

BOOK REVIEWS

The confident choir: A handbook for leaders of group singing by Michael Bonshor. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, 212pp, hardback. £73. ISBN: 978-1-5381-0278-7
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If, as a choral conductor, you have ever wondered what your amateur choristers were really thinking and how you can improve your choir's confidence both musically and socially, then this book is for you. It provides an insightful view into the subjective perceptions and emotional experiences of amateur choral singers written with a view to empowering established, and aspiring, conductors with practical advice in order to build the confident choir.

Like other excellent books and book chapters on choral pedagogy (e.g., Abrahams & Head, 2017; Garnet, 2009), Bonshor's work is based on original research. However, in this case, it has been written with the non-academic audience in mind. The introduction starts by easing the reader in an accessible way into the study aims, details of the amateur chorister participants and the methodological approach of the research. It also provides reflexivity and background information about the author.

Bonshor's original research results are then discussed alongside the existing literature and presented within relevant philosophical and psychological frameworks. Each chapter concentrates on a specific aspect of confident choral building based on the thematic results from Bonshor's interviews which grow into useful and practical lists of exercises and suggestions. His first theme is conveying and cultivating confidence, which explores what participants have observed about the embodiment and communication of confidence in other singers and also considers the contribution of the conductor. Practice, preparation and presentation cover areas such as performance anxiety, rehearsal strategies, considerations when choosing repertoire and the practicalities of getting ready for performance. Bonshor then discusses issues of choir formation and configuration both in the rehearsal room and on the stage from acoustics, confidence, communication and visual viewpoints. The next chapter highlights the socio-educational aspects of choral singing such as developing peer learning, welcoming new choir members and dealing with conflicts. The final section is dedicated to the investigation and development of conducting style covering, for example, different types of feedback and consideration of choristers' diversity and individual needs. In conclusion, there is a short chapter outlining Bonshor's personal philosophy of the 'singer-centred' (p.145) choral conducting approach and there is a final checklist for conductors who wish to follow his example.

Of particular interest are Bonshor's original findings which sometimes conflict with the existing literature. For example, he explains the principle of 'self-to-other ratio (SOR)' (p.58) which is the ratio of your perception of your own sound in relation to those singing around you. Previous research highlighted by Bonshor had demonstrated that choristers preferred to hear themselves more clearly in reference to those around them (positive SOR) (Ternström, 1994). However, Bonshor's participants preferred the opposite, in other words, they preferred to hear other choristers rather than themselves. These conflicting results may be due to different types of choral participants responding to different research aims but what is clear is that choral directors need to be aware of these differences. To get the most confidence out of different types and groups of singers, it may be necessary to take this information into account when arranging choir configurations.

Bonshor also highlights another area that is seldom addressed in the choral training literature and, in my opinion, is also rarely considered by choral conductors on the rostrum: the importance

of relationships within and between all stakeholders in the amateur choral environment. Bonshor discovered that this is a key area of building confidence both interpersonally and musically and can affect choral attendance and retention. A conductor may consider how to deal with conflicts and arguments but rarely is any weight given to the building of the choir community, the development of comradeship, the growth of trust, the consideration of effective support mechanisms and the encouragement of peer learning. Once again, Bonshor has some excellent suggestions and practical tips for this area which could reduce the prevalence of conflicts and actively encourage good communication and relationship building which can aid retention and recruitment.

In summary, Bonshor's key advice is to keep listening, watching, communicating and collaborating. Of course, that means the conductor listening musically to aspects of performance such as vocal blend, rhythm and expression and being aware of how choristers listen to each other in a musical sense. However, it also means the conductor actively listening to choristers' feedback and questions and developing a relationship with choir members so that each person feels valued. In addition, it means listening and watching how choristers interact with each other and encouraging them to communicate and collaborate better both musically and in general. This key advice is practically supported with clear and thorough lists of exercises and suggestions. Of course, each of these helpful lists is scattered about the book because they are intimately connected to their associated discussions, but it would have been useful to have an appendix or glossary of these practical suggestions reiterated for easy reference at the end of the book. Even so, this book should be a core textbook for anyone wanting to conduct an amateur choir or for seasoned conductors curious as to how they can improve the musical and social confidence of their amateur singers.

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References

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Creativities in Arts Education, Research and Practice: International perspectives for the Future of Learning and Teaching. Series: Critical Issues in the Future of Learning and Teaching, Volume 15, by Leon de Bruin, Pamela Burnard and Susan Davis. Brill Sense, 2018. 240pp, hbk, £88, ISBN: 978-90-04-36958-0

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This edited book explores the value of creativity within and beyond arts education in a range of international contexts. The book as a whole explores the variety of ways that creative skill can be fostered through arts education. This exposes the complex and, at times conflicting understandings of, and aspirations for, creativity itself. The challenges and opportunities associated with the global context in which creativity is fostered are highlighted throughout. The book is divided into three sections each of which focuses on a different area of arts education and practice. The opening chapters address arts practice and arts-based research,