

## Secondary singing inspected\*

**Janet Mills HMI**

Dr Janet Mills HMI, OFSTED, Government Buildings, Marston Road, Oxford, OX3 0TY

E-mail: [jmills@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:jmills@ofsted.gov.uk)

*The oft-lamented decline of singing in school, like many other reported declines in education (Mills 1996), is probably more imaginary than real. Ask adults to reminisce about singing when they were at school, and their stories of off-task antics during massed renditions of 'Greensleeves', 'The British Grenadiers' or 'Nymphs and Shepherds', of grunTERS, groanERS and pupils asked by their teachers just to mouth the words, do not speak of a golden age of singing in schools. Certainly, any golden age had passed when I started teaching in 1976, and I needed to work as hard as any teacher must now to persuade pupils to sing with effort, concentration and sensitivity, to vary the mood of their singing, when appropriate, from that suited to 'Football Crazy', and to cease to use their imagination to produce what they thought were amusing alternatives to printed lyrics. Yes, there was sometimes singing, of a sort, in assembly. And yes, many music teachers ran choirs and other activities for pupils who were particularly interested in singing. But then, as now, it was difficult to draw in boys, and girls whose time was sought also by PE teachers. But the fact that no decline in singing at school is proven does not excuse any complacency about the quality of singing in schools now. To judge from the high standards that may be observed in some schools, they could be much higher generally. This article considers some of the background to singing in secondary school, and describes some of the more successful approaches to singing by pupils aged eleven to fourteen that have been observed by HM Inspectors (HMI).*

### Introduction

There is little that is new about the Western European phenomenon of singing being viewed as, indeed being, a *good thing*, but a good thing that worries some potential participants, both singers and directors. I say *Western European phenomenon* partly because of an experience at a music education conference that I attended in 1998 in the North-West Province of South Africa. The staff at our conference centre simply did not share the delegates' music-graduate hang-ups and inhibitions about singing. This was from a position of strength. They had much better melodic and rhythmic memory than us, and the ability to get together with people they had not sung with before and produce something that sounded professional in a short space of time. They were also very good teachers, although they found it hard to cover their amazement and justified amusement at

\* This article is based on a talk given to a conference of the British Federation of Youth Choirs at Loughborough University in September 1998.

the pathetically slow pace with which we learnt from them, and our willingness to accommodate errors of rhythm and articulation that they viewed as grossly wrong.

The problem that I have described as Western European has a long history in England. In 1597, Thomas Morley opened one of the earliest-known music theory textbooks, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*, with a self-styled non-singer's account of an embarrassing incident:

. . . supper being ended, and Musicke books, according to the custome being brought to the table: the mistresse of the house presented me with a part, earnestly requesting me to sing. But when after manie excuses, I protested unfainedly that I could not: everie one began to wonder. Yea, some whispered to others, demanding [to know] how I was brought up. (Morley, 1952: 9)

Prior to the Education Reform Act of 1988 there was no legal requirement that schools in England teach any subject other than religious education. Nevertheless, it would have been difficult to find a secondary school that did not teach music, and there were clear expectations by government that schools would teach music, and teach it well. In 1985 HMI wrote in a discussion document, *Music from 5 to 16* (DES 1985: 9–10):

By the age of fourteen, [pupils] should have had such musical experiences as to enable them, with varying degrees of skill and understanding, to . . . sing individually and in groups with good vocal tone and acceptable articulation; to be able to maintain a simple part while others are singing or playing; to take part in a round or canon; to know and to be able to join in with a variety of appropriate songs in most of the following categories: traditional folk songs, songs of the British Isles and its regions and its various cultures, modern songs including certain pop songs, work songs, historical and modern ballads, blues, jazz and gospel songs, songs from cantatas, musicals, operas, the music hall and other forms of music theatre . . . compose (but not necessarily notate) original music (vocal and/or instrumental – including electronic) in response to an external stimulus . . . both individually and in groups.

Thus singing was encouraged as an activity in its own right, and also as a medium for composition. The discussion document continues:

While singing should continue to figure prominently in any scheme of work at [age eleven to fourteen], the traditional massed singing approach may not always be appropriate. Vocal improvisation which can do much to develop concepts of melody, harmony and texture, should be encouraged and there should be scope for some part work, combination with instruments and frequent integration of songs into classroom ensembles. Recording, mixing and amplifying this work can further heighten interest. The expectations of the teacher should remain high and vocal work should not be allowed to degenerate into a routine, depersonalised sing-song. (pp. 11–12)

The death-knell of one-off massed sing-songs – be they of so-called *national* songs such as *The British Grenadiers*, or more recently composed material with subject matter likely to appeal to adolescents, such as *Football Crazy* – had, it seemed, been sounded. Or, at least, teachers were being encouraged to think of other approaches to singing, including improvisation and composition.

Singing first became a statutory requirement of secondary schools in September 1992, when the original version of the National Curriculum for Music in England was introduced. A revised National Curriculum that was implemented in 1995 did not alter the statutory position of singing: it must be taught to all pupils aged five to fourteen, but teachers are not required to include singing in the assessment that they must make of all pupils at age fourteen:

Pupils should be taught to sing . . . a variety of music, developing control of subtle changes within all elements [e.g. pitch, duration, dynamics] and the ability to interpret the intended effect; sing . . . music by ear, from memory and from various forms of notation, including . . . staff notation and chord symbols. (DfE 1995: 7)

Composition using the voice is encouraged.

### Singing inspected

During 1993–97, all the maintained secondary schools in England were inspected by OFSTED. Drawing on the evidence provided by these inspections, HMI wrote:

[During 1993–97] there has been a steady improvement of standards in music [of pupils aged eleven to fourteen]. Improvements are evident in composing, performing on instruments, listening and appraising, but are most noticeable in singing. Schools where pupils rarely sang at all in 1993 now sing frequently, and to an ever-rising standard. Teachers are building up a repertoire of songs that are suitable for boys and girls to sing . . . and developing their ability to help pupils improve the quality of their work. More pupils now use their voices in their compositions. (OFSTED 1998: 153)

Inspectors do still occasionally find secondary schools that do not sing at all, and others where singing is not addressed systematically, or is taught very badly. The 'routine depersonalised sing-song' referred to in *Music from 5 to 16* has not completely died out, but has become less evident each year since 1993.

The good practice in singing that inspectors have found takes a range of forms, and does not employ a common repertoire. However, it often shares the following characteristics:

- (1) The teachers communicate their very high expectations concerning pupils' singing in a manner that gives pupils the will and confidence to achieve high standards. The pupils see singing as an enjoyable challenge, not an embarrassing difficulty.

*Example* School 1 is an upper school that receives pupils at the age of thirteen years. While Heads of Music at other upper schools may seek to excuse lack of attention to singing, or low standards of singing, on the grounds that it is difficult to motivate boys and girls, but particularly boys, to sing when their voices are changing, the Head of Music at School 1 teaches singing in a manner that suggests that he has not considered the possibility of making any excuses.

Walk into the music room at School 1, and you are likely to see pupils standing, grouped according to voice, and singing directly to the teacher, not seated behind tables or at keyboards. The pupils all make an effort to sing well, and they all sing solo when asked to do so by the teacher. They learn unison and

part songs by memory, and sing them unaccompanied, or to the teacher's piano accompaniment. They use their voices during almost all of their work in performance and composition.

Enthusiasm for singing in class has led to enthusiasm for singing outside lesson time. During the three years that the Head of Music has been in post, the school choir has grown from nil to 70 members, of whom almost half are boys.

- (2) Singing is addressed, in a manner that is demanding, as soon as the pupils arrive at the school – before they have a chance to think of music lessons as something that might not include singing.

*Example* This was the eleven-year-olds' second music lesson at School 2. They sang four songs, and were taught to sing them more effectively. The standard of the singing at the start of the lesson was quite low, but everyone was taking part, and so the teacher had something on which to build. The teacher used the class's shared knowledge of the songs to improve pupils' ability to internalise music. Pupils who had done some extra work at lunchtime played a phrase from any of the songs, and the other pupils had to say which song it came from, describe its location in the song, and say which words were sung to it.

School 2 was able to do this work so early in pupils' career at the school because it participates in an LEA curriculum project that bridges the transition from primary to secondary school. All the pupils who enter each of the participating secondary schools already know an agreed core of four songs composed by local secondary teachers.

- (3) Activities that include singing are taught with pace, purpose and demand. They are differentiated, require pupils to work individually as well as in groups, and give pupils feedback about how well they are doing, and how they might improve. They are the antithesis of the 'depersonalised sing-songs' described in Music from 5 to 16.

*Example* A lesson for twelve-year-olds at School 3 shows one way in which singing, including solo singing, can be incorporated into teaching that is very rigorous, fast-moving, demanding and developmental. The contrast between this approach and 'depersonalised sing-songs' is readily apparent.

The lesson was based on *call and response*. During the first twenty-five minutes each pupil produced an individual clapped, and then sung or hummed, response to the teacher's call, and received feedback from the teacher. All the pupils got individual feedback that was conveyed through the teacher's body language, some received individual verbal comment, and they all had verbal evaluation that was addressed at groups of pupils who had responded in a similar way, or to a similar standard. The use of *call and response* helped to move the lesson along, and gave a musical structure to the pupils' work: it did not feel like a test. The pupils were kept on their toes while others were responding partly through their interest in the piece of music that was emerging, and also through the teacher's practice of targeting questions about other pupils' work at individuals, including any who showed signs that their attention might be wandering. The teacher's practice of returning to pupils who she thought might have under-

achieved helped pupils to feel satisfaction in their work, and also reduced any temptation to produce responses that met some minimal requirements, but were not pupils' best work. It also showed the teacher's good knowledge of the skills of individuals.

- (4) Singing is not just about vocal performance. The pupils sing whenever this will help them raise their standards in composing, performing or appraising. But even when the focus of the lesson is composing, instrumental performance or appraising, the singing is of a high standard.

*Example* A lesson for twelve-year-olds at School 4 provided an example of the use of singing to improve pupils' standard of performance on keyboards.

During the previous lesson, the pupils had started learning to play *In the Mood* on keyboards: melody and chords. During the first part of the lesson observed, the teacher wanted the pupils to try to play it much faster and more fluently, without feeling that they still needed to read it from staff notation, checking more or less every note before they moved on. He also wanted some swing. Many teachers would have approached this by seating the pupils at keyboards and exhorting them to speed up and copy the rhythm as played by the teacher. This teacher did something else. He started the lesson with the class singing *In the Mood* to his piano accompaniment. Techniques including sharing the melody between two groups that were expected to stand to sing, and sit when they were not, ensured the concentration of the class, and encouraged them to think of the melody as phrases, not just notes. Next, he asked the class to repeat what they had just done, but singing along with a commercial recording of *In the Mood*, which was much faster. They did. Finally, he asked them to go to the keyboards and play *In the Mood* as they had just sung it, singing along in their heads or out loud if they wished. This worked extremely well.

- (5) Singing at school builds on the experience that pupils have gained of singing in the community.

*Example* Some of the pupils at School 5 belonged to an external gospel choir. The music teacher knew very little about gospel initially, but was content for the pupils to rehearse themselves in the music room at lunchtime. Over the years, a wider group of pupils has been drawn in, and the music teacher has gradually become involved in the organisation and development of the many gospel groups that have formed within the school. But the pupils are still inducted into gospel mainly by other pupils who sing gospel in the community: gospel is seen as a real, adult, form of musical activity, and not as *school music*.

## References

- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE (1985) *Music from 5 to 16*. London: HMSO.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (1995) *Music in the National Curriculum*. London: HMSO.
- MILLS, J. (1996) 'Is education in decline? a view from the joint matriculation board, 1954–65', *Research in Education*, 55 29–38.

*Janet Mills HMI*

MORLEY, T. (1952) *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicalle Musicke*, edited by R. A. Harman. London: Dent.

OFSTED (1998) *Secondary Education 1993–97: A review of secondary schools in England*. London: HMSO.