

# Introduction

Two days before I drafted this introduction, I was on a shopping trip with my wife in a fairly large town in the North of England. We had only been living in the North for a year, so this was a first visit. To my delight I saw that the parish church, an elegant clerestoried building, was open, so I popped in to escape the shops and have a quick look. The lights were on, stewards were present to welcome Saturday visitors, and a recording of what sounded to me like a men and boys' choir was playing quietly to add to the ambience. 'Is that your own choir?' I enquired of a steward. 'Yes', he replied. 'Well, it *was* in 1980 when that recording was made,' he continued, 'we had a great choir then.' 'Indeed', I retorted. 'And now? Do you have any boys in your choir?' 'No', he replied, shaking his head sadly. 'Two tenors, two basses, perhaps. No boys. All gone. It's just ladies now, all we can get. Boys won't do it anymore.'

I left the building both saddened and vindicated. I felt vindicated because a significant part of this book is concerned with why 'boys won't do it anymore'. There are a few places where boys still sing and that fact, paradoxically, is what saddens me. I think singing is a great thing for boys to do and during the writing of this book I have met many boys who still do 'it' and who agree with me. It is the fact that these boys enjoy their singing so much that makes things sad and difficult. If they would just all die out and be consigned to history, like perhaps the sailing ships of the Georgian navy, I would not have needed to write this book and my life would, frankly, have been easier. Alan Mould has recently written an excellent and definitive history and I am grateful for this, for I draw on it several times. But I am not an historian. I am a social scientist and I write about what boys do now. I also happen to have musical training and have taught music in days prior to academic life.

So what do I mean by 'it'? That is quite difficult to define, but I would like the reader to be reasonably clear about what is likely to follow. This is not a book about church music. It is about boys' singing. It just happens that when the church music dimension is taken away, a huge hole is left which compels that we answer the questions of how high boys should sing and what, other than church music, is to count as credible and authentic singing by young males who are in most other aspects of their life true blooded, risk taking, sport playing, mischievous boys. It is too often said that boys don't want to sing because they do 'not want to sound like girls'. I shall be critiquing this idea throughout the book, but for the present it should by now be clear to most readers that this is a book about boys with unbroken voices who have no desire to be girls.

I do not like the term 'unbroken' and I devote two chapters to explaining why the term 'changing voices' is to be preferred to 'breaking voices'. Neither do I like

to disparage girls. It may surprise the reader to learn that the body of theory in which I ground my work is what is commonly referred to as pro-feminist. Returning to what 'it' is, there is perhaps one more idea that must be introduced at this stage. The kind of singing I shall be writing about is sometimes referred to as 'angelic' or the 'voices of angels'. Of course, the Christian church once had a near-monopoly on angels and their voices, but no longer. In pursuit of answers to my questions about how high boys should sing and what might be authentic and credible in their singing, I shall need to devote significant space to the different genres that employ angels as singers. I shall need also to address the question of whether there is an alternative for boys with 'unbroken' voices to singing like angels.

I have been encouraged to write this book because of the constant level of interest that has been shown in its subject matter. Some ten years ago, I first published the results of a small-scale but highly detailed enquiry I undertook into the lives of the members of a boys' choir. That study was never intended to be the beginning of an occupation that has subsequently dominated my professional life. I had completed my PhD on the topic of young people's values with regard to the natural world and reached a somewhat depressing conclusion that for the most part, these were highly instrumental, consumerist or 'me-centred', and unlikely to underpin the kind of widespread revolution in environmentally responsible behaviour that many educators were hoping for during the 1990s.

I wondered whether, for a small post-doctoral study, I might look at a parallel case of something other than wild animals and scenic majesty in understanding how a sense of intrinsic value developed in children and chose, for this project, to look at how the boys in a choir valued music. The media were not that interested in my PhD study, but the boys' singing study was reported around the world on the day I first gave a conference paper. More to the point, the story of boys and music I uncovered revealed that children did not necessarily have to be totally materialistic. Ever since then, anything I have written about boys and singing has been almost guaranteed space in the newspapers and air waves. This tells us that there must be something unusually special about boys and singing that touches something deep in a collective psyche. A book such as this is needed and I feel privileged to have written it.

The choice of boys and singing for post-doctoral study was not entirely arbitrary. Writers in the social sciences such as myself acknowledge the importance of such matters as objectivity, reliability and validity, but we claim less and less to achieve it in the way that writers in disciplines such as physics do. Instead, we highlight the importance of transparency and trustworthiness in our work. Who am I, where am I coming from and how much credibility should a reader place in what I have to say? For that reason, this book is written in the first person. There has been no attempt to write my own self out through passive language intended to convey detached objectivity. It may, in this context, be helpful to know that some forty-six years ago, a small boy who absolutely hated the piano practice he hardly ever did was set to be an engineer. In total innocence, that small boy was sent to a new school that just happened to be a cathedral choir school.

The fact that it was a choir school was of little consequence to my parents who knew little of such matters and cared less about them. For the first ten years of my own life, singing and music had been about the last things on my mind. Then a cathedral, its thunderous organ, its smells of medieval timber and heating oil, and its choristers in their blue (and on Sundays and greater holy days deep red) cassocks changed all that. I must have had a gene that responded to what was one of the most critical events that has made me. The only possible explanation of my life is that I had the nature but not the nurture when it came to choral music. I have been trying to make sense of that ever since and we shall return to snippets of this story as and when necessary to maintain transparency and trustworthiness as the book proceeds.

This book is not a biography, however. It attempts to be a scholarly analysis of boys and singing. It addresses the question of how high boys should sing, but it does so because this question is related to the fact that an awful lot of boys do not sing at all. A principal reason for writing this book is that I believe most strongly that many more boys should sing than do. Part of this comes from within. Singing has become a major part of my life and identity that I know has carried me through the bad times and given meaning and purpose to living in a way that little else can. That alone would not be a sufficient reason to write the book. It has been my discovery through researching the topic with boys that I am far from unique. I do not know how many there are – nobody does, but there are many, many more boys out there who have the nature but not the nurture.

To give an enduring sense of meaning and the worthwhile to the lives of these young people at a time when so many boys seem to be facing emptiness that can lead to crime, drug abuse and indifference to other people and the world we share seems to me to justify the writing of the book. I want to be clear that I have written it because I think *singing is good for boys*. I have spoken to several hundreds of boys during the course of gathering material for the chapters that follow and I have seen that some of them gain so much through singing whilst so many others who would benefit miss out for the reasons I am going to describe and analyse. Of course, I hope what I have written may be helpful to those choir directors who live the daily angst of wondering where the next male singer will come from, but I want to be clear that my first priority is the boys who are missing out.

I shall be writing about a good deal more than choral singing, cathedrals and their boys' choirs. Most kinds of music, most kinds of singing have the power to change lives. *That* boys sing at all is perhaps more important than where or what they sing. Neither will all of what I write about cathedrals and their choirs be in any case complimentary either. If it were, the book would be a polemic in support of classical sacred choirs, not a critical scholarly analysis of the field of boys' singing. But I owe a great personal debt to cathedrals and their choirs and the experience of hearing or singing with a good one is still one that can evoke the fullest range of emotions from ecstasy to agony – something that for me goes far beyond mere entertainment.