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BOY'S CHOIR

A Research Paper
Presented to
Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors 491

by
Shelby Earl Cowling
May 1968

BOYS' CHOIR

I. History of Choir Schools

- A. Started first in London, England, c. 1000 A.D.
- B. Schola Cantorum
- C. Boys' Choir in England c. 1415
- D. Boys' Choir in Warwick, Germany c. 1415
- E. Seangerknaben in Austria c. 1498
 - 1. Founded by Maximilian I
 - 2. Privileges of Seangerknaben
- F. Tudor and Elizabethan England
 - 1. Sang anthems
 - 2. Utilized for counter-tenor or "contralto" part
- G. Sang Handel's Messiah
- H. Composers who came from boys' choirs

II. The Choir School in America

- A. No choral masters accompany first settlers
- B. C. 1700 Father Sebastain Role trained young boys for choir
- C. Question as to actual choir schools
 - 1. Trinity Church, New York, c. 1709
 - 2. St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia, c. 1764
- D. Boys' Choir at St. Michael's, Charleston, South Carolina
 - 1. Dr. Henry Purcell and Samuel Rodgers founders
 - 2. Started from an orphanage

- E. C. 1870 St. Paul's Parish of Baltimore
 - 1. Gave scholarships
 - 2. Director, J.S.B. Hodges
- F. 1894 Grace Church, New York
- G. 1905 St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia
 - 1. Reorganized music ministry
 - 2. Daytime school
- H. Washington Cathedral
 - 1. 1909, day school
 - 2. Scholarships today at St. Alban's School
- I. 1919 St. Thomas Church, New York
- J. St. Mary's Church in Chicago
 - 1. Father Finn
 - 2. His transfer to New York
- K. Professional Boys' Choirs
 - 1. Arizona Boys' Choir
 - 2. Mexican Boys' Choir
 - 3. Columbus Boys' Choir
 - 4. Apollo Choir

III. Texas Boys' Choir

- A. Organized in 1946 in Denton, Texas
- B. Moved to Fort Worth, Texas
- C. In 1952 the Fort Worth Boys' Choir Foundation incorporated in Austin to subsidize Choir

D. Perform most

1. Gregorian chant
2. Elizabethan madrigals
3. American folk songs

E. Works commissioned for choir

1. Stabat Mater
2. Modern Texas Round-up

F. Performances since founding

1. Seven hundred major concerts
2. Traveled throughout United States, Mexico, and Europe
3. On radio and television
4. Holland
5. Wales
6. Cathedrals in Rome and London

Young boys first were trained for choir singing at a time when women were banned from participation in sacred services. "Actually, the first singing school for boys was founded in London, England, c. 1000 AD"¹ Soon other choir schools were started. Rome, Italy, soon became the headquarters for these establishments. During the residence of the Popes at Avignon from 1309 to 1377, Flemish singers were introduced into the choir of the Pope, the Schola Cantorum. For the next two centuries most of the choristers were recruited from Flanders.

In Catholic England c. 1415 the choir boys performed Gregorian chant high in the alcoves of the cathedrals. Also they often combined with adult male voices in the observance of religious rites.

The provision and discipline for the boys were sometimes harsh. The members of a boys' choir in Warwick, Germany, in c. 1415 were allowed two pounds annually for food and clothes and were flogged when they disobeyed the choirmaster or were absent from rehearsal.

"In 1498 a Seangerknaben, or Singing Boys organization, was founded by Austria's Maximilian I."² A dozen boys were

¹George Bragg, "The Boys' Choir Then and Now," Music Journal, XXI (May, 1963), 31.

²Ibid.

engaged for a single daily Mass. They were lodged under the care of a Choirmaster. This choir was patterned after Flemish models of this time and became known as the Vienna Boys' Choir. In a time filled with peril for ordinary citizens, these Seangerknaben enjoyed very special privileges. The Emperor himself ordered that they receive a daily loaf of bread, three roasts during the week, soup every morning, and a pint and a half of wine at each meal. They were given six shirts a year, three pairs of trousers, two jackets, and a new pair of shoes each month. For these clothing articles they just had to sign a receipt. When their voices changed they were sent home or to a Jesuit college at the Emperor's expense.

In Tudor and Elizabethan England many anthems written for four and five part male chorus appeared in lower staves than their modern editions. The upper voices were normally assigned to the boys. While the soprano part was appropriate for unchanged male voices, the alto was probably too low: it was the approximate range of a modern female contralto. Perhaps the adolescent youths were utilized in this case. "The boys' changing voices probably had adequate ranges for this part and fulfilled the demands of composers such as Weelkes and Morley."³

³Ibid., p. 56.

A boys' choir was utilized in the first performance of Handel's Messiah in Dublin in 1742. Presumably one of its soloists first performed "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

From the boys' choirs of England, Germany, and Austria have come many famous composers. In England the alumni of boys' choirs include William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons, Henry Purcell, Sir Arthur Sullivan, and Sir William Walton. In Austria Schubert and Bruckner were members of the Seangerknaben, and Mozart once served as "house composer" for it.

The story of the choir school in America remains yet to be fully investigated. Although churchmen accompanied the explorers to America, there is no evidence to suggest the performance of choral music of trained choristers until c. 1700. "The first mention of any choral training that could be construed to be a choir school is the vested choir of forty young Abnakes trained by Father Sebastean Role for his chapel at Norridgewuck about 1700."⁴

Early references to church choirs made up of boys leave some question as to whether or not they were the products of choir schools. A charity school for boys founded by Trinity Church, New York, in 1709 and the choir of children mentioned in the minutes of St. Peter's Church in Philadelphia in 1764 are examples of early references to children's

⁴Lindern J. Lundstrom, The Choir School (Minnneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1957), p. 31.

singing. But this is not considered evidence of established choir schools.

At St. Michael's, Charleston, South Carolina, Reverend Dr. Henry Purcell and Samuel Rodgers, who had been trained in the English cathedral tradition, took advantage of a municipal orphanage in 1791 to develop a boys' choir. William Augustus Muhlenberg organized a boys' choir at the Flushing Institute on Long Island in 1828.

St. Paul's Parish of Baltimore organized a choir school in 1870 under the direction of Reverend J. S. B. Hodges. "Scholarships were given in the school which adequately financed the musical training of the choir boys."⁵ In 1894 Grace Church, New York, started its choir school. In Philadelphia, St. Peter's church reorganized its music ministry in 1905 to provide for a choir school with daytime accommodations for fifty boys. Washington Cathedral established its choir school in 1909. Today the thirty boys in the Cathedral Choir are on scholarship at St. Alban's School for Boys.

The choir school of St. Thomas Church, New York, was founded as a result of an appeal for the inauguration of a school to train choristers. It was founded in 1919 by Charles H. Steele, financier.

⁵Ibid. p. 32.

It is interesting to note that:

Voice training, music reading, ear training, tone production, and the rudiments of music, plus the learning of the soprano parts of the church music to be performed constitute the musical education offered by the school. Compositions of Byrd, Tallis, Palestrina, Morales, Purcell, Vaughn Williams, Britten, Holst, Noble, Bach, and Handel, plus plain song in Latin are learned, in addition to many secular compositions for public appearances.⁶

Reverend William J. Finn, founder of the Paulist Choir School at Old St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Chicago in 1904, visited most of the famous choir schools of Europe in search of forgotten secrets of training techniques. When he returned to his boys, he soon developed one of the finest choirs in the world. His transfer to New York resulted in the organizing of a choir school in an abandoned mansion, which he hoped would become a national institution within his church. After a hopeless struggle against financial difficulties, he was forced to abandon the project. But his ideas of vocal training have been followed by choir masters all over America.

In recent years professional boys' choirs have been organized unaffiliated with the church. Some of these are the Appollo Choir, the Arizona Boys' Chorus, the Mexican Boys' Choir, and the Columbus Boys' Choir.

⁶Ibid. p. 33.

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A very recent boys' choir that was organized is the Texas Boys' Choir. "In 1946 George Bragg organized a boys' choir in Denton, Texas."⁷ It was called the Denton Civic Boys' Choir and became a popular feature of community life. The Choir became well known throughout the area and soon two busloads of boys came over twice a week from Fort Worth to join the choir.

As a result, a citizen's committee from Fort Worth asked Bragg to transfer his headquarters to Fort Worth, where he was guaranteed funds for two years for the cost of operating the choir. Here it became known as the Texas Boys' Choir.

Since 1952 the Fort Worth Boys' Choir Foundation has raised the money needed annually to subsidize the choir and the year-round school where the choir boys are trained both musically and academically.

The Texas Boys' Choir has performed works from Gregorian chant and Elizabethan madrigals to homespun American folk songs. The Choir has been responsible for the additions of several notable compositions to the boys' choir repertoire. Local composers have been commissioned to write compositions for this choir. Among the composers commissioned

⁷Bragg, op. cit., p. 57.

was the late Ernst von Dohnany who composed Stabat Mater. Paul Peck composed Modern Texas Round-up especially for the Choir's New York debut at Town Hall in 1961.

In the seventeen years that have elapsed since the founding of the Texas Boys' Choir, this Choir has had more than seven hundred major concert engagements. The Choir has traveled more than fifty thousand miles throughout the United States, Mexico, and Europe. The Texas Boys' Choir has participated in performances on network radio and television shows and in recordings for the Decca Gold Label. The Choir has performed in the Festival of Holland, sung High Mass at St. Peter's in Rome and Westminster Abbey in London, and performed in Wales' Eisteddfod where they topped the leading choral choirs from all parts of the world.

Perhaps not a single one of the one hundred fifty youngsters comprising the basic Texas Boys' Choir, from which the concert is chosen, will go on to make music his life work. But the time he has spent with great music of the past and present has provided discipline and preparation for adult life. The choir training also develops the spirit side of a person at an early age.⁸

Boys' choirs have a long and rich heritage. Today more than ever are the potentialities of a choir of unchanged boys' voices being realized and developed.

⁸Ibid.

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