

Choral Singing

Choral Singing:
Histories and Practices

Edited by

Ursula Geisler and Karin Johansson

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORIES AND PRACTICES OF CHORAL SINGING IN CONTEXT

URSULA GEISLER AND KARIN JOHANSSON

This anthology combines articles from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. The development of joint approaches through combinations of theory, research traditions and methodology from differing traditions constitutes a scientific challenge, and there is as yet no discipline of choral studies in the academic field.¹ Since choral singing is and has been powerful and influential both musically and socially, with a wide-ranging influence in most European countries during the last 150 years, we argue that a further development of platforms for interdisciplinary research in this area is relevant. Therefore the title of this volume - *Choral singing. Histories and practices* - aims at mirroring both the diversity of and the relationship between historical and contemporary choral practices. As editors of this volume, and as initiators and leaders of the international network Choir in Focus it has been our ambition both to encourage discussions and to overcome and transcend disciplinary boundaries.

We have our academic backgrounds in differing methodological and theoretical traditions, but share the view that interdisciplinary approaches and a combination of perspectives on choral practices are relevant and of great value for all agents in the field. Consequently, this anthology reflects our purpose to include a multifaceted variety of topics and methodologies rather than excluding approaches that do not coincide with our own. However, in one respect the scope of this publication is limited: readers will notice that the countries represented are Sweden, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Germany, United Kingdom, Portugal and Belgium. The contributing authors all have a connection to the network Choir in Focus, and, consequently, a lot of the research and choral practice that actually exists globally does not appear here.² This volume highlights some of the interesting common themes that have been addressed in the network since 2009, and we hope that they will inspire further developments.

Choir in Focus – a background

Why do people sing in choirs? Why should they? How can choral music making be improved and developed? What role does contemporary choral activity (in leadership, singing, and listening) play in the construction of social and musical meaning? How can historical knowledge and analysis shed light on contemporary problems and possibilities? How can choral research promote the development and expansion of new music today? Questions like these have been the starting point for our interest in developing a common platform for choral research. In a variety of disciplines, choir singing, choral practice, and common singing in general are explored as research objects. Together, these describe a complex and multi-faceted field of relevant cultural-historical, pedagogical, sociological, psychological and music-related topics.³

Researching choir culture demands and encourages a multitude of research strategies. Consequently, the disciplines that work with choir-related research differ in theoretical and methodological traditions, as well as in definitions of ‘choir’ and of what choir research should be. Even though there are vast possibilities for co-operative and cross-disciplinary projects in this area, such studies are not common.⁴ Against this background, the network Choir in Focus was initiated in 2009 with the support from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. The network is based at Choir Centre South (Körcentrum Syd, www.korcentrumsyd.se), which was established in 2007 as a joint venture between Malmö Academy of Music, The Department of Musicology, Odeum (both at Lund University), Malmö Symphony Orchestra and Music South (Musik i Syd).

The goal was to create a platform for the development of constructive questions related to ‘choir’ on an international basis and for the reflection on problems in common areas. With ‘choir’ as an over-arching umbrella concept the network would provide the scope for co-operation across national and disciplinary borders, for example, between the traditionally musicological discipline based in humanities, practice-based artistic research in the area of music performance and social-science-oriented research in music education. It was also seen as a starting point for debates around the musical and social function of choirs in modern society as mirroring collective and individual needs for meaning, health and well-being.⁵

The four main aims of the network were stated as

- bringing together competent European researchers in research fields related to choir singing and choral practice,

- creating a European platform for the development of choir research in theory and practice situated in Sweden,
- investigating the need and scope for cross-disciplinary studies in this area, which is perceived as under-researched and as representing possibilities for constructive projects,
- developing profiled research questions and common projects in the field, which is internationally widespread and multifaceted.

Since 2009, Choir in Focus has been a forum for researchers from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. The participants represent a range of institutions and traditions and contribute with lived experience from differing research traditions. After two internal network meetings in Malmö/Lund 2009 and 2010, and a collaborative conference on choral topics at the chor.com in Dortmund in September 2011, the international conference *International Conference on the Concepts and Practices of Choral Singing* was held in Lund, Sweden, in October 2012. It was organised in order to make visible and available the contemporary dynamic development of choral research, and to highlight interdisciplinary investigations and interaction between practice-based and historical approaches in choral research. The conference broadened the choral research network contacts globally. In October 2014 an International symposium on the histories and practices of choral education takes place in connection with Lund Choral Festival. This symposium aims at highlighting interdisciplinary relationships between music educational and music historical approaches to choral research, as a platform for presentations and discussions with a focus on the history and mediality of choral education since the 18th century until today.

The present anthology includes a selection of papers held at the conference in 2012. Thematically, these cover relevant choral topics from the 19th century until today. This is usually regarded as the time scope during which the secular choral practice of today has developed. However, some written sources bear witness of choral practices that can be traced back to the times of antique tragedy.

Choral practice as (re)presentation, (re)production and (re)creation

Since Greek antiquity symbolic meaning and a specific societal status have been attributed to the collective choral voice. This collective voice has played a crucial role in defining ‘good’ and ‘valuable’ music as well as societies’ various needs for vocal representation. The antique tragedy

actually originated in choral practice, which means that the ritual and symbolic function of choirs is not a new invention by, for example, the church or the different European nationalisation movements after the 18th century.⁶ The regulation of choral singing is highlighted in the philosopher Plato's writings on the *Republic* and on the *Laws*, where music was defined as a state matter which 'should be preserved [...] from innovation [...] for any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited'.⁷ Choral singing is mentioned specifically:

Again, the work of the chorus is co-extensive with the work of education; rhythm and melody answer to the voice, and the motions of the body correspond to all three, and the sound enters in and educates the soul in virtue [...] Music and dancing together form the choral art.⁸

This is an early description of a choral practice that also includes a choral definition. Choral activity is described as a combination of music/singing and dance, and music as such was thought to be so important for the functioning of the state that it should be regulated. These Platonic texts illustrate the very early connection between people's music making and state regulations, which we recognize as a common feature of Western European music history during the last three centuries. Choral music making has otherwise mainly been connected with the church, where a choral canon and a culturally constructed meaning of religious choral singing have emerged. A complementary development was initiated by the French revolution and the Enlightenment ideas, which can be seen as starting points for community singing with other than religious prefixes.

Choral practice can be seen as a field of simultaneous (re)presentation, (re)production and (re)creation. These three aspects and discourses interact on both collective and individual levels. They bring to the fore questions about how the collective voice represents societal development and change at the same time as it is conceived as an individual source of entertainment, relaxation or the experience of fine art.

As (re)presentation, choirs embody a collective voice with the capacity of expressing a great variety of symbolic meanings. Through history, these have developed in societal processes that have shaped as well as transformed the public sphere. From being mainly connected to the church and to congregations, choral practice changed platform, expression and meaning during the different nationalisation processes of the 19th century. In most European countries, choral associations, singing groups and glee clubs then became visible agents in society, acting as representatives of the national community. As shown by Keden (Chapter Five) and Loeser (Chapter Six), choral practice can be transformed into other forms of

media. For example, the transformation of the 11th German Choir Singers' Festival 1932 into the soundtracked film 'Grüss Gott mit hellem Klang', or the male choir song *Die Wacht am Rhein* into postcards, paintings and YouTube clips demonstrate how musical meaning can be reconstructed and enacted in other settings.

Ahlquist wonders: 'Why have groups with political agendas often chosen choruses as public bearers of their messages?'"⁹ Hoegaerts (Chapter One) presents one possible answer when she points to the important influence of the choral voice in the Belgian nationalisation process during the 19th century. She makes clear that the 'careful use of different voices, unison, solos and polyphony complicates our understanding of nineteenth-century patriotism and citizenship, showing that belonging to the nation could take other forms than participation in politics or even the state's institutions' (p. 23). This is also illustrated by Brusniak (Chapter Seven), who describes the close interrelation between Freemasonry and the German male choir movement in the 1830s. Both these examples show that singing societies in the 19th century and choirs in the 20th century were not only arenas for musical aesthetics. Correspondingly Lindskog, in a reflection upon Brahms' *Requiem* (Chapter Two), suggests that for listeners, a focus on the socio-political implications of the musical work as well as on its aesthetical affordances might enhance the musical experience. It might also increase the awareness of how music interacts with social paths. For example, she states that the *Requiem* has a connection with a 'collective identifier, often referred to as "Nationalreligiosität"' (p. 35). Social and national pathos is also demonstrated by Randjärv (Chapter Four) when she pictures how the Estonian song celebrations played an important role in political community shaping. Due to the double nature of the collective voice it may, on the one hand, be seen as a purely musical manifestation, and, on the other hand, be used for conveying covert political messages.

From the perspective of (re)production, choir singing stands for stability as well as for change, which can be seen in contemporary developments of choral practice. Ashley (Chapter Eight) takes the English cathedral tradition as a starting point for reflecting upon steps that need to be taken in promoting boys' choral singing today. According to him the crisis is 'that if boys in the future sing only "embarrassing baby songs" and leave choirs before gaining an inkling of the power of serious choral music, choral directors are going to have to look a great deal harder than in the past for the 'missing males' when recruiting quality tenors and basses' (p. 126). This means that new forms of performance practices have to be considered. However, even if there are many examples of initiatives

aiming at a development of alternative formats of performance, conventional procedures still dominate the scene of choral singing. Bonshor (Chapter Eleven) emphasizes the need for rethinking the role of the choral leader and choral education, and for shifting ‘the locus of learning from an individual, teacher-led process to a more collaborative undertaking, in which the interactions between group members make a significant contribution to the learning process’ (p. 187). In contrast to this, Jansson (Chapter Nine), in a discussion of the conductor as a sensemaker, concludes that ‘although everyone in the choir is making sense of the music and of what they do, the sensemaking is a dedicated function of the conductor’s position’ (p. 151). The focus here is on a theoretical discussion of where musical meaning is situated and how it is communicated. A similar but more practice-based view-point is taken by Black (Chapter Twelve), in a study of how choral conductors transfer musical ideas to their choirs through verbal imagery. She points to the misunderstanding and confusion that may appear in the communication between conductors and singers and suggests that ‘conductors need not only to demonstrate vocally but also to enable singers to build a concept of that particular sound’ (p. 213). These examples illustrate the ongoing academic discussion about how and where musical meaning in choral singing is constructed, and points to the possibility of widening the debate as to engage practitioners. An example of research that might have this function is Jaakkola’s study of aural training material (Chapter Ten). She outlines the necessary competencies for choristers and says that ‘good choral aural skills include the ability to read a score both horizontally and vertically, knowledge of musical styles, an understanding of texture and tonal colour, and a sense of balance and dramaturgy’ (p. 182). Jaakkola presents an extensive overview of different ways to achieve this goal, which are all easily accessible as pedagogical material for both choir singers and leaders.

Choir as a field of (re)creation can be interpreted in at least two ways: as a field of recreation for individual singers, conductors and composers, or as an arena for the creation of new music in interaction between participants in choral practice. Balsnes (Chapter Thirteen) illustrates the first aspect when she presents individual perspectives on ‘how people with specific health challenges use choral singing as a health resource’ (p. 233). She points to the fact that choral singing functions as a field of possibilities for singers who are otherwise not able to achieve mastery due to their social situations or health conditions. The second aspect deals with choral music as a field of possibilities for composers and interpreters of choral music, and with the choir as an instrument for musical expression.

Santos (Chapter Fourteen) presents a detailed case study of how a prominent composer utilizes the artistic opportunities offered by the combination of a children's choir and a symphony orchestra. On a more general level, Frankel (Chapter Three) points to how important social support and funding is for the production of new choral music. The commissions of new repertoire made by the Tapiola choir in the 1960s and 1970s, which was also part of the construction of Finnishness, led to a situation where 'contemporary music emerged as one of Finland's most successful cultural exports' (p. 52). The three fields of investigation (re)presentation, (re)production and (re)creation can be seen as umbrella themes for the fourteen chapters collected here. They explore choral practice from differing theoretical and methodological starting points but all contribute to a transdisciplinary discussion about the origins, functions and meaning of choral singing.

Disposition

The chapters of this volume are organized in the two sections Histories and Practices. However, as readers will notice, they overlap and are interrelated in many respects.

In Chapter One, *Little citizens and petites patries: Learning patriotism through choral singing in Antwerp in the late nineteenth century*, **Josephine Hoegaerts** discusses the role of collective singing in the forming of the characteristic Belgian discourse on nationality, which depends on diversity and regionalism. With examples from school cantatas, she points to how they were important tools for doing and reproducing gender as well as future professional roles. Hoegaerts demonstrates how children's singing and acting in these contexts meant practising citizenship and voicing a collective, patriotic discourse: 'Rather than reflecting a simple, unified, nation, the cantatas presented a differentiated landscape populated with different groups whose gender, age, occupation and regional characteristics could easily be identified' (p. 22).

In Chapter Two '*Ich bin nun getröstet*': *Choral communications in Ein deutsches Requiem*, **Annika Lindskog** focuses on the role of the choir in the creation of a collective, national identity in 19th century Germany. Lindskog discusses Brahms' *Requiem* in a historical context and argues that music is never 'only' music but plays a part in political and social developments; it is always simultaneously locally situated and universally relevant. She problematizes the tendency towards polarising music into either an entirely political or a solely intra-musical phenomenon, and suggests that 'opening up the interpretative hearings of nineteenth-century

choral music to include a range of possible communications and concerns might be a way of situating it closer to its historical context and at the same time allow it to speak with multifarious voices' (p. 47).

In Chapter Three, *The Tapiola choir and Finnishness: nationalism and the institutional support of contemporary music in Finland*, **Lauren Holmes Frankel** describes the background to the Tapiola Choir, a Finnish children's choir that enjoyed great success from its foundation in 1963. The choir was conducted by Erkki Pohjola and won the BBC competition in 1971. Frankel outlines Pohjola's four working principles: (i) the ideal of a 'Finnish' sound, (ii) the choristers' combination of singing with playing an instrument, (iii) the collaboration with contemporary composers, and (iv) an international outreach ambition. She goes on to discuss the relationship of the Tapiola Choir with the Finnish State policy of arts and points to how the choir's success was a function of the interaction between musical visions and governmental support: 'Institutions like the Tapiola Choir helped to create the contemporary identity that was presented to the world, by producing new music and continually reaffirming the existence of a nation' (p. 62).

In Chapter Four, *Estonian song celebrations as drivers for political and social change*, **Laine Randjärv** in parts describes the role of the Estonian song celebration tradition during the period after the Second World War from a subjective inside perspective. Randjärv pictures the history of song celebrations since the late 19th century and aims at showing how the repertoire and concert programmes reflect obedience but also rebellion against Soviet authorities. In an analysis of the repertoire, a central aim is to 'bring out the methods that the Soviet authorities used in order to attract part of the creative intelligentsia to their cause and thus sow strong discord among creative figures' (p. 70).

In Chapter Five, *'Grüß Gott mit hellem Klang!' The medialisation in films of the bourgeois lay choir movement in the Weimar republic*, **Helmke Jan Keden** presents a strategy for investigating films as a source for historical research, in which the film material is seen as representing a history of media culture. The described method was developed by Wiebke Glowatz, with the three main steps (i) criticism of sources, (ii) analysis of the film material, and (iii) interpretation. Keden analyses three films of major choral events made for propaganda purposes by the Deutscher Sängerbund (DSB) in Germany and Austria around 1930.

In Chapter Six, *The 19th in the 21st century? The German male choir block buster Die Wacht am Rhein and its mediality on YouTube*, **Martin Loeser** defines mediality as resulting from a process of 'accumulation of meaning, created by bringing together different media and different layers

of sense' (p. 101). He investigates the mediality of the German male choir song *Die Wacht am Rhein* by studying its impact, reception and function at different points in history through video clips on YouTube. The song was widely popular during the second half of the 19th century as a heroic representation of German national unity and resistance towards the neighbouring age-old enemy, France. Loeser shows how the song gains an extended meaning and function and has been used for neo Nazi purposes, for example, in *Die Wacht an der Spree*, which is made with a direct allusion to *Die Wacht am Rhein* and as a criticism of the democratic constitution of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD).

In Chapter Seven, *The involvement of freemasons in the 'Erstes Deutsches Sangerfest' in Frankfurt-on-Main in 1838*, **Friedhelm Brusniak** advocates the study of the connection between Freemasons and the German male choir. He points to the fact that further research is needed especially in order to 'supply more differentiated answers to questions about the initiators and supporters of non-professional choral singing and their institutional and organisational alliances since the early 19th century' (p. 114). Against this background, Brusniak claims that it has to be taken into consideration that perhaps the involvement of Freemasons in the First German Sangerfest in Frankfurt 1838 'was greater than previously supposed' (p. 117).

In Chapter Eight, *1000 years and 1000 boys' voices: the crisis and radical challenge for choral singing*, **Martin Ashley** discusses the missing-male problem in classical choral singing in England, and states that the country has 'for so long enjoyed such choral riches through its professional cathedral choirs that the decline of the "grass-roots" infrastructure in amateur choral singing with boys at parish, school and community level has failed to motivate alternatives' (p. 139). However, he points out that 'crisis' might mean a turning-point rather than disaster, and draws on successful examples from France and Scotland to show how new forms of boys' choral singing may develop in the wake of secularisation.

In Chapter Nine, *Modelling choral leadership*, **Dag Jansson** departs from an overarching discussion of models for music-making and choral leadership; as leadership, in terms of musical meaning and as a set of competencies. He presents *the enactment model*, which builds on a research project that investigated choral leadership through the lived experience of 22 Norwegian accomplished choral singers with abundant experience of different choral directors. The model is intended as a tool for scholarly discussions in connection with choral research as well as an inspiration in musical practice. It encompasses factors such as (i) control

and engagement, (ii) rehearsal and management, (iii) music skills and knowledge, and (iv) mentorship.

In Chapter Ten, *Choral aural training materials*, **Soila Jaakkola** presents a study made against the scarce research on musical literacy and the lacking training of sight-reading skills in choirs. It is based on the questions: (1) Which basic concepts in the theory of music are featured in choral aural training textbooks? and (2) What teaching methods were selected for choral aural training textbooks? Her aim is to contribute to choral education by way of enhancing the sight-reading and sight-singing ability of adult choir members. In her study, Jaakkola investigated 40 aural training books and presents six of these as case studies, each illustrating one methodological pathway to meaningful choral ear training.

In Chapter Eleven, *Confidence and the choral singer: The choir as a community of practice*, **Michael Bonshor** notes the absence of research related to adult amateur choral singing. He argues that each choir forms a community of practice and that the singers learn not only from the choir leader but also from each other as ‘informal’ team leaders. Thus, one of Bonshor’s conclusions is that ‘reciprocal, collaborative learning amongst participants is often of more importance than might be anticipated, bearing in mind the conventional view of the choir being passively led and taught by the conductor’ (p. 199). Consequently, musical learning and confidence building to a great extent take place in the social interaction between singers. In the light of this, Bonshor suggests that the role of the conductor should be reinterpreted as that of a member of the community of practice, hereby ‘reframing the role of the conductor or teacher as a facilitator and “senior learner” who contributes to the collective learning process, rather than as a leader who is solely responsible for group learning’ (p. 204).

In Chapter Twelve, *‘Bouncing and dancing’: the use and effect of verbal imagery in choral directing*, **Mary Black** discusses the definition, function and use of verbal imagery in choral directors’ work. She points to the fact that there is little research in the area and puts the question: What is the function of verbal imagery in choral work? Black defines verbal imagery as something that has the aim of influencing and changing the singers’ output, in contrast to, for example, musical imagery as described by other researchers. In a study of 16 choir directors and their choirs, she has investigated the work with imagery through questionnaires, observations and interviews. Based on the data, Black concludes that verbal imagery is a powerful tool in communicating intentions to the singers, who ultimately are the ones who produce the music. She argues that ‘success in explaining imagery effectively may be the key to enabling singers to improve or change the sound’ (p. 213-214).

In Chapter Thirteen, *'I get sick if I don't go to choir practice!'* *Choral singing as a health promoting resource*, **Anne Haugland Balsnes** focuses on the positive health effects of choir singing: 'Choral singing can prove to be a source of a sense of mastery, the experience of social and musical belonging, powerful and positive musical experiences that contribute to sustaining a healthy emotional life, and contribute to perceptions of meaning and coherence in life' (p. 232). Starting from individual pictures of four choral singers who have all been affected by illness, she points to how one important aspect for these experienced singers is that the choir is not intended as therapy, that is to say, they do not sing in the choir in order to get well, but with the aim of making music. Balsnes connects to Tia de Nora's use of the concept *asylum* as, on the one hand, encouraging creative and expanding activity and, on the other hand, providing a restorative and protective space. She argues that 'in the first sense, choral singing adds positive experiences to the lives of the interviewees – experiences of mastery, achievement and community. In the second sense, choral singing is a "bubble" where the choristers can distance themselves from illness, pain and other difficulties of life' (p. 244).

In Chapter Fourteen, *The interaction choir-orchestra in Ljus av ljus by Karin Rehnqvist*, **Pedro Santos** describes the importance of the Swedish choral tradition for the development of high-ranking children's choirs. He illustrates this with Karin Rehnqvist's piece *Ljus av ljus* and describes the characteristics of her style, for example her 'sensitivity to timbre, her mastery of orchestration techniques, use of modernistic materials (for instance clusters and extended instrumental techniques), exploration of sound spatialization and her interest in experimental approaches to performance' (p. 252). Santos concludes that the work *Ljus av ljus* is a good example of the successful combination of children's voices and the symphony orchestra. In his analysis of the piece, Santos shows how Rehnqvist's work with the vocal material was made before the orchestral part, and points to the interaction between these two bodies of sound. He recommends *Ljus av ljus* as a role model for composers who want to write for children's voices and symphony orchestra.

Notes

¹ Recently, The Croatian Choral Directors Association has coined the term 'Chorusology' as 'the multidisciplinary science of the choral art'. See www.choralcroatia.com/Choralis2014.aspx [2014-05-20]. There is – as far as we can see – no wider academic discussion on this term or on questions of establishing a separate scientific discipline called 'Chorusology' within the academic curriculum.

² Cf. Geisler, U. (2010). *Choral Research. A Global Bibliography / Körforskning. En bibliografi*. Malmö/Lund: Körcentrum Syd. [http://www.korcentrumsyd.se/wp-content/uploads/Geisler-2010_Choral-Research_A-Global-Bibliography.pdf]

³ Cf. Geisler (2010).

⁴ Bresler, L. (Ed.). (2007). *International handbook of research in arts education*. Dordrecht: Springer; Colwell, R. & Richardson, C. (Eds.) (2002). *The new handbook of research on music teaching and learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Lindström, D. (2006). *Sjung, sjung för livet! En studie av körsång som pedagogisk verksamhet och av deltagarnas upplevelse av hälsa och livskvalitet*. Luleå: Luleå University of Technology.

⁶ Bierl, A. (2001). *Der Chor in der Alten Komödie. Ritual und Performativität* (unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusen* und der Phalloslieder fr. 851 *PMG*). (=Beiträge zur Altertumskunde; 126), Leipzig & München: K.G. Saur, 21; Burton, R.W.B. (1980). *The chorus in Sophocles' tragedies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1ff.

⁷ Plato (428–348 BC). *The Republic*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html> [2014-05-20].

⁸ Plato. *The Laws*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html> [2014-05-20].

⁹ Ahlquist, K. (Ed.) (2006). *Chorus and Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 8.

PART I
HISTORIES

CHAPTER ONE

LITTLE CITIZENS AND *PETITES PATRIES*: LEARNING PATRIOTISM THROUGH CHORAL SINGING IN ANTWERP IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

JOSEPHINE HOEGAERTS

And in this imposing and magnetic silence, over this wide sea with its frozen waves, upon which a blue shadow, descending softly and full of caresses, throws even more peace and solemnity, fall suddenly from the highest gallery of the tower, where the eyes try in vain to discern the coats of arms, the martial smatterings of trumpets in unison. And the sopranos of the sister cities – Ghent and Bruges – hail and acclaim the Metropolis again and again. Their ever more ardent and strident ‘vivats’ were followed each time by the somewhat raucous call of the band. After this dialogue, the carillon started to chime: slowly and muted at first, like a clutch awakening at dawn in the dew of the thicket; then, getting more animated, raising its voice, suddenly launching a rain of jubilating chords. A sunrise. Then the orchestra and the choirs entered in contention. And it was the apotheosis of Wealth and Art.¹

In 1880, naturalist author Georges Eeckhoud included a long description of the performance of Peter Benoit’s ‘Rubenscantate’ in his novel *La nouvelle Carthage*. Eeckhoud took his time to paint the colorful crowd gathering on the *Groenplaats* to listen to the newest creation of a man by then celebrated as a local, Flemish and national composer.² He described the tension and excitement building up before the start of the concert, the powerful effect of the music and its ‘sonorous and hyperbolic common spaces’,³ the carnivalesque outpouring of emotions when the cantata was finished and, in the midst of it all, the composer himself, who he compared with the subjects of great Flemish primitive paintings: a *Renaissant* reigning triumphant over his own creation – visibly linked with the past, with the city and, next to the statue of Peter Paul Rubens, one of the

nation's greats. The composer's heroic and national stature was underlined by the staging of the cantata,

Next to the statue of the great Peter-Paul, the choirs and the orchestra occupy a circular tiered platform, in the center of which the composer is enthroned. The square, cordoned off, is left to the bourgeoisie. The people crowding around it, respect its boundaries.⁴

A huge number of musicians was assembled on the *Groenplaats* for the performance of the cantata, but the center around which the performance gravitated was a huge mass of over 1000 choral singers occupying the stage.⁵ They, rather than the composer who represented mainly his own genius and authority, symbolized the nation to the crowd. Singers had come from across the country to take part in the celebration, and the varied nature of their voices had been consciously employed as a representation of the country's and the world's different citizens. The *soprani des villes soeurs* were recognized as voices from somewhere else, yet related to the Antwerp setting, and it was only after they had been properly heard that the carillon, an instrument that was easily recognizable as a symbol of the region and anchored in the city's structure, started to play – including young and old in a unison song.⁶

Then, the carillon will play
from all archways,
the grey will sing,
and the young will dance!⁷

The cantata described by Eeckhoud was one of many mass choral performances at the end of the nineteenth century in public places throughout Belgian cities. Composed by local maestros, some of whom went on to gain some international fame, yet mainly exclusively Belgian or Flemish heroes, these cantatas were conscious performances of national unity through diversity. The diverse set up of the choirs needed for their performance played a major role in the enactment of this interpretation of unity. The choir, gathering different voices in unison or at least in harmony, was easy to understand as a metaphor for national harmony as well.⁸ In the next paragraphs, however, I aim to show that musicians and politicians alike took the metaphor of unity through diversity much further by a number of (artistic) strategies that audibly and visibly contrasted different singers. Soloists were separated from the choir, men's and women's voices offset each other, children had a particular role to play and even the country's regions, as Eeckhoud's description has already shown, were chorally reproduced.⁹

In what follows, I will first sketch how (Belgian) nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century was imbued with notions of diversity and dependent on regionalism. Song, and especially collective singing, played an important role in cementing and spreading these notions of regionalism and nationalism. Second, I will zoom in on a number of cantatas that encouraged singers to claim their specific roles and re-enact the nation on stage, focusing mainly on the use of lyrics for different groups of singers and unraveling the cantatas' discourse. Finally, different participants in the cantatas' choirs will be compared in order to show how gender, age, and degrees of accomplishment were expressed through singing and employed as acoustic representations of citizenship. In these multifarious re-enactments of the nation, it seems that it was not the heroic tenor, nor the male choir, that best symbolized the nation, but rather the soaring sound of treble voices.

L'union fait la force – regionalism, nationalism and pedagogy

The concept of unity through diversity plays an important role in Belgian history. Since the nation's inception in 1830, recurring discussions have surfaced over the country's unclear, dualistic, identity, and its consequences for its claims to authenticity.¹⁰ Like for most, if not all, European nations, the creation of Belgium was a nineteenth-century process of unification through the creation of 'invented traditions', national institutions and standardized languages. The national motto, *L'union fait la force*, in this context, appears as a hopeful discursive device to produce what it claims: national unity despite the obvious differences between the communities occupying the landscape. By the end of the nineteenth century, it became difficult to settle on a definition of the nation in Belgium. Various poetic patriotic texts stress the indissoluble and harmonic character of *la patrie*, but what the author meant by this fatherland remains to be read from the descriptions he might include of national heroes, sights, landscapes or sometimes from his political leanings. In Antwerp, for example, the nation was often understood to be Flanders, which – rather than betraying any political separatism, denoted the author's sense of cultural belonging to a nation within a nation.¹¹

This was also largely the way in which the nation was presented in geography manuals in school. In primary schools in particular, the nation was presented as the outer limit of a number of circles in which the children were presumed to feel at home and to which they were to have an emotional attachment. Starting from the home, teachers went on to

familiarize their pupils with their town, region and finally the nation – to which children were to extend the love they felt to their homes. Simultaneously, they were to imagine the nation as a large mosaic of different regions, in which different people – with their own characteristics – had their homes. Geography manuals enumerated the natural resources and industries of different regions as well, thereby underscoring the nature of the nation as a union of various different landscapes and communities. The familiarity children were to acquire with the nation was therefore not based on ‘sameness’, but rather on the idea that the regional variety was what made Belgium unique. Especially at the end of the century, with the rise of a Flemish cultural consciousness, the dual nature of the country was embraced as its defining feature. Rather than dividing the country, the combination of two ‘races’ (Flemish and Walloon) was represented as that which constituted the nation’s strength. If unity indeed created strength, the unity became stronger precisely because it consisted of two different nations.

Rather than teaching abstract notions of nationalism, politics or ideology, teachers sought to create a bond between their charges and the country’s various *petites patries*. Much like in France, Belgian schools founded their education towards patriotism on

the immediate reality of the child. It is about taking the place where the pupil lives as a basis, and developing his love and pride in his *petite patrie* in order to allow him to then extend these sentiments to the *grande patrie*.¹²

Anne-Marie Thiesse defines this *petite patrie* as

a lovable and safe place, an intermediate between family and society within which the individual can grow and develop.¹³

The definitions of the nation and the pedagogical principles applied in order to forge patriotic love thus intrinsically suppose a process of parallel growth or expansion. As long as children were small and therefore incomplete citizens (that is, without civil rights or duties) they were regarded as inhabitants of their *petite patrie*. Grown men, performing their duties of citizenship and exerting its rights and privileges inhabited (or even made out) the actual, *grande patrie*.

Whereas knowledge of the nation was acquired mainly in geography and history classes, patriotic education – the teaching of love for one’s country – pervaded all activities inside and sometimes even outside the classroom. Pupils read patriotic stories, visited different parts of the national landscape and sang patriotic songs. The importance of the practice

of singing within nineteenth-century (patriotic) education can hardly be overestimated. Music became a compulsory part of the curriculum of primary schools in 1879 but school manuals show that music was a part of classroom life long before that. Contemporary proponents of school singing saw numerous advantages to the practice. Singing would ameliorate the children's health, and especially their lungs, it would allow them to develop a taste for art and aesthetic feeling and, according to a number of experts, would develop their national identity provided the right songs were chosen.¹⁴ Singing, it seems, would help children to grow up and become strong, moral and patriotic citizens. Conversely, it would avoid tuberculosis and chase bawdy street songs from their minds.¹⁵ Moreover, as children constantly repeated similar songs, the nationalist discourse of many of them would firmly lodge in their vocabulary, and the practice of collectivity through singing in harmony or in unison would become routine.

Boys and girls alike sang patriotic songs in their respective classrooms, but the content of explicitly patriotic songs often implied a male singer. Many songs would include a brave and soldierly character figuring as the 'I' in the story who protected the fatherland and would be willing to die for it (or for 'her', as it was expressed in some texts), thus encouraging boys to play-act as soldiers. However, the actual singing practices of boys in the classroom were less straight-forward than those of girls. Young pupils were all seen as 'natural' singers – singing was associated with childhood itself and, through their high-pitched voices, they aligned with the feminine, frivolous side of music. The male teachers in boy schools, on the other hand, were not expected to sing. Despite their presumed professionalism (as opposed to that of women teachers, whose voices were often seen as less strong and dependable), mature men were encouraged to use a violin rather than their voices to teach their pupils to sing.¹⁶ While little boys were assuming grown up masculine roles in their singing, they were not lead (or even joined) by an actual mature male voice.

Although patriotic songs could be interpreted as a bridge between learned knowledge of the country and the feeling of love for it – thus encouraging the leap from *petite patrie* to *grande patrie*, it is less clear how the leap from pre-citizen to full citizenship could be made. As Ian Biddle has suggested, the singing voice has but rarely been a modern male voice, despite the symbolic meaning of the virile voice for the nation.¹⁷ And indeed, in the classroom, on the political stage and possibly in the home, the sound of masculinity was one of either silence or of rational-authoritative speech. Boys' recurring singing practices seem to have been

important for an education into this non-musical civil identity, but songs of the classroom do not really show us how.

Re-enacting the nation on stage – regionalism, nationalism and grand performances

Outside the classroom, however, young boys did occasionally get a chance to hear – and even share a stage with – mature male voices. By the end of the nineteenth century, public performances of choral music by ad-hoc choirs had become ubiquitous. In the city of Antwerp, these performances were organized regularly for all sorts of celebrations. Their practical organization and their enormous number of participants depended mainly on the multiple links between the city's liberal (and mainly flamingant) mayor and aldermen, the city schools and the conservatory. The most recognizable and probably most important figure in this network was the aforementioned Peter Benoit. He headed the Antwerp Flemish school of music from 1867 onward and turned it into a Royal conservatory in 1898, created multiple compositions for choir and orchestra for celebrations such as the anniversary of Rubens and established a relation with the city schools. Pupils would be granted the opportunity to take music lessons at the conservatory during school hours, and the city council – which was responsible for the organization of public concerts – could count on the schools to provide young singers as well as mature ones (the teachers) for the performance of cantatas. Moreover, the school teachers would also organize rehearsals for different groups of singers, after which Benoit himself would conduct the actual performance.

Benoit was a pivotal figure in the tight-knit community of Antwerp politics, education and music – partly because of his increasing stature as a musician, but also because of his political leanings and involvement. His flamingant ideology, striving for the conservation of Flemish language and culture within the wider circle of a harmonious Belgium, Europe and – ultimately – the world, squared perfectly with the Antwerp elite's ideas on culture and the state. Moreover, he passed his musical legacy – together with much of his ideology – on to many students who would effectively become his successors. Composers like Jan Blockx, Lodewijk Mortelmans and Edward Keurvels form a recognizable school of artists who created very similar works: like Benoit, calling on the school population to perform their work, and often employing the same librettists who would spread similar messages of continuous 'flemish' cultural traditions and patriotism. Members of the city council also continued to take an active interest in music and pedagogy: they were present at the concerts, allowed

for continued collaboration between schools and conservatory and publicly expressed concern or interest for the teaching of music. In 1904, Antwerp mayor Jan Van Rijswijck addressed his city's school children with a speech appealing to what he seems to have considered a universal tendency of 'the people' to express itself through song. More particularly, he drew his audience's attention to 'the folksong, old as history itself'. 'For the people has always sung of joy or of misery', Van Rijswijck stated, immediately connecting this seemingly universal observation to local knowledge (referring to an Antwerp proverb that had the 'little pauper' singing of 'poverty and wealth'), and to a history of struggle and pain shared throughout the nation (suggesting the existence of a song of national martyrs).¹⁸ The folksong, it appears, was the self-evident binder between a nation and its inhabitants' emotions. It not only belonged to the people, but also to a long history that, paradoxically, made it seem timeless.

The cantatas and their performances, though represented as popular entertainment, were mainly a showcase for the interlocking communities of the city's elite. They provided a moment of popular education and spread a discourse that the composer, local politicians and pedagogues shared. As public *Gesamtkunstwerke*, using elaborate mise en scene, features of the city landscape and explicitly emotive music, they could be seen as ideal vehicles for the city council's liberal ideas on region, nation and citizenship. The composer's decisions regarding the distribution of vocal parts and orchestrations significantly influenced the effectiveness of the message, but the reproduction of a patriotic discourse as a fatherland consisting of a number of beloved *petites patries* was first and foremost the lyricists' responsibility. Poets like Jules De Geyter or Emmanuel Hiel were members of the same social and political circle as the composers, and attempted to create a Flemish literary tradition in which descriptions of the country's landscape, people, and language were interwoven.

Rather than the – now more well-known – highbrow literary products of people like Henry Conscience or Jan Frans Willems,¹⁹ these lyrics were consciously kept accessible: not only were they meant to be understood by their often very young singers, they were also supposed to be intoned by massive choirs in the open air. Their message and vocabulary were anything but subtle. Moreover, their content dovetailed with the songs schoolchildren were already familiar with. They contained descriptions of the country they were praising, stressing the beauty of its cities, the quality of its craftsmen, the virtue of its people and the bucolic sights and sounds of its countryside. Albert De Vleeshouwer's patriotic cantata 'Peace', for example, opens with a poetic impression of spring who 'conjures a shower

of flowers everywhere' and in which 'peace sparkles like gold over cities and land'.²⁰ The land in question is identified by two choirs, each focusing on one part of the country, but also on a different characteristic of the land. The girl choir starts off with a description of 'the hilly country of the Walloons, where the brook rises from the land'.²¹ The Walloon country is briefly described as a landscape with its own sounds and sights: 'the brook bounces and murmurs and sings through solemn woods and valleys'.²² In Flanders, as the boy choir intoned, it is not the 'brook' that sings, but rather the people. Living in a 'delightfully luxuriant garden' full of riches rather than among the stern pine-trees, the Flemish were to see their homestead as a 'land filled with song and pure enjoyment'.²³

If the assignment of the descriptions of Wallonia and Flanders to – respectively – girl and boy singers was probably random, the further development of the sung story is obviously deliberate: where the girl choir was to sing about domestic peace, the location of a 'wife with her progeny', the boys were urged to intone their part on the 'concord and power' that were symbolized by the flag *martiale ma largamente*, underscoring the gendered nature of the two definitions of peace by attaching each to a specific sound that is – later in the cantata – associated with ambient sounds.²⁴ The enforced peace sung by the boys was also 'brawled' by 'source and stream' and 'exulted' by 'wood and lake' while, according to the girl choir, peace is whispered, rather than cried out, by the firmament as a 'holy word'.²⁵ The bipolar organisation of the young singers by De Vleeshouwer – domestic, religious femininity intoned by soft voices and celebrating the whisper on the one hand and public, martial masculinity forcefully and loudly demanding peace on the other hand – is only dissolved at the very end of the cantata, when boys and girls exchange their phrases once and then join *tutta la forza* in a paean for the 'dear fatherland'.²⁶

The school cantatas by Jan Blockx and Peter Benoit, written for particularly young voices, show a similar scheme of gendered definitions of spaces, sounds and roles. Making girls sing about mothers and boys about fathers, both composers allotted boys and girls specific and very different places. In Benoit's cantata 'Into the world', the picturesque intro on the beauty of nature locates the girls in 'mother's little garden' and boys in 'father's orchard'.²⁷ How different these seemingly similar spaces were imagined becomes clear as the older boys and girls join in the chorus: in 'father's orchard', boys are ostensibly prepared to 'mow and sow', to 'sail the seas, free as eagles'.²⁸ The girls are, by contrast, destined to 'ornate' the potential men 'with happiness, at home' as their 'sisters, brides and wives'.²⁹ The young singers are thereby introduced to a

discourse they will repeat as their voices mature. In 'The Muse of History', the mixed choir was split for the patriotic chant at the very end of the cantata to allow women to 'sing men's praises' while the men sung their enjoyment of what 'flows from their lips'.³⁰ Even if 'mother's house' was associated with silence that was occasionally broken by 'father's word', girls nevertheless sang of 'mother's song', appealing to the audience's practiced ears that would recognize not only the femininity but also the youth of their voices.³¹ The dichotomy between female and male voices was often further complicated in the cantatas by role-assignments that suggested an association between the text sung and the singers' age. In most cases, more serious lines were left to 'maidens and lads' instead of the younger 'girls and boys', yet the gravity of a text could also be matched by a gravity of tone.³² In 'Flanders' grandeur', excerpts on the 'threat' to Flanders' riches and especially those on the buried heroes of the past were written for altos who were to evoke an air of sadness and maturity – as those who could look back upon the nation's combative past – with their voices.³³

In most cantatas, however, children's voices were staged as prefigurations of mature voices: girls and boys not only intoned their prospective identity as mothers and brides or fathers and heroes, but also their professional future. Edward Keurvels' 'Patriotic children's cantata' entitled 'High tide' presented a succession of groups – all staged as children of specific professional descent – ringing for the 'laurel wreath' that was promised in the cantata's introduction to 'band of the most noble sons' of the country.³⁴ Boys' voices were used as the sound of labour and battle, impersonating the 'artisans' sons', 'sailor boys' and 'soldier boys', while girls gave voice to the arts and farming, appearing as 'artists' children' and 'country-girls'.³⁵ Unlike the boys, who sang as one group for each of their roles, the girls were subdivided in a section of sopranos to sing about 'beauty', the undying 'highest grace' and a section of altos to exhort the 'sailor boys' to 'sing another tune'.³⁶ Whereas the sopranos acted as a kind of allegorical voice, acoustically impersonating beauty, the altos donned the acoustic garb of the farmer's wife, stressing not only the prefiguration of their own female voices, but also repeating the familiar discourse of the taciturn, 'crafty' and hardworking rural population of Flanders.³⁷ Rather than reflecting a simple, unified, nation, the cantatas presented a differentiated landscape populated with different groups whose gender, age, occupation and regional characteristics could easily be identified.

Many voiced unison – singers, singing practices and the image of unity

This composition of the performing ensemble for the cantatas departs from the more straightforward relations between song and citizenship that seem to have characterized the nineteenth century. On the one hand, choral singing has been interpreted as a producer of collectives, a way to symbolize and enact the togetherness of inhabitants of the nation (while excluding dissenting voices that did not belong to the civil community).³⁸ The male choir in particular has been acting as a shorthand for the voice of the nation – literally consisting of gathered citizens voicing patriotism with similar timbres. On the other hand, the (male) heroic soloist has represented the individual, independent character of modern citizenship. In the Belgian case, François Van Campenhout, the tenor famous for performing the national hymn right after the revolution, is perhaps the most salient example.³⁹ In the cantatas, however, both collectives and individuals were vocally present to intone a discourse of patriotism, and the idea of singing in unison as a way to forge the national collective became much more complicated, as different groups of singers embodied different modes of belonging to the nation – and even modes of belonging to different nations.

The careful use of different voices, unison, solos and polyphony complicates our understanding of nineteenth-century patriotism and citizenship, showing that belonging to the nation could take other forms than participation in politics or even the state's institutions. It also betrays the ambiguous nature of (male) citizenship itself, asserting its individual and independent qualities while also insisting on shared traditions and characteristics of belonging to a homogenous group. This practice aligned with what choirs and schools did with other patriotic songs as well: although composers of patriotic songs wrote a number of solo works for tenor or baritone voices that clearly suggested an identification of the singer as one, autonomous citizen, groups of men or boys would also sing these songs collectively and in unison. In song anthologies this possibility was sometimes suggested by the compiler.⁴⁰ It seems that individuality could be performed collectively – especially by groups that were supposedly in the process of acquiring (rather than already in possession of) the duties, privileges and most importantly the qualities and habits of the modern citizen (i.e. boys, young soldiers and labourers).⁴¹

These practices further underlined the absence of the individual male singing voice as well, and strengthened the notion that the citizen could be acoustically represented through song, but could not sing – unless singing

was his profession.⁴² Interestingly, even though male singers were part of the performances of public cantatas, the most visible representations of actual active citizenship were located off-stage: the middle classes were visibly present (and distinguishable from the people), and above all local politicians and dignitaries were there to perform the act of ‘representing’ the nation publicly. Offsetting the sounds of music and celebration, these privileged citizens were eerily silent, acting as detached witnesses to the spectacle. Even if their voices often played a role in public celebrations – most notably by making speeches – their words were later represented as discourse, not as sound. A booklet documenting the celebration of the national day (*Vaderlandschfeest*), published by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1905, detailed the roles played by local and national officials during these celebrations.⁴³ Representatives of the government, the army, the city council, the royal family and a delegation of labourers were described as visible and present. Their acts of speaking were mentioned but garnered no more attention. The production of patriotic sounds was left to the multitude, an entity that had been allotted an important role in the cantata composed by Jan Blockx on this occasion, and that was given voice by a large choir of Antwerp singers that travelled to Brussels for the day.⁴⁴ Rather than creating a soundscape with the ambient sounds of the nation’s nature or topography, Blockx’s cantata presented an acoustic rendition of the nation as people, consisting of men, women and children, the genius of the fatherland and an undefined but important ‘foule’.⁴⁵

In other cantatas, the mass of choral singers was anything but homogenous, however. For the performance of Benoit’s ‘Muse of History’ in Antwerp in 1880, the organizing committee boasted the participation of 1500 performers, among which were not only the young pupils of the city schools who were to impersonate the ‘Muse’, but also delegations of singers of the different provinces of the country. Each of these groups had its own *moment de gloire* when they sang ‘their’ verse, describing their home region. The strict separation of voices, not only along lines of gender and age, but also of location, cement the notion that these cantatas were indeed envisioned as soundscapes in which the sound of a particular region could not only be described through musical and textual motives, but was also inherent to the voices of its inhabitants.