss., University of Kansas, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Brian Robins, "From Rutter to Rachmaninov: An Interview with Stephen Cleobury of King's College, Cambridge," *Fanfare—the Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* 22, no. 2 (November 1998): 138.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Martin Cullingford, "The World's Greatest Choirs," *Gramophone*, accessed September 11, 2015, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/the-world-s-greatest-choirs>.
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Cleobury, Boris Ord, David Kremer, James Whitbourn, Philip Ledger, and David Willcocks, *Carols from King's*, Opus Arte, 2001 DVD [S.I.].