

## THE BOY CHOIR FAD

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**T**HE boy choir fad has grown so alarmingly that the choral ideals of the American church will degenerate unless a decisive check is firmly put upon this disastrous evil in church music. At the present time, the standards are so very low that many recognized musicians deem the field of religious music unworthy of their serious attention and interest. The realm of church music, as a whole, is not a prominent factor in the development of artistic standards in this country.

The boy choir propaganda may be argued from many points of view—musical efficiency, psychology, tradition, sentiment, finance, or from the viewpoint of religious training; but I can see not one unbiased, truthful, substantial argument which may be brought to its support. The following brief examination intends to bring out these facts. It is, of course, necessary to include some of the well-known arguments against the institution, in order to cover the whole ground.

There never has been, and there never will be, any child twelve years of age—no matter to what musical training he has been subjected,—whose vocal ability will measure up to the standard of that of an adult, who, through a longer training period, is able to acquire a greater amount of musical ability, and retains and uses it with intelligence and understanding. This statement is, of course, undeniable. When one considers the training period necessary to prepare a boy's voice for use during the brief term of a few years, it is immediately obvious that the energy expended in this process is practically wasted. Comparing this with the case of the adult, whose vocal compass is a permanent possession, and whose choral training is, therefore, cumulative, it requires but little logic to perceive the inherent inferiority of the boy choir. This statement, too, admits of no possible reply. Permanency of corps is one of the fundamental elements in ensemble work, but with the children's choir this is out of the question. When the boy choir was introduced into our country, the essential feature which made for the support of the institution in England (from which the whole business was copied), was neglected here—that is, the choir school. There are now a few of these scattered

throughout the country, endowed by people whose sentiments lead them. In such places the standards are, usually, better; but in the vast majority of churches, there are no such schools, in many instances on account of lack of funds with which to endow these wasteful institutions.

The actual mechanism of running a boy choir is most complex—vocal lessons, constant rehearsals, school machinery for maintaining discipline and control, regularly procuring new material, etc., etc. Such a stupendous amount of work might be considered rational, were the results obtained equal to those obtained with adult singers; but they will not bear the light of just criticism, nor even comparison with a mixed choir having but one weekly rehearsal. Such a choir will progress more in one month, and will be of more value to a congregation than a boy choir will in a year. And further, the finished product in the case of the mixed choir is worth while, while the boy choir never “arrives.” An adult singer may be replaced, but it takes a year to train a new boy.

The matter bears the light of truth no better, if considered from a psychological standpoint. In order to sing with interpretative understanding, under the direction of a capable conductor, one must be able to form concepts of certain types. The concept-forming ability does not appear, nor does the religious awakening come, until adolescence, and then the boy's voice has gone! In the final issue, the essence of religion and worship is for the adult mind, not for the child. The religious world is composed of men and women, and although children may be taught to imitate, to some degree, their attitudes and beliefs, it is not until they become adults that they are mentally capable of entering fully into the comprehension and purpose of religion and religious activities. Mere imitation in choral music lacks reality and meaning, and, being insincere, is purposeless. A choir must have a comprehensive idea of its purpose and responsibility. The choral conductor who carefully instructs the choristers under his direction by bringing to their cognizance a certain amount of imagery and parallelism in other fields of artistic activity, is producing musical results which bear fruit. But the training of uncultured, inexperienced and undeveloped minds to perform the *same music*, is preposterous on the face of it, and doubly preposterous by actual observation and aural comparison. It is impossible to compare any boy choir renditions anywhere in the world with those of certain mixed choral bodies, known to every musician. Who would dare compare any boy choir with some of

the splendid mixed choirs in New York City? Only an individual with no musical conceptions upon which to base judgment, or perhaps one imbued with the idea that a "real" church choir should look in real life as some painters have elected to picture it. However, music has to do chiefly with the sense of hearing, and not with that of sight.

The principal elements which have made for the development of the boy choir are: sentimentality, a certain amount of ignorance about the "angelic" qualities of a boy's voice, hollow imitation of the English church, and the unusual belief that it is not proper to have women in the chancel.

A woman's voice, carefully trained for one or two years, is worth any number of boys' voices, trained for a similar period. Further, the adult voice, when developed, remains available vocal material, assuming, of course, that the singer does not give up musical activities. Light, lyric voices, with as much "angelic" quality as was ever found in any boy's voice, are easily found among women's voices. A boy's voice will not stand comparison with one of these for timbre, control, *sostenuto*, and vocal range. Any choirmaster, who would work half as faithfully with a mixed choir as he is obliged to do with a boy choir, would find his work progressing rapidly, and with the usual attendant success.

Many church musicians have arrived at their positions through a study of the organ and the writings of the masters for this instrument. Thus neglecting a serious and exhaustive study of church music, they are not in a position to judge the efficiency of boy choir work. The organ is such a minor consideration in the production of pure ecclesiastical music, that it is almost negligible. It is a very vital element, to be sure, in the production of the theatrical, operatic music, generally sung in churches. Any organist, educated on broad lines, given an opportunity to hear and compare choral renditions, and orchestral renditions, and allowed to give to the matter keen and careful study, would unfailingly arrive at the conclusion that the musical work of a boy choir is extremely limited, and an impossible process in church music. Many city organists rarely attend orchestral or choral concerts, or are ambitious enough to hear choirs, other than their own, and thus to learn by comparison. Many well-known choirmasters, now managing boy choirs, have expressed themselves confidentially as disgusted with such unfruitful musical work, but they cannot afford to give up their work.

Wherever the boy choir is found, we find trivial church music, or, at any rate, music which is not as splendid as it might

be. The results cannot fail to be trivial, because we are assigning adult tasks to children. It is indeed to suffer indignity, to hear boys attempt the more profound religious music, perhaps based upon a text of great depth and beauty. Such renditions are carried on without the slightest conception as to what it all means, save to sing louder here or softer there. Such matters as phrase-lengths, sense of rhythm, key relationship with its subtle meanings, etc., are entirely beyond children, and nearly every boy choir regularly exhibits this fact. The great church composers should be treated with as much respect as those who wrote secular music. It is no less a musical crime to have children attempt the "German Requiem," than it is to have them attempt to play a Beethoven or a Tschaikowsky symphony. Somehow Tschaikowsky and Beethoven of the concert hall require a standard of performance, but Tschaikowsky and Beethoven, the church musicians, get very unmusical treatment at the hands of a boy choir. Symphony societies are endowed so that nearly the same performers may be retained year after year; but, in church music, alas! half of the performers are from nine to fourteen years of age, and the personnel of the corps is changing monthly! The influence that this has on the results hardly needs further comment; it is so very obvious.

In an age as rationalistic as ours, tradition should not have much consideration. Lorenz, in his splendid book, entitled "Practical Church Music," says:

A chorus made up of men and boys, or of normal men and abnormal men, with soprano and alto voices, was organized in the early and middle ages, because, owing to this ascetic doctrine, women's voices could not be employed. Nor is this idea yet extinct, as a recent Encyclical of Pope Pius X has directed a return to the ancient custom of excluding women from all Roman Catholic choirs; even previous to that women were heard in few great churches of Europe. I remember well my admiration of the portly, heavy moustached, handsome man I saw in the singers' gallery of the Choir Chapel at St. Peter's in Rome. I took it for granted that this was the basso-profundo of the choir. Later, a florid, semi-operatic solo, with a rumitum accompaniment was sung by a soprano voice of clear, but peculiar timbre, and looking up, I was amazed to see that the soprano soloist was my magnificent Adonis. Anything more incongruous it has never been my fortune to see and hear, unless it was the rendering of Root's "Under the Palms" at the leading Methodist church of York, England, where all the alto solos were sung by men, who used the falsetto register. To one accustomed to the prominent part played in American church music by female voices, the whole arrangement was distressingly absurd, unnatural, and monstrous in spite of the knowledge of its theological and historical basis. . . . One can forgive these cowed monks, misguided ascetics,

or gross in life, for their narrow views and exclusiveness, since the clerical organization of the choir, their celibate vows, as well as the accepted views of the inferiority and dangerousness of the sex, made the participation of women in the choral service impossible; but that men of this century, who have seen, and possibly rejoiced over the social and civic advancement of this sex, should apparently take artistic pride in perpetuating this medieval monstrosity in the church is beyond patience. There is no danger that boys will displace women in our American choirs, but there is a danger that none of us shall appreciate how much richer, stronger, and truly worshipful our church music has become, because this foolish, and at root, gross prejudice, against the participation of our sisters in the faith has been eradicated in our land. There is danger that we may thoughtlessly countenance the shallow imitation of the remnants of medieval and barbarous Europe, which is sometimes urged by musicians, who, in their anxiety to furnish some novelty, and to be "up-to-date," would revive the fruits of medieval superstition and folly, and by ministers, whose judgment is based on tradition, as the only test of "churchliness."

If it were impossible to have women in the chancel in certain churches, the choir could be placed in a gallery at the end of the church, or somewhere to the left or right of the chancel. Such positions would be ideal. No choir ought to be visible from the congregation, for the director should be able to assert himself as freely as is necessary while directing his chorus. In most cases, this is impossible in the chancel.

La Trobe, writing in 1831, says in his book on "Church Music":

The custom of admitting women to compose part of the choir . . . is indeed of the very highest antiquity. We learn from the Old Testament that they had a prominent part assigned to them in the musical performances of the Jews, and we have every reason to conclude that the services for which St. Paul so highly commends certain women, included assistance in the direction of church music. Doubtless, it was for general edification that God gave to the female voice that sweetness, flexibility, and strength of tone which renders it suited to lead or support the united chorus of a congregation.

In "Chapters on Church Music," the Rev. R. B. Daniel, Curate of Tickerhall, Derby, states:

The objection to women singers on the ground that the quality of the female voice renders it less fit for the use in the church services, than boys' voices, is surely mere prejudice. The opinion that female voices impart a sensuous coloring to the music is too absurd to need refuting. Women's voices are indeed different as to tone quality from boys', being less cold and penetrating, but fuller and more melodious. . . It is surprising to find people arguing from the Bible that women ought not to sing in church choirs. For women seem to have been employed

in the temple choir (see I Chron. xxv, 5 and 6; and Ezra, ii 65, where "two hundred singing men and singing women," are included with those who returned with Zerubbabel). And the singing of women does not seem to have been prohibited in either the Old or New Testament. The words of St. Paul in I Cor. xiv, 34 and 35, are strangely quoted by the advocates for boy singers, for they contain no injunction against women's singing. It is their *speaking* in church that is forbidden (see I Tim. ii, 11 and 12, where they are forbidden to teach). . . . We learn from Philo, that a choir of men and women sang in the religious service of the Therapeutæ, a sect of Jewish enthusiasts of the first century after Christ. And Burney gives quotations from Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius which show that women sang in the early Christian assemblies. . . . The objection that women cannot be robed in surplices weighs only with those who have adopted medieval opinions, or who like the appearance of a surpliced choir so well that they will have them at any cost. Those who have introduced the boy element into their choirs can hardly be expected to confess that they have made a mistake. And many people, even if they notice the falling off in church music, regard it with little concern. But there are others, who observe the degeneracy of church choir singing and know the cause of it, and these look forward to the day—and it will surely come—when the present fashion will give place to a better one, and women's voices (the most perfect and beautiful of all musical material) once more help to lead the praises of God in the Sanctuary.

Standards in church music should not be left to the control of laymen, any more than they are in the case of the opera, or in the symphonic field. They should be in the control of professional musicians who seriously and profoundly give these matters consideration. If the musical conductors in this country, the leaders in the musical work at our many universities, and the music critics would, at every opportunity, simply state the truth in regard to the boy choir propaganda, the worst evil in church music would rapidly disappear. As the matter now stands, the ruinous work of the boy choir and its attendant features, will require years of true choral effort to overcome. The cheap compositions, secular in style, produced here and in England, for boy choir use, are trash, not worthy of publicity. Their secularity appeals to the child mind, and they are easy to teach, notwithstanding they "profane the Sanctuary."

The contempt of the boy choir has been growing constantly, and is becoming more and more positive. Musical people—laymen and professional—realize the failure of this institution, and it is only a question of time which will be the victor—church music, or the boy choir, for the two are incompatible in the final issue. No minister ought to inflict a boy choir upon his congregation for the worship of full-grown adults. If the choirmasters who

are enthusiastic over their activities in the boy choir work, could be brought to a full realization of the compromising position they hold in the musical world, they would feel surprised and humiliated. Church music in this country is mainly a mechanical echo of the ideals of the English church, which some of us consider the stupidest and dullest the world has ever known. Even the operatic and sensuous style of the modern Italian church is more to be desired than is the style of the former.

Considered from the financial standpoint, the inefficiency of the boy choir business is again driven home. In many churches boys receive substantial sums, particularly in those places where there is any possibility of another church "stealing" boys who are "trained." As soon as a boy has acquired a certain amount of ability, he becomes a valuable product. Hence many choirmasters will take boys already trained, rather than go to the trouble of training them as part of their own work. The maintenance of a boy choir means money for choir schools, theatre parties, summer camps, excursions, whereby to hold the boys; for they enter the choir, not from any musical motive, but in consideration of the "money end of the business," or because these activities are sufficient bait. In view of the fact that money thus spent by a church might go into its musical work directly, such extravagance is not to be forgiven. In every community there are always women, perhaps vocal students, who are interested in choral music. Such people will sing for sums much smaller than the amounts, plus the extra expenses, paid out for boys. Such people enter choir work for musical pleasure and social activity. Boys are merely "put" in a choir, because their parents deem the training advantageous. Any interest on the part of the boy, which does later develop, is rarely musical; generally it is based on the "gang" instinct—which is a legitimate part of every boy's play life.

A presentation of this matter would be incomplete without the mention of the method of treating the alto part in a boy choir. This problem never has been and never will be solved, for a solution is impossible. In England, and generally in this country also, the alto part of a boy choir is sung by men who sing above the "crack" in their voices. Such a makeshift in Divine Worship is abominable, sacrilegious, intolerable. The sound produced is unnatural, atrocious, inhuman; it is but an unmusical hoot and often false in intonation. And all this for the only purpose of supporting an unsuccessful venture. In other words, there is no alto part possible in a boy choir. Some few attempts have been

made to force the chest register of boys' voices down sufficiently, to make tones as low in pitch as the legitimate tones of a real alto, but such a tone has none of the qualities of the alto timbre. As religion is a natural human process, so the choral worship of the service must be natural. This element has not been left out of the scheme of the Creator, for He has given mankind voices of varying vocal range, that they might unite harmoniously in praise and worship. It is not, therefore, required, nor is it wise, that we should use inferior substitutes, when the original and natural is to be had. The legitimate—the natural chorus—and the religious chorus is the mixed chorus, with the women's natural voices carrying the soprano and the alto parts, and the men's natural voices supporting with the tenor and bass parts. It is a most exasperating experience to hear the awful squawk of the male altos in the boy choirs in our churches. The tone does not combine with the other three parts in producing a balanced ensemble, but—in all its horror—shines through the combined efforts of the other three parts of the choir. It seems as though it could not be subdued, for one male alto will well nigh ruin the work of a chorus of forty voices.

These matters need careful attention and reflection, and a plain, truthful exposition for the consideration of those who have them in charge. Once the light of truth is upon the boy choir, any rational, unprejudiced mind, musical or not, can at once be convinced of the utter impossibility of the whole fad. No great or permanent results are obtainable from an insecure and erroneous foundation, no matter how carefully the after-effects are bedecked with fine equipment and properties. In other words, handsomely printed weekly programs, fine, clean vestments, beautiful buildings, four-manual organs, flashy newspaper advertising do not make for good church music in the least. If church music standards in this country are to equal those in the secular field, the boy choir must go. Rational, refined, musical considerations must overcome sentimentality, and uncultured, unworthy motives, which make for lower standards and insufficient results. The church which maintains a boy choir at once places a precise limit upon its musical activity, and the man who carries on such a work unconsciously sets a definite limit upon his musical growth—a limit which often disastrously blinds his vision and restricts his whole progress. Such church musicians, with the proper material wherewith to work, would rise to greater heights (partly gauged, of course, by their initial ability) with the inevitable result that they would be of greater service in the artistic world. This, in

turn, would insure not only better church music, but better church composition, larger church attendance, larger general interest in the great field of religious music, and a better financial support of church choirs. Thus the spiritual atmosphere in our places of worship would rise to a higher plane. In a book entitled "Evolution of Church Music," by Rev. F. Landon-Humphrey, with an introduction by the late Bishop H. C. Potter, occurs this paragraph:

From the accounts published from time to time in the parochial news columns of our church papers one would suppose that what is popularly called a "boy choir" is the only choir that can fitly sing the church's music. Thus it is told with deep satisfaction that St. Harmonium's parish has at last attained to a vested choir, which made its appearance upon such a date, and under such and such circumstances; and from the way the affair is written up, it is easily seen how happy the good priest is at his success, whether the people may be or not. One would almost imagine that some pressing doctrinal principles were absolutely dependent upon having a surpliced choir. The idea has seized upon the community that it is more devotional that the soprano parts should be rendered by boys' and not by women's voices, and the fancy has swept the country, capturing parish after parish, without regard to the many limitations which must regulate and modify the usage. The popular idea seems to be that all that is needed to obtain a boy choir is to gather a mob of street urchins, give them books and a few rehearsals, put vestments on them and turn them into the stalls. They may sing flat and sing sharp, they may murder the service and drag through the hymns, they may shout and scream with voices that would scratch glass, they may rattle the windows with *Nunc Dimittis*—but the parish has a boy choir and the Rector is happy, even though the long-suffering congregation be literally sung out of doors.

People are hungry for good, religious music. Cheap, trashy, "popular" music may fascinate for the moment, but it does not add anything to the spiritual atmosphere of the service. In all churches where the atmosphere is on a high plane, there is no lack of attendance or support, for the people are not long in finding that there is something to be taken out of such an atmosphere, a something which is precious and valuable. These churches are in the minority. If the other churches desire to regain the confidence and support of the public, they must consider these musical problems more deeply than at present.