

The Swedish Sound

by Gary L. Anderson



Stockholm, Sweden

It was my privilege and pleasure recently to spend five weeks in Sweden as part of a sabbatical leave. My experience was professionally rewarding and aesthetically stimulating, immersing myself in the Swedish choral culture. I met many excellent conductors and reacquainted myself with others; met and interviewed composers; discovered a wealth of exciting and challenging music; attended rehearsals, recording sessions, and conducting classes; and discussed repertoire and performance practices. It was a wonderful five weeks. What follows are observations of my time in Sweden.

I. Choral Sound

There were four components of the Swedish choral "sound" in every choir observed: 1) excellent legato line, 2) emphasis on proper vowels, 3) controlled vibrato, especially in the soprano and alto voices, 4) excellent intonation. In addition, there seems to be a concept of singing within a choir in which the ensemble sound takes precedence over the sum of its parts, i.e., there is a model sound preferred by conductors, and the singers work from year to year to fit their voices to this model sound. The four components were all heard in a middle school girls' choir, a high school mixed choir, a multi-generation church choir, a civic/church chamber choir, and professional chamber choirs.

Since most choral music in the Western tradition is based on legato rather than staccato singing, finding choirs working on a legato line is not surprising; however, there was a con-

scious effort to create a "line" even in music that might have been performed in a more buoyant manner. Reinforcing this need for a legato line was strongly emphasized when singing unaccompanied repertoire, which requires particular attention to a line in singing. It is interesting that there never was an admonition to breathe properly and "move the air," or any other technical exercise, in order to achieve a legato line. In fact, breathing in a rehearsal, including during vocal warm-ups, was never mentioned.

Some languages lend themselves to singing a legato line better than other languages. The Swedish language, a "tonal language," is well-suited to legato singing because of three main factors. All syllables are created equally and are to be spoken and sung with more or less equal weight. Contrast that factor with, for example, the German language where some syllables are given greater weight than others both in speaking and singing, e.g., *zum STER-ben und zu MEI-nen RUH*.

Composers take this feature of the German language into account when setting text to music, putting emphasized or strong syllables on strong rhythmic beats and weaker syllables on weak rhythmic beats. In the Hungarian language, the first syllable in every word is emphasized, e.g., *E-rik PI-ros-lik, HEJ, RI-katom*. Composers setting Swedish texts do not make such detailed syllabic decisions, but base the strong and weak rhythmic units on the overall shape of the phrase and reinforce that with the harmonic rhythm.

Giving equal emphasis to all syllables, in singing or in speaking, creates a legato line. There is a rising and falling of the vocal inflection, and not a monotone sound, but a "tonal language." In spoken form, it actually sounds intoned. Equal syllabification in choral music is a distinctive feature of the Swedish choral sound. This is particularly evident when a

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Swedish choir sings in a different language, e.g., German, where the syllabification issue is quite different. The choirs observed sounded like a choir singing in German; the unique Swedish choral sound was not present.

Secondly, in the Swedish language there are nine vowels (including å, ä, ö) but twenty-two vowel sounds (including three diphthongs). Contrast that with six vowels and fourteen vowel sounds in Hungarian, six vowels and nineteen vowel

sounds in English (including five diphthongs), and six vowels and twenty-one vowel sounds in German (including diphthongs). More important, the vowel sounds in Swedish are consciously sustained in both speech and singing, a feature not consistently heard in Hungarian, English, or German speaking and singing.

Finally, in the Swedish language the consonants *c*, *q*, *w*, *x*, and *z* are rare, as is the combination *ch*. In the combinations

dj, *gj*, *hj*, and *lj*, the *j* is pronounced as a *y* sound and the preceding consonant is silent. At the end of a word, *g* and *k* are sometimes pronounced as *y*, or not pronounced. Finally, *rs* is pronounced as *sh* and *kj* like the German *ich* but closer to *sh*. The point is that many hard consonants are not found in Swedish, and other consonant combinations are softened. These statements are based on choirs observed and on conversations with conductors. There is an emphasis on vowels, especially on bright rather than dark vowel sounds, and a de-emphasis on consonants in the Swedish language, spoken and sung.

The choirs observed attended to proper vowel and consonant pronunciation in each language, but singing in Latin did not hide the Swedish sound. Beyond Swedish and Latin, the choirs singing in Italian, German, and English could have been anywhere in Europe or North America, judging by the sound. Choirs and conductors, though not ignoring consonants, paid more attention to proper vowel sounds and particular attention to vowel agreement among the singers. This was done primarily by vocal modeling and not by verbal suggestions, for the sound and manipulating the singing apparatus. Two conductors spent quite some time on vowel uniformity, leading to conscious listening for overtones. The other seven conductors did not talk about overtones, yet they spent some time on vowel uniformity, an obviously important component in the Swedish choral sound.

The issue of vibrato was not as controversial because singers simply do not use it, and conductors do not talk about it very much. There is an expectation that one does not use vibrato in choral singing unless requested, and only when appropriate for the repertoire. Conductors said that of course there have been discussions between conductors and voice teachers over the years, and these continue. However, it is not often discussed in choir rehearsals. It must be added, however, that the women seemed to pay more attention to controlling vibrato, at least in some choirs.

There were many lovely, solo-quality voices, but this quality was subjugated to the ensemble when the word *tutti* appeared. In one situation, the conductor said, "yes, there are voice majors who are

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members of the choir, but the majority of music students in choirs are studying for careers in music education, church music, musicology, or music theory." He added that all singers "need ensemble experience to enhance listening skills, sight-singing skills, and learning to sing as part of an ensemble." There seems to be an understanding, if not total agreement, about choral singing versus solo singing. The conductors were not particularly concerned about this issue and quite surprised that it is of interest to American choral conductors.

The seven ensembles (middle school-age to adult) sang beautifully in tune, apparently by concentrating on vowel uniformity, good pronunciation in all languages, controlling vibrato, and sustained singing. The repertoire of the choirs was primarily contemporary and based on close harmonies, quartal and tertian, some minimalism, and major and minor seconds and chord clusters.

II. Choral Rehearsals

Conductors rehearsed from the keyboard. In each case the conductor exhibited good keyboard skills, in open score part work and in playing independent keyboard parts. However, in each setting music was rehearsed primarily unaccompanied, using the keyboard only to reinforce difficult-to-hear individual parts.

Because the parts are not given in isolation but rather in combination, conductors transfer the major responsibility of learning notes to the singers. When a part is troublesome and keyboard reinforcement is helpful, playing that part in harmonic context is more useful than playing the part in isolation. This method helps educate the singers in learning the value of each part within the harmonic context.

Each choir reflected the conductor's personality and conducting/teaching method. In each rehearsal an atmosphere that fostered discussion about the music between singers and conductors was evident, where questions were answered and openness for dialogue was present. Singers and conductors were on a first-name basis. This spirit of cooperation stems from the concept that "we are equal in creating this instrument, but we have different responsibilities for the success of

the choir." There was a good, cooperative spirit in the rehearsals and humor was often incorporated, depending upon the personality of the conductor. Rehearsals began in a rather relaxed manner, with singers arriving at different times.

Most rehearsals began with a vocal and mental warm-up period, conducted either by the conductor or by another individual. During this warm-up period, vocal and mental exercises were combined, i.e., range extension with changing and chal-

lenging intervals. This allowed the leader of the warm-ups to teach musicianship skills while physically warming up the voices. No gymnastics or back rubs, popular choral warm-up exercises in the United States, were used. Each warm-up period incorporated intonation exercises, ranging from singing in unison with suggestions for listening for overtones, to practicing difficult-to-tune fifths, thirds, and seconds. In each case the leader explained the goal for each exercise. Many



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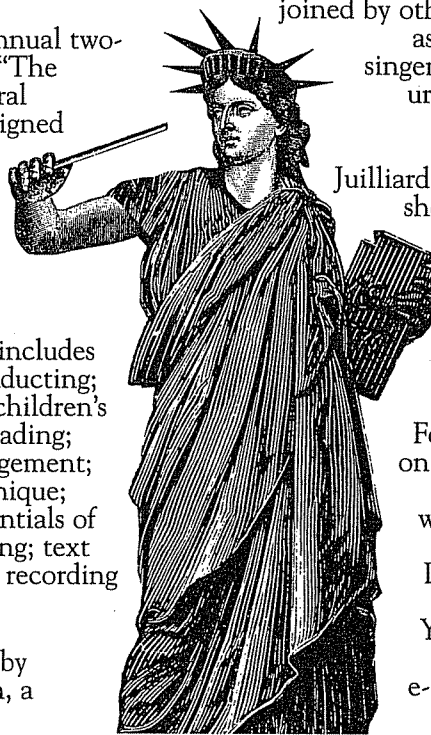
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times the singers were encouraged to listen during silence and while singing.

III. Chamber Choirs

There is a high level of musicianship in the choir personnel, particularly in the women's sections. The adult singers represent many disparate professions, including music. Singers with academic backgrounds in music had studied primarily church music, some history or theory, composition, and music education; few had studied applied voice. It

was not always apparent which singers had studied music and which singers had taken different academic paths. The solid training received by all was noticeable in sight-reading, understanding musical style differences, and following the composer's intentions, including diacritical markings.

All choirs were auditioned. Many singers in the church choirs are paid for participation in worship but not for rehearsals. The number of paid singers and the amount of remuneration varies from place to place. Some singers in the church choirs are members of the church in which they sing. Church choirs provide music for worship on a planned but not necessarily weekly basis. These choirs prepare music for worship services, which are not well attended, and music for concerts, which are well attended and mostly held in churches. Ticket sales provide income for the choir members, music, and other needed supplies; the conductor's salary is not dependent on the concerts but is part of each church's budget. Some concern was voiced concerning the ongoing

separation of church and state and how it affects music budgets. Most believe that music programs will continue to be strong, in part because of public support for concerts.

All adult chamber choirs, independent and church, work toward projects, e.g., local concerts, concert tours, and recordings. Rather than preparing a concert season, the choirs rehearse and prepare for individual events with appropriate repertoire and timely publicity as needed. Repertoire is learned, the project completed, and the choir moves to a new project with new repertoire.

IV. Other Choirs

There is music education in Sweden's public elementary schools, but no choirs in the curriculum for elementary through high school in the majority of schools in Stockholm. There are no choirs in Uppsala's public schools. The lack of vocal and instrumental ensembles in the curriculum is the norm throughout Sweden. School children who wish to sing in a choir do so either in a church choir, a choir at a local music preparatory school, or they attend a magnet school devoted to singing.

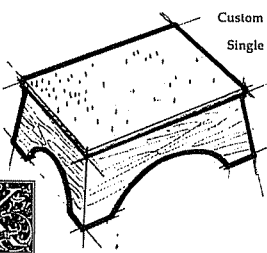
In Stockholm, the Adolf Fredrik School for middle-school-age boys and girls is a popular, selective public school in which successful entrants must do well on academic achievement tests and pass a vocal audition. The entire student body sings.

This universal participation provides wonderful music opportunities for the students at Adolf Fredrik, but sadly it is the only middle school in Stockholm where choirs are part of the curriculum. The high school equivalent is the Kungsholmen Musikgymnasium. It is a singing school with many choirs, including an after-school chamber choir. Although it is not part of the curriculum, many more students audition than can possibly be chosen. In Stockholm a few hundred middle school students and high school students receive outstanding academic programs, including choral ensembles. Conversely, thousands of middle school and high school children do not receive choral training in the public schools.

In the six state colleges of music in Sweden, located in Stockholm, Malmö,

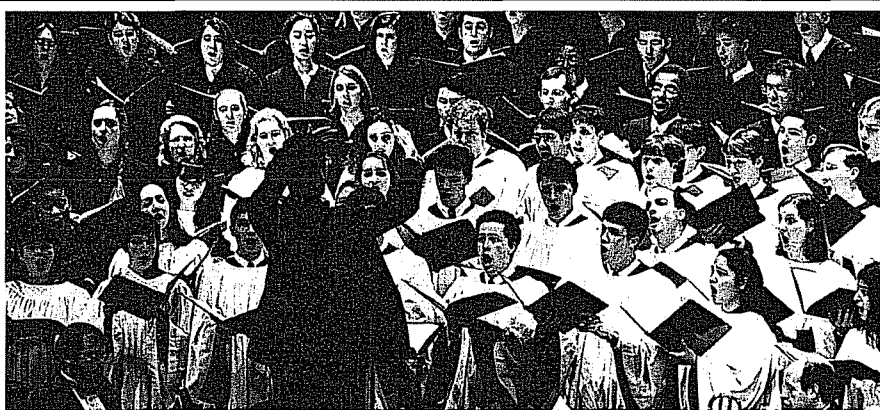
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Göteborg, Örebro, Ingusund, and Piteå, choirs are part of the curriculum. These choirs are only for conservatory students. The other universities throughout Sweden do not have choirs, bands, or orchestras in the curriculum. They have extracurricular clubs, with adjunct, part-time faculty serving as conductors. Only recently has Uppsala University, a world-class and historic university offering music degrees in musicology, theory, and composition, supported a choir for the students. This ensemble is still not part of the curriculum. Students do not receive credit for participating, even though many major in music at the university. The conductor is an adjunct, part-time member of the faculty. At most Swedish universities music is not offered as an academic pursuit. It is relegated to club status to provide extracurricular activities for students. Whereas excellent choirs are available to music students at the conservatories, few are available to students at the majority of universities in Sweden.

There is one full-time choir in Sweden, the Kungsholmen Opera Chorus. The Radio Choir provides about 70 percent full-time employment to its members. Membership is coveted because of excellent conductors and numerous opportunities to perform and make recordings.

Nearly ten percent of Sweden's population sings in a choir. Most conductors give credit to the church for historical and continuing support for choirs, but they nevertheless cannot answer in a single voice why this situation exists. There is some concern for the future of choral singing with the separation of church and state, but there is also a widely held belief that people will continue to support choirs, as participants and listeners.

V. Conductors

In each choir (middle school through adult) there was a wonderful rapport between the conductor and the singers. In rehearsals choristers seemed comfortable asking questions, and the conductor was willing to answer questions without showing impatience; humor was used to good effect. Some observers might get the impression that a lack of discipline is evident at times in many of the choirs. Actually, it is an atmosphere that allows for verbal give-and-take and rehearsal

breaks for chatting and stories.

It was hardly surprising that some similarities in approach to sound, style, and repertoire were noted. Virtually all observed conductors either studied with Eric Ericson or sang in a choir under his direction. However, the next generation of conductors is studying with a number of qualified professors. As noted earlier, a specific Swedish choral sound is evident in all observed choirs: legato line, good vowels, controlled vibrato, and excellent intonation, all in combination with the unique qualities of the Swedish language. These conditions can be traced to a single source of training for the conductors, Eric Ericson.

In addition to the sound, certain identifiable common conducting and teaching techniques were noticed: placement of the conducting gestures at eye level most of the time, the left hand often used for indicating a legato line, and most importantly, absolute adherence to the score. The composer's intentions were of primary importance to each conductor.

VI. Repertoire

Repertoire was age-appropriate. Each choir sings contemporary and traditional Swedish music, in addition to selections appropriate to the choir's mission.

There were a few selections in common, particularly contemporary music

from Baltic countries, including but not limited to Sweden. These often-used selections, though each unique in some ways, included minimalism, dense chords, seconds moving to and away from unisons, and some unique sonic effects with required overtones for the best performance. This repertoire certainly shapes the sound of the choirs.

This past year was a Bach year in which musicians celebrated the 250th anniversary of the death of J. S. Bach. This important anniversary was being celebrated in nearly every choir's repertoire.

Beyond traditional Swedish music, contemporary Swedish and other Baltic music, and music by J. S. Bach, only a limited number of other national composers were represented. The entire list of repertoire heard, given by country with the number of composers represented, includes Italy (4 composers), Germany (4), France (3), England (3), Spain (2), the Czech Republic (2), United States (2), Hungary (2), Estonia (2), Finland (2), Poland (1), and Sweden (19).

All choirs sang more unaccompanied music than music with required instrumental parts. This is a twentieth-century tradition in Sweden and continues as the twenty-first century begins.

—CJ—





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