

## Book Reviews

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### **Singing in the Lower Secondary School** by

Martin Ashley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 216pp., paperback. £24.95. ISBN 978-0-19-335591-6.

Martin Ashley's introduction provides a clear rationale for the publication of this volume, which is based on his practical experience of working with adolescent voices, as well as upon his well-established research in this field:

Firstly, despite being highly trained musicians, not all secondary school music teachers have expertise in singing or choral direction; although this book will have broad appeal, these practitioners are Ashley's 'key target group'. Secondly, facilitating singing in the lower secondary school is a 'specialism within a specialism' (p. 1), which requires a wide range of practical, musical and vocal skills, alongside knowledge and understanding of the vocal development of young adolescents; this book is designed to provide some of the insight required for leading singing effectively with this age group. Thirdly, there is a lack of singing in many English secondary schools; in just under half of them there is 'no singing at all' and the singing has been assessed as 'good or excellent' by OFSTED in only about a quarter of them (p. 1), and Ashley explores the reasons for this. He suggests that a widespread misunderstanding of vocal development in adolescent males may have contributed to the current limited provision of singing for boys with changing voices, and sets out to challenge some of the myths and misconceptions around the voice change process. He also tackles some of the more contentious topics, including the reasons why singing is more likely to be

flourishing in private, fee-charging schools than in publicly funded state schools. Ashley proposes that this has less to do with the socio-economic background of the pupils than 'the quality of senior leadership and music teaching' (p. 2), and seeks to confront some of the contributory factors. He also contends that singing is currently in danger of becoming a spectator sport that revolves around individual vocal performances being exposed to the often humiliating and degrading progression through various rounds on televised talent shows, rather than a participatory activity which is open to, and enjoyed by, everyone. Finally, he suggests that, even in schools where singing is strong, it is not always appreciated for its intrinsic value, and that more use could be made of voice-based pedagogy as a tool for acquiring musical skills and knowledge.

These are all complex subjects to address in one volume, even before Ashley raises the question of whether puberty is starting earlier these days, and the effects that this is likely to have on physiological, social, cognitive and vocal maturation. However, he starts in a very accessible way by defining 'singing' and the age range covered by the term 'lower secondary school', providing useful background on government targets for vocal achievement for this educational and developmental stage, and outlining the biological effects of puberty and the impact of socio-cultural considerations upon singing provision in schools. Helpful distinctions between 'choral work', 'vocal work', 'just singing' and the 'class chorus' are also provided. An approach to whole class singing is suggested in which the vocal development of the students should be prioritised when selecting suitable repertoire, whilst also considering

the quality of the music: facilitating musical pedagogy; ensuring that lyrics are age-appropriate; allowing an inclusive approach to material which reflects the multicultural heritage of British society; and acknowledging the burgeoning musical identities of the adolescents, which may be very strong and separate from music which is perceived as 'school music' (p. 21). From this it becomes clear that even choosing an appropriate song for the whole class to sing can present an enormous challenge, but fortunately some guidance on repertoire selection and song arrangement is provided in Chapter 7. The importance of 'fitting the song to the voice' is continued in Chapter 10, during the description of the *cambiata* movement, which began in the United States as a means of catering for young adolescent singers with changing voices. This chapter includes helpful tips on finding, composing and arranging 'cambiata music', alongside tables showing the comfortable tessitura and full ranges to be considered when creating two and three part arrangements for young adolescents.

Much of Ashley's writing focuses on the changes taking place in the voices of young adolescent males, which are explained in detail in Chapter 5, and this information will be invaluable to anyone working with male singers in the lower secondary school and beyond. Chapter 5 includes useful summary tables, which show the expected tessitura, full range, and likely quality of the singing voice during the principal stages of vocal development, which are shown in relation to school year group. John Cooksey's extensive work in this area is, rightly, given credit in this section, as is Irvin Cooper's introduction of the concept of *cambiata*, arising from his work with adolescent male singers, in Chapter 10. Ashley recognises that girls' voices also develop during and around puberty, and acknowledges that 'cambiata'

provision can be made for girls as well as boys, but there is significantly less coverage of the changes undergone by the adolescent female singer.

The concentration on male adolescent vocal development obviously reflects Ashley's expertise and long-established research specialisms, but it is slightly disappointing that the male perspective takes such pre-eminence throughout the book. In Chapter 9, the challenges inherent in encouraging teenage boys to enjoy singing are presented, but several of these points are also relevant to girls, and therefore have even wider significance than Ashley claims. He states that the more obvious voice change in boys probably accounts for the general neglect of the topic of voice change in females, apart from the ground-breaking work by Lynne Gackle, who is here described as the 'John Cooksey for girls' (p. 102). This phrase indicates the extent to which research on male adolescent vocal development has been prioritised over the lesser known vocal changes experienced by many adolescent females. This imbalance is understandable, based on the more dramatic nature of the male voice change process, but it is suggestive of the need for further research into the experience of vocal development in female adolescents.

Ashley's book contains a wealth of essential information for his target audiences of both newly qualified and established teachers who find themselves responsible for developing a class singing programme. The most daunting take-home message of this book is that the quality of singing in secondary schools is usually more dependent upon the expertise of the teachers, and the support of school management, than upon the ability or background of the students. However, the challenges of facilitating singing in the lower secondary school are clearly recognised by

the author. One of the main challenges is that although there are recognised measures of singing development, which are detailed in Chapter 4, 'progression in singing is not straightforwardly linear' (p. 88) and the class teacher can 'be faced with a range of ability from the confirmed non-singer to the advanced choral singer' (p. 87). Ashley also points out that teaching singing in the classroom may be complicated by the fact that some teachers may experience 'singing anxiety' which may inhibit their teaching, and that this can be transmitted to their students. He also makes it clear that providing access to more information on vocal development would enable more teachers to lead class singing for adolescents in a way that is healthy, effective and enjoyable for all concerned. The author's stated intention is that this publication will function as a handbook for teachers who are faced with the challenges of leading singing activities in the lower secondary school (p. 6). In an ideal world, all developing voices would be nurtured in an informed and supportive way, and this book will begin to spread the word about some of the crucial factors in empowering adolescent singers.

Fifty years after it was first initiated in American junior high schools, wider dissemination of the 'cambiata' approach is now underway in the UK, largely thanks to Ashley's advocacy. One of the most important messages is that male adolescent voices do not 'break' but undergo a process of change; if teachers are well-informed about this process and have effective strategies for helping boys to manage this change, boys of all ages can enjoy singing, develop a strong vocal identity and gain confidence from their singing activities. Although there is less emphasis on the subtler aspects of the voice change process for female adolescents, teenage girls also

often need reassurance and guidance about their vocal development. All of this places a considerable responsibility upon the teacher in charge of whole class singing but the rewards of this can be substantial. An enthusiastic, skilful and well-informed leader of class singing may facilitate healthy vocal development, enhance musical engagement, foster vocal confidence, and inspire a lifelong interest in group singing activities.

*Singing in the Lower Secondary School* contains vital information for teachers of singers in this age group, and the dissemination of Ashley's work will contribute significantly to a greater understanding of adolescent vocal development. This will help teachers to address some of the challenges of leading class singing, to avoid some of the major pitfalls inherent in this activity, and to guide adolescent singers through this influential stage of their musical lives.

MICHAEL BONSHOR  
UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD  
[pocketmaestro@hotmail.com](mailto:pocketmaestro@hotmail.com)

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**Music for Children with Hearing Loss: A**

**Resource for Parents and Teachers** by Lyn E. Schraer-Joiner. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 314pp., paperback. £20.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-985583-4.

This book provides a practical and insightful resource for both parents and educators who are looking to bring music into the lives of children with hearing loss, both in the classroom and at home. Progressing through seven chapters, the author explores how and why we might hope to better engage children with hearing loss in the music classroom.