

Refuting Misconceptions 1: The Use of Vibrato in Choral Singing in the United Kingdom

by

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It is a well-known fact that there is a particular type of North American musician who is fascinated by the so-called "English Choral Tradition." I am one of those myself. I spent much of my Canadian childhood longing to be a choirboy, processing solemnly under the shadow of the fan-vaulted splendour of King's College Chapel. Although that particular dream never came true (there were certain obstacles in my way), I did eventually come to study at Cambridge as an organ scholar and I felt so at home that I am still here, over twenty years later.

Not surprisingly, I arrived with many preconceptions about life in the United Kingdom, most of which were quickly dispelled (it's not really like living in an episode of *Brideshead Revisited*). It is also the case that some of those aforementioned choral Anglophiles have musical misconceptions, and in this two-part series I will deal with two of my favorites. This month I will consider the mistaken idea that UK choirs sing without vibrato. In my next column I will look into the erroneous belief that all English choirs can sight-read fluently.

Two key issues need to be considered in refuting the manifestly invalid assumption that English choirs never sing with vibrato. First, the technical definition of vibrato, and second, the passage of time and musical fashions (since the 1960s) and the associated advancement of musicological scholarship. My only caveat is that it is important for readers to remember that the best known UK choirs (i.e., those which are exported most frequently by means of broadcasts and recordings) constitute an exceedingly small minority of the choirs in the country. Therefore, the sound of a "typical" English choir is impossible to codify.

Vibrato is defined as a regular, pulsating variation in pitch, above and below the fundamental frequency. Both the range and the speed of fluctuation can be measured and adjusted. In most academic references to vibrato in singing (as opposed to vibrato in string playing), a clear distinction is drawn between vibrato, a natural by-product of a healthy, free singing technique, and warble (or "wobble"), when the pitch oscillation is too wide or the speed of fluctuation too slow. This is normally symptomatic of poor technique or aging (and occasionally of abused or over-used vocal folds), which adversely affects both pitch and sound quality. Technically speaking, the misconception here is perhaps more accurately expressed by saying that the best UK choirs do not sing with warble rather than that they do not sing with vibrato.

It probably goes without saying that the humorous sign reading "Choir Room: Please check your vibrato at the door" is most commonly directed at sopranos. Since both age and technique are known to play a crucial role in the distinction between a natural vibrato and an undesirable warble, it is necessary to consider the normal make-up of an English choir's soprano section to ascertain why the latter is not perceived in the sound. In the majority of England's best-known choirs the soprano sections consist of young, individually-trained singers. This includes both boys and girls



in Cathedral choirs, those in their late teens or early twenties in mixed Oxbridge choirs, and young professionals in the best-known specialist choirs. Conductors in all of these places are at liberty to encourage healthy vibrato, even in sopranos, since the combination of youth and technical training safeguards against warble whereas healthy vibrato enriches choral colour, improves tuning, and facilitates a sound which is free, relaxed, and vibrant, a word I have chosen purposefully. Unsurprisingly, across this country there are many thousands more choral singers who are aging or whose technique is unreliable. Consequently, warble is as equally present in Britain as it is in North American choirs. The question to be asked is whether comparing an average village parish choir with a professional London ensemble is necessarily appropriate or fair.

Historically, the early music revival, which gathered momentum in the 1960s, has influenced both fashion and taste. Vibrato has always been considered an essential expressive device and its use by singers and players alike is well documented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theoretical treatises. So, although Baroque string players do not use vibrato continuously with equally wide pitch fluctuation on every note as they might when playing Romantic repertoire on a modern instrument, removing it entirely is an unsuitably extreme and unstylistic interpretation of the sources. By extension, the same is true for singers.





Nevertheless, it is true to say that when the early music revival began there was an unhealthy fashion for some choral conductors to ask grown women to sing like pre-pubescent boys. This now outdated practice resulted in a vocal production which was artificially straight, constrained, thin, and often sharp (not to mention that it was undoubtedly both psychologically and vocally traumatic for a whole generation of sopranos). Unfortunately this sound was recorded for posterity and widely distributed, since this trend coincided with the invention of CD recordings in the 1980s. Thankfully, now most UK choir directors have outgrown this hazardous practice. At any rate, there have always been plenty of pre-pubescent boys, particularly in Europe, who have sung with vibrato, so it was a flawed constraint from the outset.

Notwithstanding the above refutations of the original misconception, there must be a particular quality that North Americans have perceived in English choral singing (and not just on 1980s recordings), since this characteristic misconception continues to be surprisingly wide-spread. It probably is true to say that the best-known UK choirs' sounds are characterised by unity of purpose and by what is usually called "good blend." Personally, I dislike the word blend in a choral context since it appears to deny choir members the opportunity to make an individual contribution to the overall sound. I know that most of my colleagues who are directors of music would agree with me. Instead, I try to achieve a unified choral sound in my own choirs by encouraging vocal independence and courage. They do, of course, have to listen to each other and cooperate musically. Ensemble of diction, expression, and intent are obviously crucial in order to turn thirty individuals into one musical force, but true vibrato need not – indeed, should not – be checked at the door in order to achieve these ends. In my experience, this philosophy creates a fresh, colourful, free, well-tuned, and most importantly healthy choral sound to which every singer contributes individually and naturally.

I hope I've managed to refute this particular misconception successfully. If after reading this you still believe that UK choirs never sing with vibrato, do a Google search for videos of one of the UK's finest professional choirs, the BBC Singers. Tune in next column to find out just how poor an English choir's sight-reading might actually be.





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