

“That’s a lot of dots!”

**Investigating the role of musicianship
through rehearsal and performance stages of a Bach cantata**

Abstract

This paper examines the nexus between musicianship education and choral singing. Musicianship skills are vital to the development of a good musician, and nurturing a music student’s ability to think in sound is the essential foundation. This paper applies these concepts to a small vocal ensemble through the rehearsal and performance stages of the J. S. Bach Cantata BWV182 *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen!*

Keywords

Musicianship, Choirs, Z. Kodály, J. S. Bach, Cantata, Singing.

Introduction

Who is a good musician? This question was posed by Zoltán Kodály to the 1954 graduating class of the Liszt Academy of Music. He answered his own question as follows:

A well-trained ear, a well-trained intelligence, a well-trained heart and a well-trained hand. All four must develop together, in constant equilibrium. As soon as one lags behind or rushes ahead, there is something wrong. So far most of you have met only the requirement of the fourth point: the training of your fingers has left the rest far behind. You would have achieved the same results more quickly and easily, however, if your training in the other three had kept pace. (Kodály 1974, 197)

At the heart of Kodály’s thinking is the old-fashioned belief that musicianship should be holistic, encompassing much more than is usually considered by music educators. The Kodály

concept of teaching won global attention after Budapest hosted the 1964 International Society of Music Education (ISME) conference (ISME, 2007). Many were deeply impressed by the quality of musicianship on display in choral performance, even behind the Iron Curtain.

Since then, three North American scholars have significantly influenced current thought about ways of knowing in relation to musicianship. Howard Gardner (2006, 2011, 2016) highlights music as one of the multiple intelligences, with its own unique way of knowing. Edwin Gordon (1989, 2016) suggests that audiation is the very foundation of musicianship. David Elliott (1995, 2005, 2015, 2016) radically challenges the traditional notion of aesthetic music education pioneered by his doctoral supervisor Bennett Reimer, instead promoting praxial education, a way of knowing by doing.

In a similar vein, comprehensive musicianship through performance (CMP) promotes the interdisciplinary study of music through ensemble performance (O'Toole, 2003, xi). It encourages teacher and student to connect with the music on broader, deeper levels technically, musically, emotionally and analytically. This connection in turn hopefully leads to a more meaningful engagement with music through the rehearsal and performance process. CMP emerged in North America around 1965.

When considering the development of musicianship skills in the choral context, sight singing would appear to be a substantial feature. For example, Philips (2004, 278-295) devotes a whole chapter to a concise historical overview of the importance of sight singing to musicianship training in the choral context. The English church choral tradition has a formidable reputation for producing strong sight singers. English choral director John Bertalot (1993, 1994, 2002, 2004) has a long professional association with Westminster Choir College

in America. Bertalot's publications are largely practical musicianship focusing on the art of sight singing. Other published works from Westminster Choir College reveal influences from both Kodály's music education philosophy and Gordon's audiation theory (Jordan & Mehaffey 2001, Jordan & Shenenberger 2004). This is the background for the study.

Aims

The primary aim of this research paper is to enable a critical reflection and evaluation of best practice in relation to a) the quality of the teaching experience for the choral director, who is a musicianship mentor in the higher education context and b) the quality of the learning experience for the choral singer who is also a musicianship student in the higher education context.

Methodology

This research study surveyed past and present musicianship students from Avondale Conservatorium who were also involved with the small vocal ensemble Avondale Chamber Singers through the rehearsal and performance stages of the Cantata. Research data included a self-reflective journal, audio recordings, video recordings, a questionnaire and a focus group discussion. Avondale Conservatorium presented the first performance of the Bach Cantata at an evensong program on Saturday 28th May 2016. After the first performance and immediately prior to the final performance, each member of the small vocal ensemble was given a questionnaire to investigate their individual responses. The final recital performance took place on Friday June 3rd 2016 at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Immediately after this final performance the focus group discussion took place.

J. S. Bach Cantata BWV182: Present Context

This cantata was chosen for its suitability to the choral and instrumental forces currently available in relation to Avondale Conservatorium staff and students.

I was also drawn the fact that Bach the consummate musician was also Bach the serious theologian who publicly acknowledged his musical gifts by signing his compositions *Soli Deo Gloria*. The text for this cantata combines the scriptural readings of the Lutheran liturgical calendar for Palm Sunday with the spiritually thematic poetry of Salomon Franck to compliment the dual purpose of the cantata story: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and welcoming Him into the Christian heart. Palm Sunday was a joyous occasion in the passion story that called for much celebration. To sing and to dance for earthly royalty and heavenly glory appears to have been the overarching dual aim of Bach's premiere performance of this cantata.

As newly appointed Konzertmeister to the Duke of Weimar, and with a commission to compose a cantata to be premiered at the Duke's Schlosskirche at Weimar on Palm Sunday 25th May 1714, Johann Sebastian Bach must have aimed to impress his royal patron with Cantata BWV182 *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen!* Likewise, the Duke must have been flattered when his Konzertmeister began with a stately overture in the French style fit for the processional of a king.

The cantata has eight movements as follows:

1. Sonata
2. Chorus *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen!*
3. Bass Recitative *Siehe, siehe, ich komme*

4. Bass Aria *Starkes Lieben*
5. Alto Aria *Leget euch dem Heiland unter*
6. Tenor Aria *Jesu, laß durch wohl und weh*
7. Chorale *Jesu, deine passion*
8. Chorus *So lasset uns gehen in Salem der freuden*

The performance edition chosen was the Breitkopf and Härtel edition (Bach n.d.). Vocal scoring is for chamber choir with the addition of alto, tenor and bass soloists. The instrumental scoring is for chamber orchestra comprising flute, violin concertante, violin ripieno, viola I, viola II, continuo harpsichord, violoncello, violone.

Musicianship Program

Musicianship classes are streamed into three levels. The 1st year foundation level and 2nd year intermediate level both involve a weekly two-hour class across the semester (13 weeks). The combined 3rd and 4th year advanced level is a weekly one hour musicianship lecture and a one-hour conducting lecture across the semester.

All musicianship students are expected to complete the following assessment in any given semester: weekly *viva voce* tasks (technical & repertoire); written exam (dictation & repertoire); solo performance (technical & repertoire); ensemble performance singing repertoire studied in class, one voice per part.

J. S. Bach chorale harmonisation (E flat Major)

For the purpose of this study the J. S. Bach chorale harmonization (verse 33) no. 194 in E flat Major was used in the context of musicianship class (see below).

194. Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod

(Cant. 159 Sehet, wir geh'n hinauf gen Jerusalem B. A. 32, 163)

Melch. Vulpian 1609

Cont.

1. Je - su Lei - den, Pein und Tod, Je - su tie - fe Wun - den,
33. Je - su, dei - ne Pas - si - on ist mir lau - ter Freu - de,

ha - ben Menschen, die nur Koth, heil - sam - lich ver - bun - den.
dei - ne Wunden, Kron und Hohn mei - nes Herzens Wei - de;

Men - - - - - schen, die nur Koth,
Wun - - - - - den, Kron' und Hohn

Men - - - - - schen, schafft die Sün - de ab, wir sind Chri - sten wor - den,
mei - ne Seel' auf Ro - sen geht, wenn ich dran ge - den - ke,

sol - len kom - men aus dem Grab in der En - gel Or - den.
in dem Him - mel ei - ne Stätt' mir des - we - gen schen - ke.

34 Str. (Str. 33 des Liedes: Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod.)

Paul Stockmann, vor 1636

The foundation level students were required to sight read this chorale in letter names and make an analysis of the tonal centre for each phrase. There was no assessment connected with this chorale for foundation level students.

The intermediate level students were required to sight read this chorale in letter names and solfège; make an analysis of the tonal centre for each phrase; and complete a harmonic analysis of the cadence points of each phrase. There was no assessment connected to this chorale for intermediate level students.

The advanced level students were required to sight read in letter names, solfège and German text. They also analysed the tonal centre for each phrase and completed a full harmonic analysis of the chorale including cadence points. Additionally they made a small comparative study of J. S. Bach chorale harmonisations by way of comparing and contrasting this chorale with two others (no. 192, 193) with the same melody (Bach n.d.).

The advanced level assessment consisted of the following basic tasks built around the study of the E flat major choral harmonisation: *part a* - sing each part separately against the bass line; *part b* - performance of the chorale in SATB quartets; *part c* - conduct peers in a class performance of the chorale.

J. S. Bach Cantata BWV182, No. 7 Chorale ‘Jesu deine passion’

The advanced level students analysed the treatment of the chorale melody in the context of the No. 7 chorale movement in J.S. Bach cantata BWV182. After completing a comparative study of J. S. Bach’s treatment of the chorale melody in the context of four contrasting chorale settings, advanced level students were then encouraged to attempt the extension task, which was to create their own improvisation based on the original chorale melody.

J. S. Bach Cantata BWV182, No. 3 Bass Recitative ‘Siehe, siehe, ich komme’

The advanced level students completed the following task in relation to the third movement bass recitative ‘Siehe, siehe, ich komme’: *part a* - Sing melody (solfège, letternames, German) and play continuo bass line; *part b* - conduct peers as soloists & continuo players for a performance in class. An advanced level student whose principal study is bass voice was given an opportunity to perform this recitative and the accompanying aria in a bass understudy role for the first performance.

Bach Cantata BWV182, No. 1 Sonata (excerpt)

After sight reading and making an harmonic analysis of the opening sonata excerpt, the advanced level students completed the following task in relation to the first movement sonata: *part a* - sing viola I (alto clef) in solfège and letternames and play continuo bass line; *part b* - sing viola II (tenor clef) in solfège and letternames and play continuo bass line; *part c* - perform instrumental parts of the sonata excerpt as a vocal ensemble. An advanced level student whose principal study is violin played violin II in the chamber orchestra for the performance (transcription from viola I).

Choral Program

The large resident choral ensemble (30-40 voices) of Avondale Conservatorium is called Avondale Singers. Music students who join Avondale Singers for their ensemble performance elective are expected to attend weekly 1.5 hour rehearsals and attend any associated additional hours for performances across the semester. Avondale Singers gave the first performance. The final performance was given by Avondale Chamber Singers, 12 voices selected from the larger ensemble who also attended an additional hour of weekly rehearsal time.

Historically informed performance practices

There is a considerable amount of literature on the debate surrounding the likely size of J. S. Bach's choir (Braatz 2010). At one end of the debate lies the traditional argument for twelve to sixteen voices giving three to four voices per part (Schweitzer 1966, Schering 1936, Spitta 2015). At the other end of the debate lies Rifkin's controversial argument for four voices giving one voice per part (Parrott 2000, 189-208). Research into historical performance practices and iconography connected to J. S. Bach also revealed a need to consider performance standing positions (Parrott 2000, 29-41). After theoretical research and practical experimentation it was decided that Avondale chamber choir would consist of twelve voices with three sopranos on the left then three altos, three tenors and three basses standing from left to right in one row behind the chamber orchestra.

Preliminary conclusions

1. Teaching perspective: self-reflective teacher analysis of the musicianship program

Having considered the focus group data and watched the progress of students, I am convinced that strong integration of the musicianship class, conducting class, choir and orchestra produces a more meaningful experience in learning. This integration meant that students were more engaged with the rehearsal and performance process overall even when most were not singing, for example when soloists were rehearsing.

The research showed clearly that students who were involved in the choir and orchestra found the intensive study of the cantata in musicianship class extremely valuable and interesting, while students not involved in the performance found the intensive study of the cantata somewhat valuable but sometimes tedious.

2. Learning Perspective: self-reflective student analysis of the musicianship program

The results showed that students perceived the following to be most useful through the rehearsal and performance stages: inner hearing (thinking in sound, aural analysis), sight singing (visual analysis), ensemble (one voice per part), solfège, intervals and musical memory.

I plan to publish these results in more detail in future.

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