

Chapter 1

Introduction: Choral Conducting in Context

The single element that most affects the eventual sound quality of a chorus in performance ... is the actual conducting technique or physical movements of the conductor.¹

With these words, Abraham Kaplan summarizes a truism in choral practice: that the director should look like he or she wants the choir to sound. The character of the conductor's physical demeanour is believed to have a direct effect on how the choir sings, at a level that appears to be largely unconscious and involuntary. This effect encompasses not only deliberate conducting choices, but also habitual elements such as stance and mannerism.

It is also a matter of simple observation that different choral traditions exhibit not only different styles of vocal production and delivery, but also different gestural vocabularies. These are shared not only between conductors within that tradition, but also, to varying degrees, with the singers, and indeed the audiences. It is as possible to distinguish a gospel choir from a barbershop chorus or a cathedral choir by visual cues alone as it is simply by listening. John Blacking's category of 'sound groups' would thus appear also to be one of movement, or stance groups.²

There has been, however, little attempt to explain the nature of these forms of physical communication. Do they belong to a pre-cultural realm of primate social bonding, or do they rely on the context and conventions of a particular choral culture? Is kinaesthetic experience and body language an inherent part of musical performance styles, or does it come afterwards, in response to music? At a practical level, does one understand the music differently if one has or has not mastered the idiom's characteristic ways of using the self?

This book presents the outcomes of a long-term project that has explored these questions. The questions are simultaneously theoretical (in what ways is musical style stored in our bodily experiences, and how does it then relate to our sense of self?) and practical (how does one conduct a choir, especially in stylistic contexts that may feel 'foreign'?). It has examined the praxis of a variety of choral traditions, and has investigated the relationship between conductor demeanour and choral sound in general, and the ways it is constructed within the stylistic constraints of specific idioms. Its findings will be of interest both to those engaged in the study

¹ Abraham Kaplan, *Choral Conducting* (New York, 1985), p. 18.

² John Blacking, 'Music, Culture, and Experience', *Music, Culture and Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking* ed. by Reginald Byron (Chicago and London, 1995), p. 232.

of music as a cultural practice and to practitioners involved in a choral conducting context that increasingly demands fluency in a variety of styles.

My central thesis is that the gestural languages of choral conducting, and their choirs' associated body languages and styles of vocal production, are integral to the way that musicians understand both the music they perform and – as a consequence – their own identities as performing musicians. My aim has therefore been to examine the ways in which choral practitioners inhabit the repertoires they perform (and vice versa) in order to analyse the processes by which people constitute themselves as choral conductors and singers. The pages that follow both theorize the relationship between musical style, social meanings and the performative construction of identity in choral performance, and draw practical conclusions regarding the transferability of good practice in choral conducting between different musical idioms.

Hence, this book lies at the intersection of two well-developed, but hitherto largely distinct disciplinary worlds in the study of music: critical musicology and choral practice. Members of each constituency might reasonably ask what is to be gained from their combination.

Critical musicology is accustomed to imagining the voice as a site where social processes and individual identity meet most intimately. The voice is singular and unique, to the extent that it acts as a standard image for originality and agency of thought throughout the arts and humanities: we talk of the poet's voice, or the composer's. At the same time it is generic, formed by forces beyond the control of the individual, whether those of nature (lungs, larynx, resonant cavities) or of nurture (language acquisition, gender roles, conventions of expression). The ideological, aesthetic, and – increasingly – technological contexts in which vocalicity is constructed have consequently been investigated in a plethora of idioms from bel canto to extended vocal techniques, from crooning to cock-rock.³ The majority of this work, however, has focused on the singer as soloist; ensemble singing has received far less attention.

There are several reasons why it is valuable to critical musicology to redress this soloistic bias. First, the study of choral music presents interesting theoretical questions about the relationship between individual and corporate identities, between the personal and the supra-personal. The practical experience that choral practitioners have in melding disparate voices into a unified ensemble can usefully inform critical musicology's investigations into the role of musical participation in the 'project of the self'.⁴ Related to this, it moves the focus away from the exceptional voice towards the 'typical'. While it is undoubtedly important to understand the passion that a diva, a torch singer or a rock star arouses in their

³ See for example Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones (eds), *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge, 1994) and Mary Ann Smart (ed.), *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton, 2001).

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991).

devotees, it is also important to understand how the 'ordinary' singer might experience their own voice. Choral singing (however broadly or narrowly one defines this) involves many more people in the act of musical performance than solo genres, and as such arguably represents a more fertile ground for the production of socio-musical meanings.

The widespread nature of the activity also gives it significance in its own right: many people experience choral singing as an integral part of their week-to-week lived experience. In particular, many choral organizations are deeply concerned with questions of social inclusivity, whether from an educational perspective, through the agenda of funding bodies, or simply from the pragmatics of recruiting and retaining choir members in an era of falling participation in organized leisure.⁵ Contemporary choral music thus fulfils several of the theoretical interests that helped define critical musicology as a self-aware discipline: the concern with democratic, not just elite, musics; an interest in the cultural politics of classical music; and the desire to operate as an 'epic' theory, that is, a theory that addresses crises in the world, not just in theory.⁶

This in turn suggests where critical musicology can be of service to choral culture. In recent years choral singing has embraced an increasingly varied range of musical idioms and their associated cultural practices. The growth of international organizations and festivals has promoted an awareness of different national traditions, while national organizations have increased the contact between choral groups from a variety of different performing traditions within individual localities. These developments have produced much that is both artistically exciting and educationally enriching, opening up possibilities for the expansion of musical horizons and development of community ties in what is primarily an amateur art form.

Differences in approach, however, have also sometimes emerged as conflicts of taste and mutual misunderstanding that serve as barriers within the wider choral community. Indeed, there sometimes seems to be a greater continuity of approach and understanding between choral groups of different nationalities that share a common repertoire than between geographically close choirs performing in different styles. When these misunderstandings occur between a choir accustomed

⁵ The concern for social inclusivity manifests in the range of projects and organizational initiatives aimed at enhancing the participation of specific social groups; see for example the range of Repertoire and Standards Committees supported by the American Choral Directors Association (details available online at <http://acdaonline.org/R&S/> [accessed 1 December 2006]). Robert Putnam documents changing patterns in participative leisure in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2001).

⁶ The idea of an epic theory comes from Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); see also Liz Garnett, 'Musical Meaning Revisited: Thoughts on an "Epic" Critical Musicology', *Critical Musicology Journal* (1998), available online at http://www.leeds.ac.uk/music/Info/CMJ/Index/author.html#garnett_1.html [accessed 12 March 2008].

to performing in one idiom and a director that does not directly share this musical background, or a student director whose experience is in one idiom and a teacher with experience in another, the results can be unhappy for all concerned. The dilemma a performer faces when instructed to do something as a matter of 'good practice' that disconnects them from their experiential relationship with musical content needs handling with sensitivity. Critical musicology offers theoretical tools to analyse the nature and significance of both overlap and difference in performance practices and their associated meanings, and hence help individuals and ensembles involved in choral performance find their way through this stylistic pluralism. Negotiating between nature and nurture is a theoretical mainstay of the critical musicology project, as well as a constant practical challenge for the choral practitioner. Bringing the two together promises useful insights in both directions.

Contexts 1: Bodies of Knowledge

Within these broad disciplinary boundaries there are four specific bodies of knowledge that this study draws upon and to which it aspires to contribute. These are: theories of music and identity, with particular reference to voice; performance studies in music; the choral conducting literature itself; and theories of nonverbal communication.

Music and Identity; Voice and Identity

Music and its relationship with identity has been a central theme in the critical musicology project, not least because it was an interest shared by several of the subject areas whose interaction fed the growth of the 'new' musicology of the 1990s. Popular music studies, ethnomusicology, music and gender studies, and music psychology all shared a belief that traditional musicology's almost exclusive focus on the Western art music composer and 'his' (it was usually assumed) works took an unduly limited view of music's interest and importance in people's daily lives. What does music mean to us? Why and how do different people choose to align themselves with different types of music? In what ways is music integral to who we think we are? These were questions that all these disparate subject areas were asking in one form or another.

This heterogeneous origin has produced a literature that is vibrant and stimulating, but which also contains a potentially bewildering range of theoretical models and approaches to research method. Popular music studies started off in sociology departments in the days before they found favour in musicology, while ethnomusicology drew on the methods of anthropology. Music and gender studies drew on a range of feminist and literary/critical theories, while music psychology's disciplinary antecedents were visible in its more empirical approach. Music and identity as a subject area cuts across traditional lines not only between university

departments but even faculties: it can sit not only in the arts or the humanities, but also the social sciences. It is something of a pleasant surprise, therefore, that it presents as coherent and stable a literature as it does.

Raymond MacDonald, David Hargreaves and Dorothy Miell, while writing from a music psychology perspective, make some useful points that generalize well across other approaches. First, they point out that theories of identity have moved away from the idea of the self as the stable core or essence of an individual towards a conception of identity as much more fluid and emergent. They describe the self as ‘something which is constantly being reconstructed and renegotiated according to the experiences, situations and other people with whom we interact in everyday life’.⁷ They attribute this shift to the rapid changes in peoples’ lifestyles that accompany globalization and technological change, and indeed it may be that the dislocations of modern life bring to our attention how much psychological effort the individual needs to invest in order to maintain a sense of personal continuity. However, it is also worth pointing out this change has its theoretical origins in the work of critical and literary theorists from the 1960s onwards. The idea of a ‘decentred’ subject – that is, one that assembles him or herself from available cultural discourses rather than consisting of a central nucleus that pre-exists its encounter with culture – appears in various forms in the writings of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva and Foucault. It has subsequently infiltrated concepts of identity across many disciplines, including, of course, music.⁸

MacDonald et al. also make the distinction between identities in music, by which they mean aspects of identities defined, or at least shaped, by musical activities, and music in identities, by which they mean the ways that music acts as one of the resources people use to create their definitions of self. The first category relates more closely to the ethnomusicological tradition, with its interest in a culture’s practising musicians and their cultural roles, while the second recalls the sociological interest popular music studies has taken in fandom and affiliation. The current study suggests that, useful as the distinction is, the two aspects cannot fully be separated: in Part II I shall discuss how the identity of ‘choral singer’ is crafted in terms that reference both ‘purely’ musical processes and wider social categories. That is, the identity in music is forged, at least in part, by reference to music in identity.

The foundational text in the study of voice and identity is Roland Barthes’ 1972 essay ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in which he theorizes the indescribable but uniquely identifiable ‘grain’ of a voice as a result of the intersection between the

⁷ Raymond MacDonald, David Hargreaves and Dorothy Miell (eds), *Musical Identities* (Oxford, 2002), p. 2.

⁸ See for example Kevin Kopelson, *Beethoven’s Kiss: Pianism, Perversion and the Mastery of Desire* (Stanford, 1996) and Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley, 2005).

individual singing body and the culture-bound language it sings.⁹ Barthes develops his argument by comparing two singers, Fischer-Dieskau and Panzéra, and much of the literature that has followed in his footsteps likewise evinces a fascination with individual, distinctive voices. Martha Mockus, for instance, takes the ‘power, range, and depth’ of k.d. lang’s voice as her starting point, while Edward Baron Turk explores the reception of Jeanette MacDonald’s voice in a series of film operettas from the late 1930s.¹⁰ Other writers explore the encounter between culture and individual by focusing on the deeply personal response listeners can experience to certain voice types. For example, Elizabeth Wood identifies a voice type she calls ‘Sapphonic’ in the singers with whom Ethel Smyth worked as an opera composer, and discusses the specific meanings this mode of singing accrued within a lesbian aesthetic in early-twentieth-century Britain. Michel Poizat, meanwhile, explores the transcendent experiences reported by opera fans in response in particular to the soprano voice.¹¹

John Potter’s *Vocal Authority* takes a much broader purview than these case-study approaches, and undertakes an explicitly ideological analysis of voice production over the history of Western art music.¹² His starting-point is to question the very different uses of the voice mandated by classical and popular singing styles that he had found himself negotiating as a professional singer. From this he develops a narrative of the history of vocal music driven by a dialectic between a populist urge to communicate text intelligibly and an elitist tendency to privilege the voice as sound-object. His analyses of ideological processes that shape vocal production are incisive and original, but there is a tendency to posit a kind of Marxian vocal ‘false consciousness’, whereby the voice’s ‘natural’ state is distorted by the workings of cultural politics. Popular vocal styles are just as culturally constructed as classical ones, after all, if generally less expensive to acquire. Notwithstanding these reservations, the current study (particularly Part II) shares much of Potter’s critical perspective. Indeed, if the ambitious scope of Potter’s work both establishes its status as a key text and represents its most significant weakness, then more focused studies such as this will inevitably read as both amplification and critique.

⁹ Roland Barthes, (1977), ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London, 1977).

¹⁰ Martha Mockus, (1993), ‘Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang’, in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (eds), *Queering the Pitch: The New Lesbian and Gay Musicology* (New York, 1994); Edward Baron Turk, ‘Deriding the Voice of Jeanette MacDonald: Notes on Psychoanalysis and the American Film Musical,’ in Dunn and Jones.

¹¹ Michel Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. by Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1992).

¹² John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1998).

Performance Studies

The area of performance studies can be seen as part of the critical musicology project in that it developed in part as a critique of academic music's prior focus on the composer and the work. Indeed, it is rather surprising how recently performance studies has emerged; for instance, it had its first dedicated session at the American Musicological Society Conference only in 1995.

Of course, musical performance has been studied in the academy since music training first moved from an apprenticeship to an institutional model, but this study traditionally operated within clear boundaries of activity and authority. Musical performance was studied almost exclusively as a practical activity, in which the aim was accurately to reproduce the work according to the composer's intentions. Any scholarship surrounding performance was focused on questions of technique, pedagogy or interpretation in service of this aim. The appropriate object for the academic study of music, meanwhile, remained the composer.

The single most significant development for the growth of performance studies was simply a decision to take seriously what practitioners do. Rather than assuming that the full meaning and artistic significance of the musical work was imparted by the composer, with the performer's role merely to transmit these meanings to the listener, scholars started to examine what performers themselves did as artistically autonomous beings. Instead of asking what a particular analysis of a work could tell a performer about how to play it, people started asking what particular performances can tell us about how to analyse a work.¹³

This shift of perspective was facilitated in several ways by technological change. First, by the 1990s, there was the best part of a century's worth of recordings available for study. While the exact status of recordings as documents and their relationship with live performance is subject to debate, this historical breadth permitted the comparison of stylistic traits across time in a way that had previously only been possible with textual sources. Robert Philip's *Early Performance and Musical Style* of 1992 was the groundbreaking text that demonstrated how the use of a host of orchestral performance devices – rubato, vibrato, portamento – that would nowadays be considered vulgar or self-indulgent were at one time mainstays of expressive performance.¹⁴

Philip's study was the formal outcome of work in the National Sound Archives that had started in the 1960s, and had produced many radio broadcasts en route. It was digital recording technology, however, that facilitated the dissemination and emulation of its insights. The reprocessing and reissue of old recordings on compact disc made the performance styles about which Philip wrote much more

¹³ See for instance Nicholas Cook, 'Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis', in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford, 1999); and John Rink (ed.), *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (Cambridge 1995).

¹⁴ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Musical Performance, 1900–1950* (Cambridge, 1992).

accessible to other scholars and their students, and thus permitted the growth of performance studies outside of specialist archives, and its infiltration into university and conservatoire curricula.

The other significant way in which technology assisted the development of performance studies was in the empirical study of performance. Whereas performance pedagogy had traditionally specified what performers *should* do, the increase in computer memory and processing power by the 1990s meant that it was now possible to measure what in fact they *did* do. Tempo variation, loudness, tuning and tone colour could all be measured, both from recordings and in the laboratory. The elements of music that lie ‘between the notes’ had previously been relegated to the margins of academic study as overly ‘subjective’ compared to the solidly verifiable elements of notation; when technology made these details available for study, the qualitative became quantifiable.¹⁵

I will discuss this study’s relationship with empirical methods in more detail in Part I; for now, it suffices to note that the ethos of performance studies lies at the heart of this book. My central thesis sees performing individuals as integral to the construction and transmission of musical meanings, and my focus will be on these individuals almost to the exclusion of the composer’s text. I will also be exploring the gap between what theorists recommend and what practitioners actually do, and will be doing so without making a priori assumptions about which is most likely to be ‘right’. For while there are few conductors who would lay claim to flawless technique, there is also much that conductors do very effectively that nonetheless appears to contradict theory, or is simply not documented. By making these practices visible, then, this study recognizes the work of those who keep choral traditions alive, as well as giving them a sense of perspective on each other’s praxis.

The Choral Conducting Literature

The distinction between pedagogical and empirical approaches noted in performance studies is also very clear within the choral conducting literature itself. This study has a somewhat different relationship with this body of knowledge from those discussed above, in that the choral conducting literature represents both a principal disciplinary context to which this book aims to contribute and a significant primary source. That is, the distinction that scholarly writing traditionally makes between ‘literature review’ and ‘data analysis’ becomes very blurred when the people for whom and about whom one is writing are substantially the same. I will discuss the ethical and epistemological issues this raises in more detail in my discussion of peer research in Part I; here I will simply outline what the choral conducting literature comprises and how I will use it in this book.

¹⁵ See for example Peter Johnson, “‘Expressive Intonation’ in String Performance: Problems of Analysis and Interpretation’ in Jane Davidson (ed.), *The Music Practitioner: Research for the Music Performer, Teacher and Listener* (Aldershot, 2004).

The pedagogical literature I draw on consists of texts for the instruction of choral conductors published in Britain and the United States between 1914 and 2004. Some (primarily American) are intended for use in structured courses in choral conducting and/or by those intending to pursue choral conducting as a career; others (both British and American) are aimed at the aspiring amateur. Virtually all, though, are written by practitioners and strongly reflect their authors' personal experience as choral conductors; consequently, I refer to this body of work as the practitioner literature.

These texts both draw upon and constitute a complex and constantly renegotiated discourse that shapes cultural practice. They are the discursive flotsam left behind by a century of music-making in two countries, and they give us vivid pictures of their authors' practical experiences, and the frameworks of value in which these occurred. At the same time, the texts are claiming the power to shape their readers' activities and their beliefs about their activities in ways that will directly impact upon the lived experience of the singers those readers direct. It is notable that the intertextual relationships within this literature are strongly mediated by praxis; authors are in general far more likely to refer to another conductor's or choir's good practice to support their recommendations than they are to another writer's book. Practitioners are the primary storage device for this discourse, and the literature is commensurately personal and practical.¹⁶

The empirical literature is much more recent, and much more firmly based in the academy. It is strongly linked to American university departments that run DMA programmes in choral conducting, and is often published in education journals, although the development of specialist journals since the turn of the millennium attests to the growth of this area as a discipline in its own right. The empirical literature both critiques and draws upon the practitioner literature. Its primary rationale is that the practitioner literature is unscholarly in its reliance on anecdote and uncorroborated experience; consequently common themes found within the practitioner literature provide many of its hypotheses for testing. I shall discuss in Part I the merits of this critique, and the implications of the methods chosen to produce the desired intellectual rigour.

The empirical literature thus represents a change in attitude as to what constitutes reliable knowledge: the scientifically demonstrable becomes valued above the

¹⁶ Hence, in 1975 Darrow notes that a 1959 article classifies articulation styles into legato, marcato and staccato; this classification also appears in 1970 and 1996 in books by Garretson and Jordan respectively, and is developed in 2002 by Neuen. This classification probably first appeared in print in 1950 in Max Rudolf's book on orchestral conducting, but in all of these cases except Darrow, there is no reference to any literary provenance. See Gerald Darrow, *Four Decades of Choral Training* (Metuchen, 1975), p. 152; Robert Garretson, *Conducting Choral Music*, 3rd edn (Boston, 1970), p. 24; James Jordan, *Evoking Sound: Fundamentals of Choral Conducting and Rehearsing* (Chicago, 1996), p. 119; Donald Neuen, *Choral Concepts: A Text for Conductors* (Belmont, 2002), p. 224; and Max Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting*, 3rd edn (New York, 1995).

merely expert. It does not, however, represent a shift in what this knowledge aims to achieve. Like traditional instruction manuals, most empirical studies in choral conducting seek to identify what is effective in order that practitioners might change what they do for the better. That is, despite the adoption of very different methods and modes of discourse, these studies remain primarily pedagogical in intent. This contrasts with the empirical work in performance studies discussed above, which explicitly refused to assume that the theorist is entitled to instruct the practitioner.

For this study, the practitioner literature provides a significant source of evidence for how choral conductors understand what they do, and I use this evidence in several ways. First, like the empirical studies in choral conducting, I use practitioner texts to document the rationale for my central questions. While any one writer may be deemed anecdotal in approach, together they demonstrate a broad community of understanding. Second, I use this shared understanding to test methods and theories applied to the study of choral conducting, both by myself and others. Hence my critique of empirical approaches to conducting in Part I is based on the way they rely on marginalizing elements that practitioners value most highly. The criterion by which I select theories of nonverbal communication to discuss in Part IV is likewise whether they explain practitioners' experiences. Third, I analyse the practitioners' discourse for evidence of the musical and cultural values that inform and shape their practice; the practitioner texts accordingly provide much of the primary source material for my discussion of enculturation in Part II.

Nonverbal Communication Studies

Conducting, as many writers on the subject contend, is a form of nonverbal communication. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the extensive literature in nonverbal communication studies is not referenced more widely in studies of conducting. This is the final major body of knowledge to inform this book, and it is both the most obvious and – in its manifestations to date – the least musical.

Nonverbal communication studies is an interdisciplinary field which brings together aspects of anthropology, neuropsychology and semiotics, although its primary disciplinary home is in social psychology. It embraces a range of areas of enquiry, including the study of body language (gesture, stance, mannerism); of facial expression, particularly in relation to emotional state; of how people interact physically in social situations; and the non-linguistic elements of speech (tone, inflection, speed).¹⁷ It thus shares a number of questions of both theory and method with the study of conducting.

¹⁷ For general overviews of the field, see Michael Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 2nd edn (London, 1988), and Mark Knapp and Judith Hall, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, 5th edn (London, 2002).

Key theoretical questions surround the nature and function of gesture and body language. To what extent are gestures part of a shared cultural vocabulary, and to what extent are they idiosyncratic to the individual? Is body language expressive or communicative? That is, to what extent do gestures and facial expressions reflect a person's interior state, and to what extent are they a means to convey information? What relationship does gesture have to thought? Is it a descriptive gloss to aid communication, or does it participate in the formulation of ideas?¹⁸ Gesture studies has a well-developed theoretical framework within which to address these questions, including a collection of systems by which to classify gestures according to the degree to which they are conventionalized and their relative dependence on or independence from verbal content.¹⁹

This work, though, has been developed almost exclusively in the context of spoken language. Musical systems of gesture, such as conducting and solfège, rarely feature among the case studies in this literature, which include such otherwise varied examples as American Sign Language, theatre studies and primatology. And some of the most significant theoretical developments in gesture studies, such as David McNeill's concept of the 'growth point' – the moment at which a thought is formulated – see language and gesture as so intimately related that one could hardly exist without the other.²⁰ In this context, simply applying the pre-existent theories from nonverbal communication studies to conducting is easier said than done. Still, there is a growing interest in gesture theory among musicologists (if relatively little in conducting studies itself), and the explanatory possibilities are rich enough that it is worth teasing out how gesture studies' answers to the common questions outlined above might illuminate what goes on in the choral rehearsal. Indeed, a subsidiary aim of this project is to offer back to theorists of nonverbal communication some insight as to how effectively their models work with regard to musical discourses.

Nonverbal communication studies also grapples with similar questions of method to those that face the researcher in conducting. These include, first, questions of how to capture details of the behaviours to be studied: whether to set up situations in which the behaviours will unfold, or whether to go out and observe the behaviours occurring in daily life. Second, there are the questions of documentation: how best to record or describe the behaviours, particularly

¹⁸ These issues are explored in Adam Kendon, 'An Agenda for Gesture Studies', *Semiotic Review of Books* 7/3 (1997): 8–12; and Paul Ekman, 'Should We Call it Expression or Communication?', *Innovations in Social Science Research* 10/4 (1997): 333–44.

¹⁹ Classification systems are presented in Bernard Rimé and Loris Schiaratura, 'Gesture and Speech' in Robert Feldman and Bernard Rimé (eds), *Fundamentals of Nonverbal Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1991); David McNeill (ed.) *Language and Gesture* (Cambridge, 2000); and David McNeill, *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago, 2005).

²⁰ David McNeill, *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago, 2005) and 'Gesture, Gaze, and Ground', available online at http://mcneilllab.uchicago.edu/pdfs/McNeill_VACE.pdf [accessed 12 March 2008].

with regard to qualitative (as opposed to formal) elements. Related to this is the question of interpretation, especially as it relates to the researcher's own cultural background: to what extent, and in what circumstances, can one reliably ascribe expressive qualities to a gesture? These issues are equally fundamental whether one is studying human interaction in conversational groups or in vocal ensembles, and the solutions developed in nonverbal communication studies have usefully informed my discussions of method and approach in Part I.

Contexts 2: Communities of Practice

So who are the choral practitioners whose music-making this study attempts to understand? In addition to the British and American practitioners whose voices come through the literature, this study draws on visits to over 40 choirs in rehearsal. The majority of these were based within an hour's travel from Birmingham, UK; this was a choice of pragmatism rather than principle, however, and I took opportunities as they arose to observe choirs from further afield, either when they visited the West Midlands or when I travelled elsewhere. Hence I also have notes on groups from North America, Ireland, Korea, the Netherlands and New Zealand, as well as from around the UK, although some of these were in staged open rehearsals and so do not offer direct comparison with ensembles observed 'in the wild'. They nonetheless offer some wider perspective. The choirs were selected to represent a variety of choral traditions, and included large choral societies, small community choirs, cathedral choirs (men and boys, and mixed), gospel choirs (both church and performance), Jewish choirs (again, both synagogue and performance), barbershop choruses (male and female) and male voice choirs. The majority of singers, though not all, were amateur, and the directors included the full gamut from seasoned professional, though semi-professional to relatively inexperienced amateur. Contact came variously by telephoning around choirs listed in local directories and by personal introductions, and the selection process therefore aimed to balance opportunism as I developed my relationship with the region's choral networks with the need for breadth in the overall picture.

This broad picture, then, gives rise to several further questions. What is the relationship between insights gained from the practitioners represented in the literature and the practitioners observed in person? Should we see this as a cross-cultural, inter-cultural or intra-cultural study? How, in fact, does one define the identity of a choral group?

To start with the question of primary sources: for the purposes of this study, the medium in which material is accessed is largely irrelevant to its usefulness. That is, it does not matter if one learns of a conductor's view that, in articulating a text, 'you can never have too much consonant' through reading it in an instruction manual or hearing it spoken in rehearsal. Either way, it acts as evidence of a particular set of beliefs about choral performance. Given that the practitioner literature both arises from and seeks to shape actual practice in rehearsal and performance, there is a

broad continuity of discourse and cultural meanings between published texts and observed practice.

Within this general premise, however, a couple of caveats are in order, and these start to impinge on our questions about group identity. The first caveat is to consider how the two classes of material are situated in time and place. That is, they both present bodies of evidence of beliefs and practices within choral music-making, but the profiles of the samples are quite different. One covers two continents and the time-frame of a century, and presents the world from the perspective of the conductor, while the other is focused on the early years of the twenty-first century in central England, and presents the world from the position of an informed observer. It is clear, therefore, that generalizing across the bodies of evidence needs to be undertaken with some care; it is unlikely, for instance, that Henry Coward's views on social class and singing ability would be as acceptable in Sheffield today as they were in 1914.²¹ On the other hand, the two bodies of evidence are not as distinct as this might suggest. There are genealogies of practice that run through both: choral practitioners will routinely quote other conductors' points of principle or *bons mots* to both their choirs and their readers to lend authority to their statements. And, while it varies considerably how much today's practitioners engage with the literature aimed at them, all the texts cited are available to them and thus have at least the potential to inform their discursive world.

The second caveat relates to how we delineate the group 'choral practitioners'. The impression one gains from a cursory read of the practitioner literature is that choral music is a relatively self-evident and obvious category with a clear set of shared norms. Likewise, festivals and networking organizations suggest that, while different choral groups present different performing traditions and repertoires, we all know what choral singing involves and will be able to recognize it when we hear it. And of course at one level this is the case; the common-sense understanding clearly works well as a useful part of our musical world. But it also hides within it assumptions about what choral music is, and what choral practitioners do, that do not necessarily generalize to all parts of choral culture. I will analyse this issue in detail in Part II, but it is relevant here because it affects the points about both evidence and cultural identity outlined above.

The definition of 'choral practitioners' affects the relationship between text-based and ethnographic evidence because writers on choral music are more likely to come from certain traditions than others. This should not be surprising, of course. A person's relationship with educational institutions, and thereby with formalized knowledge, is a significant component of identity, and it is thus only to be expected that those whose background includes the expectation that music is something to be written about would provide the published literature. Still, it should remind us that when a writer makes a point about choral music in general, they are nonetheless writing from a specific position in relation to choral music as a whole. That is, their statements do not necessarily carry more authority than those

²¹ See p. 92 in Chapter 7 for a discussion of this.

of practitioners whose rehearsals I have observed. The fact of publication can give some indication about an individual practitioner's esteem and influence among his or her peers, but this is only relevant within those parts of choral practice that have an established relationship with the infrastructure of publication. In effect, this is to restate my earlier point about evidence base – that the medium is largely irrelevant to the effectiveness of material to demonstrate beliefs and practices – but with a particular precautionary note.

The question of a 'choral' identity and how to define it also affects how this project is framed in general, whether it should be seen as a cross-cultural or within-culture study. This looks as if it should be an easy question, but actually depends significantly on how one formulates concepts such as 'culture' and 'identity'. If we use standard sociological markers of social groups – race, class, age, nationality – we will come to rather different answers than if we define the groupings by the cultural practices that identify people as choral practitioners – lay clerk, soprano, barbershopper. From the first perspective, this looks like a within-community study that investigates British choirs, with the few groups from abroad offering a little breadth of perspective but not significantly distracting from this focus. Indeed, all the choirs were English-speaking, in that rehearsals were conducted in English (although the Korean choir was clearly doing this for a British audience, and the Dutch group was working in English for the benefit of an English-speaking educator).

Beyond this basic common denominator, however, the cultural homogeneity starts to break down. The demographic profiles of different choral groups in the same area can be strikingly different: one can find an all-white, explicitly secular group rehearsing in the same venue as an all-black, faith-based ensemble. And even language is not as stable a factor as one might suppose. Several of the UK-based choirs have repertoire in languages other than English (Hebrew, Welsh, Latin) that act as significant markers of religious and/or ethnic identity, or educational background. The extent to which these sociological markers would be regarded as essential to the group's identity varies: one is more likely to be excluded from a choir because one is the wrong religion than because one did not learn Latin at school. It is clear, though, that there is a significant degree of cross-cultural comparison involved in studying different choral traditions within the same geographical area.

This suggests that it can make more sense to delineate choral singers' identities in terms of musical repertoires and their associated performance traditions. These remain somewhat tangled up with sociological categories of identity, as we have seen, but are more likely to be experienced as central to a singer's identity within the context of that group. Some choral traditions are relatively easy to identify as distinct musical communities: barbershop and gospel, for instance, have boundaries that are relatively visible and audible, sustained not only by repertoires and performance practices but also by institutions and belief systems.²²

²² See for example Liz Garnett, *The British Barbershopper: A Study in Socio-Musical Values* (Aldershot, 2005a) for a discussion of the ways in which barbershop creates and maintains its sense of identity.

Male voice choirs present a less clear-cut example. Some maintain a strong sense of heritage and continuity of tradition, articulated by, for example, Welsh-language repertoire, while others position themselves more simply as singing organizations that offer single-sex leisure. The English collegiate and cathedral tradition is easily identified in its typical locations, but the strength of this tradition as a training-ground for British musicians means that one frequently finds directors from this background leading many choral societies and chamber choirs. Other choral societies, meanwhile, have directors with a background of conducting instrumental ensembles. Here, then, the boundaries between traditions and repertoires are fuzzier; the meme-pool is larger and more freely shared.

Hence, this study has elements both of cross-cultural and intra-cultural work, depending on how one chooses to define cultural groupings. It cannot claim to speak for all choral practitioners everywhere – even at its widest reach it remains focused on the UK and the US. But it does embrace a sufficient range of performing traditions to give a sense of perspective, and thus to draw conclusions that have the potential to offer insight beyond the case studies from which they are drawn.

Before embarking on the cultural, gestural and interpersonal questions that lead to these conclusions, however, it will be useful to consider how to go about research in conducting. Hence Part I will examine questions of research method and its implications for the kind of knowledge that different approaches will produce. Readers whose primary interest is in the practice of conducting may wish to skip ahead to later sections, although they will need to come back to Part I if they find themselves wondering why I have gone about the research in the ways that I have.

The following three sections travel a path along the nature–nurture axis from an analysis of the social construction of the choral singer to a discussion of how ensemble singing relies on instinctual behaviours we share with other primates. Part II considers questions of choral culture and identity, examining the ways that choirs establish and uphold their customs and conventions. It shows that practices that most readers will find so familiar as to be almost invisible are in fact sustained by a collection of deeply embedded belief systems and expectations for behaviour that are enforced by conductors and singers alike. Part III focuses on the conductor and explores how it is that they can come to ‘look like the music’. This section includes detailed discussion of gestural vocabulary, illustrated by footage on the accompanying DVD, and uses this to theorize how these gestures become meaningful. This section is the heart of the book: it is where practical detail meets theoretical analysis most directly, and thus allows us to see how genre-specific traditions arise from processes shared across styles. Part IV moves away from questions of cultural values towards the mechanisms of interpersonal interaction. We may know how gestures become meaningful, but how is it that they can have such an audibly direct effect on the way choral singers use their voices? As Part II provides the cultural context for the construction of meaning, Part IV explores the inborn infrastructure that permits choral traditions to develop and disseminate their distinctive practices.

The Conclusion draws these threads together to show how these processes interact, how the conductor's generation and communication of musical meaning relies on both cultural-discursive processes and instinctive, inherited behaviours. It goes on to ask what the implications of these findings are for conducting studies in general and for the reflective practitioner in particular. My central research questions arose from experience in real-life situations, and I have therefore evaluated the theories that I have used to answer them by their capacity to explain phenomena observed in regular choral practice. The overall aim, therefore, is to offer ideas that will enable directors to develop a new level of self-knowledge at the level of both technique and interpersonal interactions, make wiser and more sensitive choices when moving between stylistic worlds, and make sense of their musical experiences in new ways that will enhance their conducting and their teaching. The essence of a good theory, after all, is that it helps us not only to understand the world around us, but also to act more effectively within it.