

Chapter 1

What Is a Choir?

What makes a collection of singers a choir? What is it that transforms the mere sound of human voices into a focused choral tone? Why does one choir sing better than another? What, precisely, is wrong with a choir that sings poorly? Without answers to these questions, it is impossible to advise the choral conductor as to the specific practical directions his work should take. As we answer these questions, we will come to understand the true nature of choral leadership.

There are three very important qualities that a good choral sound possesses. If we listen carefully to the sound of a choir that is singing well, we can discover the nature of these essential qualities. First, let us try to imagine the sound of such a choir: quiet, yet broad and resonant sounds roll over us evenly like waves. We are beguiled by the uniform, rich tone and the amazing blend of all the voices into a single sonority; not only are the voices of individual singers indistinguishable in this homogeneous sound, but individual sections are also merged into the whole; all is blended and balanced, so that a beautiful sonority results. The wholeness and stability of such a sound is striking. The choir with its many singers seems to function as a single organism.

The chords begin to grow in waves, begin to swell, and finally, to attain great force. In this most critical process of expansion, as the choir reaches a powerful *forte*, all the previous blend and unity is preserved, yet at the same time, there is a sensation of such ease, that it is as though the choir were hardly expending its energy to produce this remarkable swelling effect.

We shall try to enter into the very heart of the choir and shall take

it upon ourselves to break this beautiful sound into its constituent elements. To begin with, as an example, we shall observe only the alto section. What do we see and hear there? We notice, first of all, that all the altos focus their attention on their own section; we note each individual singer's desire to blend with their section in volume as well as timbre. As a result of such concentration, all the altos, mutually balanced in volume and matched in timbre, form a true choral section, i.e., not a random combination of individual voices and various colors, but rather, a single choral voice, capable of being, at various times, powerful and forceful, or soft and gentle, or taut and elastic, and possessing its own uniformly characteristic coloration, peculiar to that specific voice part. This balancing of volume and blending of timbre is the basis of the first quality of a good choral sonority: sectional ensemble.

“Ensemble” is a French word, which means together, unified, and, what is more important for this discussion, balanced. Balance is vital because even if a choir sings perfectly together and with a unified tone, yet lacks balance, it still will not have what we identify as sectional ensemble. (We call this type of ensemble “sectional” because it refers to individual sections rather than to the choir as a whole.)

We can hear this first element of choral sonority—sectional ensemble, within each section of a fine choir. This is why, when perceiving the overall choral sonority, we are not aware of any individual singers.

If we shift our attention from the context of a given section and consider, rather, its relationship to the choir (as a part of the whole), we will notice that the entire section, unified by sectional ensemble, strives to balance the strength of its sound with each of the other sections in the choir. This effort produces uniform, balanced singing from all of the sections of the choir. As a result, general choral ensemble is achieved: the first essential quality of choral sonority. This is what creates that unity and blend of all the sections that impresses us when we listen to the choir as a whole.

If we place ourselves in the center of a choir, we will notice a great number of barely perceptible communications—tiny threads that tightly link one section to another. We will notice that these threads, which stretch from singer to singer and from section to section, serve to adjust and regulate the sound. Each singer and each section seeks to position themselves in the overall chord with perfect precision, both in relation to the sound of adjacent singers within a section, and in relation to the sound of other sections. We also observe that each singer seeks to “lean”

on adjacent singers, on his or her own section, and on all the other sections of the choir, so that pitch and volume can be adjusted accurately. Only by listening attentively to nearby singers and to the other sections of the choir are the singers able to modify their sound precisely. Each singer and each section must therefore endeavor to hear the entire choral sonority, the ears of the singers (and, if you will, the “collective ears” of each section) thus informing them of their exact position in the harmony. This sensitivity creates a precisely regulated, well-tuned chord, which accounts for the second element of good choral sonority: intonation.

This second element, intonation, is the very source of that beauty and harmony we heard in the overall choral sonority. Ease of production and resonance, even on a powerful *forte* (“as though the choir is hardly expending any energy”), are qualities that emerge when both ensemble and intonation are present. Only a chord that is balanced and in tune has an exemplary sound, and the more balanced and tuned the chord is, the more ease and resonance it will possess. Therefore, the more power and ease we desire to achieve, the more we must seek to balance and carefully tune the sound. A balanced, tuned sound is capable of “flight”: on the softest *pianissimo*, it will take wing and spread to the most distant corners of even a very spacious hall. A chord lacking ensemble and intonation, however, remains bound up within a choir and will not project even on the most thunderous *fortissimo*.

If we scrutinize the choir still more closely and listen even more carefully, we will notice yet another web, woven from a different type of thread. We will see that these threads—not the threads of ensemble or intonation but new threads—lead out from each singer and are gathered into bundles emanating from every section. All these separate strands are then gathered together into a central point. This central focal point of the choir is the conductor.

We notice that all the singers and all the sections, while concentrating on ensemble and intonation, at the same time focus their attention on the conductor. We distinctly perceive that all the singers are strongly connected to the conductor; that the conductor’s will is their will; that each singer does not undertake to make a single sound without watching the conductor and without being in continuous contact with him; that every singer is empowered by this mutual contact and by the conductor’s leadership.

Such contact and rapport between the singers and the conductor establishes a special sensitivity and mutual understanding: the conduc-

tor's smallest gesture is immediately perceived and executed by every singer, by every section, and by the entire choir; visual communication, facial expressions, and inner nuances of artistic feeling on the conductor's part are reflected at once in the thoughts and feelings of the singers. Out of this fine-tuned mutual understanding arises the third quality of choral sonority: nuance, or shading.

Thus, by analyzing the sound of the ideal, imaginary choir, we have established that there are three essential qualities of choral sound: ensemble, intonation, and nuance.

The characteristics and significance of these three basic elements of good choral sonority are illustrated in the following table:

Elements	Characteristics	Results
Ensemble	Balance and blending within each section and of all the sections together	Unity
Intonation	Precision and accuracy in the tuning of chords	Beauty
Nuances	The perception and fulfillment of the conductor's demands	Expressivity

The basic features of choral sonority described above are indispensable.

Imagine a choral sonority in which ensemble is absent. Such an absence itself already destroys choral sonority, because there is no balance of sound—neither within each section, nor across the choir as a whole, i.e., among sections. In addition, the absence of ensemble has an adverse effect on the other elements of choral sound, such as intonation and nuance. Intonation suffers when the singers cannot hear all of their colleagues in their own section and in all of the sections of the choir, and consequently cannot tune accurately. Similarly, without ensemble, nuances cannot be uniform or simultaneous, because the singers will be unable to regulate the nuances properly unless they can hear their immediate neighbors and the other sections of the choir. Thus, poor ensemble has an adverse effect upon choral sonority. We need not even speak about the absence of intonation: one can just imagine how “beautiful” a sound is achieved when a choir sings out of tune.

It might seem that if ensemble and intonation are present, then good choral sonority is assured, and a lack of nuance will not destroy

it. In reality, this is not so. Nuances give expressivity to choral sound. Without this expressivity, a choir's sound has no vitality. Without nuances, choral sonority is dead. Intonation and ensemble will thus be vital and alive only when nuances are present. To summarize, the lack of ensemble, intonation, or nuance or, even worse, the absence of all three, diminishes the quality of choral sonority.

On the other hand, elements such as diction, tempo, rhythm, and the like, are matters pertaining to the *interpretation* of a work rather than to sonority; in other words, if a choir sings with poor rhythm or diction, the choral sonority may still be acceptable (see the latter part of Part I, Chapter 5). One should not, therefore, confuse the interpretation of a composition with choral sonority as such: it is possible to produce a good sound while the interpretation is unartistic, or even downright incompetent.

If a choir with good choral tone has poor diction, i.e., pronounces words indistinctly, this defect surely diminishes the clarity of the interpretation on the one hand, and the general artistic impression, on the other. The composition may sound both unified in terms of ensemble, in tune, and even expressive, but its sense is difficult to grasp because the words cannot be understood. Thus, poor diction is indisputably an artistic flaw, which will negatively affect the work from the standpoint of interpretation and overall effect. But does the choral sonority necessarily suffer as a result? No, because the music sounds both unified and beautiful, and the choir may still sing expressively, even if not dramatically so. In summary, poor diction in a choir with a good sound diminishes the clarity of interpretation and the artistic effect, but does not destroy choral tone in and of itself.

If a choir with a good tone sings unrhythmically, then the listener might be dissatisfied or even annoyed; but satisfactory choral sonority is still not necessarily lost, because it is possible to sing unrhythmically, yet with a blended sound, in tune, and with some degree of expressivity.

If a good choir performs a composition at an incongruous tempo, this may do injustice to the composition itself and to its composer, but this does not diminish choral tone, for it is possible to sing in a tempo that is inappropriate and still retain satisfactory ensemble, intonation, and nuance. Therefore, poor diction, inaccurate rhythm and an incorrect tempo, while they detract from the interpretation of a work, do not adversely affect the choral sonority.

Ensemble, intonation and nuance thus represent the most impor-

tant and essential elements of choral sound. These principles must be the cornerstone upon which choral science is constructed. Only in the light of these principles can we give a precise answer to the question, "What is a choir?" A choir is a group of singers whose sound displays a strictly balanced ensemble, precisely regulated intonation, and distinctly formulated, artistic nuances.

Giving due significance to these three basic elements, but before we examine them in detail, we find it useful to identify the basic rules by which they are formed and perfected. These rules are obligatory for every choral singer, since only by following them can one master the fundamentals of choral technique.

The maxims that are both essential and accessible to every choral singer, and which the conductor must constantly strive to implement, are as follows:

- 1) Each person singing in the choir must listen sensitively to his or her own section in order to balance the volume of one's voice with the others, and to blend one's timbre with the timbres of the other singers. Precise observance of this rule creates good sectional ensemble.
- 2) Every section, blended and balanced within itself, must listen acutely to all the other sections of the choir in order to balance the volume of the section with the overall choral sound. The implementation of this rule creates overall ensemble.
- 3) Every singer, while striving to achieve satisfactory sectional ensemble, must listen to his own section, in order to blend the pitch of his voice with that of the section in a precise unison. The observance of this rule will produce proper intonation within the section.
- 4) Every section, united in sectional and overall ensemble and perfecting its own sectional intonation, must listen carefully to all the other sections and, perceiving the overall chord, must set its pitch with total precision in relation to the pitches of the other sections of the choir. The conscientious observance of this rule will yield good overall intonation in the choir.
- 5) Each singer must maintain continuous contact with the conductor, so that they can see and understand his indications and carry them out accurately. Implementation of this rule will result in effective nuances.

By consciously teaching and constantly reminding the choir of these elementary rules, the conductor will slowly but surely develop in the singers a feeling of ensemble, a sense of intonation, and an understanding of well-balanced nuances. The choir as a whole will thus, perhaps slowly, but steadily, master these most crucial elements of choral sonority. Only when they have acquired and perfected these essential principles, can a group of singers truly be called a choir.