

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This thesis explores the expected role and responsibilities of UK-based choral conductors from a singer's perspective, with a particular focus on the conductor's role in the use and care of singers' voices. The role of a conductor is a contested concept, with no unanimous consensus on what the role and required skillset of a conductor should be (Durrant, 1996; Jansson, 2013). The existing variety of conceptions of the role may be the result of conductors functioning differently across varying choral contexts and therefore may allow for practitioners to usefully adapt the role to suit their choral group. This lack of consensus however on what a conductor's role is, what they do, and how they do it, may also pose problems for those seeking to evaluate and model conducting practice (Jansson, 2013).

1.1 Motivation for the study/Researcher positioning

The impetus for this research stemmed from my experience of participating in choirs as a singer. As a singing teacher and conductor I began to grow concerned and frustrated as I witnessed other conductors treat their singers' voices in a way which I perceived to be detrimental. Colleagues began reporting hoarseness and fatigue after choir rehearsals, both of which indicated vocal misuse to me. Additionally, as conductors led warm-up exercises and offered advice on vocal technique which did not align with my own understanding of vocal best-practice, I began to wonder whether these choral leaders' methods of vocal pedagogy were simply different to my own, or whether they might not have had access to a similar level of vocal training and were therefore simply doing their best with the vocal knowledge they had. I then began reflecting on my own experience of conductor training

and wondering whether I might be culpable of engineering the choral rehearsals I ran to align only with my skillset, as opposed to ensuring I had the necessary skills to fulfil the role expected of me by singers.

Reflecting on these experiences and then consulting the choral conducting literature revealed a gap in the shape of a definition of the role of a UK-based choral conductor in relation to their responsibilities to singers' voices. Of most concern to me as a singing teacher was the separation of discussion between rehearsal/performance management and safe and efficient voice use by singers in the conducting literature. Although many texts made reference to safe/efficient vocal use, logistical conductor duties such as rehearsal management and musical functions such as control of tempo, balance/blend, and tuning often appeared to have primacy over the vocally focused aspects of the role, suggesting to me that in many cases these duties were perceived as of secondary importance (Brewer, 1997; McElheran, 1989; "Music Direction diplomas (DipABRSM, LRSM and FRSM)," 2017).

Embarking on the research in this area from my position as a conductor and singing teacher situates me as an insider-researcher (Costley et al., 2013). A number of benefits and challenges accompany this position. A key benefit of being an insider-researcher is access to insider, specialised knowledge, and access to groups of practitioners who can further enhance this knowledge (*Ibid.*). Accompanying this however are a number of potential challenges, such as the need to manage the power implications of being both a researcher and practitioner within a field of practice, maintaining anonymity/confidentiality for any colleagues participating in the research, and the need to be critical of one's own perspective

during the course of the research, given the potential for insider bias (*Ibid.*). These challenges were given careful consideration during the research design process and will be addressed fully in Chapter 5, Methodology.

1.2 Context of the study

The British choral tradition has its roots firmly planted within the Christian church and in particular within activities surrounding The Reformation (Durrant, 2017). During this period, composers were required to set texts written in English, as opposed to Latin, in order to make participating in singing more accessible for congregations as part of Protestant worship. In addition to this, the subsequent widespread teaching of Curwin and Glover's tonic sol-fa system during the late 19th century enabled large bodies of laypersons to participate in group singing (Durrant, 2017; Wisse, n.d.). This in turn led to the formation of choral festivals and choral societies with the purpose of performing large scale choral works (Durrant, 2017). The roots of this tradition lie in stark contrast to today's choral scene in which just 11% of choral activity is identified as taking place within church choirs or other religious choirs (Voices Now, 2017).

As choral singing has become more diverse, and the type of repertoire performed has become in some areas more complex, the conductor's role has begun to encompass more than previously expected. Where originally conductors were tasked primarily with timekeeping, the role has grown to encompass a broader range of abilities such as musical interpretation and enhanced coordination skills (Durrant & Varvarigou, 2019). Additionally, the purpose of much choral singing has diversified, with the majority of choirs in the UK

comprising groups of people who gather to sing as a social activity. Consequently, the conductor has also begun to play a role in some groups in unifying the choir socially in addition to enacting their musical role (*Ibid.*). Further to this, the UK's choral census, undertaken in 2017, shows a wide diversity in the demographics and purpose of choirs currently active within the UK. The report found groups ranged in size from 4 to 700 singers, the age of the singers sampled ranged from 6 to 100+ years old, and the most common type of choir in the UK was found to be community choirs which represented 36% of the sample, as compared to choral societies and chamber choirs which represented 18% and 15% respectively of the sample (Voices Now, 2017).

Whilst group singing is no recent phenomenon, writing on the subject of choral conducting is a more recent trend, with one of the earliest texts on the subject composed in 1910 by Russian conductor Pavel Chesnokov (Jansson, 2013). Choral conducting writings have been penned by a number of authors since Chesnokov, however as a subject of study, choral conducting is considered an emerging field. At present, the scholarly conducting literature is generally atomistic in nature, with authors compartmentalising aspects of the conducting act and examining these separately. Studies have, for example, been undertaken on many individual aspects of conducting such as gesture, aural skills, score preparation, and choral acoustics. There is however a scarcity of research that addresses conducting as an integrated or "holistic" (Jansson, 2013) role. In addition to this, much of the scholarly research that has been undertaken has been carried out in the US where the training and practice of conductors is markedly different to the UK (Varvarigou & Durrant, 2011). Within the body of practice-based texts, authors often offer autobiographical anecdotes as the

basis of guidelines for practice or outline suggested conductor skillsets and behaviours based on personal experience. These texts therefore generally outline contextually specific working practices developed by practitioners during the course of their careers.

1.3 Statement of the problem (a)

Originally this thesis intended to examine the conductor's role in the development and training of singers' voices. The primary research question generated for this project was stated as: **To what extent is it possible and perhaps more importantly appropriate for a conductor to offer vocal instruction to singers in training from the podium when faced with a range of singers of varying ability levels, voice types and levels of vocal education?**

Sub-research questions were also generated and are presented in Chapter 3 (see section 3.3).

An initial review of the conducting literature was undertaken, which appeared to show a strong basis for a focus in this area. Initial data gathering was then undertaken via an online survey, sampling conductors currently based in the UK. Analysis of this data indicated that whilst many conductors in the sample did engage in choral vocal pedagogy in their work with choirs, choral vocal pedagogy, that is the teaching of vocal technique to choral singers, was clearly not a priority as compared to various other rehearsal aspects such as the overall quality of sound produced by the ensemble or singer motivation.

This indicated that the research's initial focus was too narrow and that in order to understand the conductor's role in working with singers' voices, it was necessary to revisit the literature and reevaluate the research questions being posed in the project. It was therefore determined that returning to the literature and engaging in a problematization process (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) in order to generate new research questions would be an appropriate next step in the research. Altering the direction of the research in this way after engaging in initial data-gathering was deemed appropriate due to the project's pragmatic nature.

1.3.1 Pragmatism as a paradigm for the research

As acknowledged above, the conducting literature comprises not only scholarly research but also a large body of work produced by practitioners. In addition to this there are many scholarly researchers who bridge this gap by engaging in both research on conducting and conducting practice (Daugherty, 2019; Durrant, 2019; *Featured Author - Dag Jansson*, 2020). Indeed, much conducting research involves an element of practical fieldwork or observation of practice (Durrant, 1996; Ekholm, 2006; Grady, 2014). In sitting between theory and practice, the study of conducting may be situated successfully within a pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatic researchers do not view theory and practice as separate entities, rather they are both viewed as sitting on a spectrum of forms of inquiry available to researchers. In pragmatic research, the researcher aims to turn an indeterminate situation into a problematic situation, and then aims to undertake inquiry to move from a problematic situation to a set of warranted assertions which are of use in future action, thereby improving the problematic situation (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In other words, pragmatic

researchers must first identify a problem to be investigated, and then take action which allows them to gain an understanding of the situation and then produce results that will be useful in explaining or altering the situation.

In this thesis, a pragmatic approach is employed. This is evident in the structure of the literature review and research design process. Initial data gathering was observed to be unsuccessful, therefore the conducting literature was revisited and a problematisation process was engaged in to redesign a more successful set of research questions and study design. In doing so, I aimed to move from the indeterminate situation described above wherein I observed singers experiencing negative choral experiences, to a problematic situation through the generation of research questions that respond appropriately to this situation. This process is outlined in detail in Chapter 3. The result of this problematization process was a shift in focus from choral vocal pedagogy, to a broader exploration of the conductor's role, whilst maintaining a focus on the voice-centred aspects of the role.

1.3.2 Statement of the problem (b)

The result of the problematization process identified a number of potential alternative approaches to exploring the conductor's role in voice work. The most striking observation made was that scholarly theory relating to the "holistic" (Jansson, 2013, p.52) role of the conductor is scarce. Previous studies frequently examine only individual aspects of conductor function whereas an integrated overview of the conductor's role is less common. In addition to this, UK-focused choral conducting research is relatively uncommon, with the majority of work in this area being undertaken in the US. The body of conducting research

most frequently frames the conductor's role as an educator, with only a very set of studies deviating from this and instead conceptualising the conductor instead as a leader of a team (Allen & Apfelstadt, 1990; Davidson, 1995; Ludwa, 2012). Finally, within the literature reviewed, a centring of the singers' perspective was conspicuously absent, as previously noted by Jansson in a review of the literature (2019).

The following research questions were therefore generated:

- 1. What do singers expect of a UK-based choral leader, with particular reference to the voice-centred aspects of their role?**
- 2. What forms of leadership are valued within a choral context?**

A number of sub-research questions were also generated, these are presented in Chapter 3, following a full discussion of the problematization process.

1.4 Aim and scope of the study

The broad aim of this study is therefore to explore what singers expect in terms of choral leadership from their conductors, with particular reference to the specifically voice-centred aspects of their role. The term 'voice-centred' is used in this thesis to refer to activities that can only be considered in relation to singer-focused voice work, as distinct from conductor duties which could be considered in relation to leading other groups of people, such as communicating logistical instructions or motivating a team.

In terms of scope, this study is firstly focused on UK-based choral activity. Choral singing of a wide-variety of genres is represented, and no restrictions were placed on the types of choral singers invited to take part in the data-gathering process. Data gathering was however limited to singers over the age of 18 as it was deemed possible that conductors working with younger singers, particularly in educational settings, may view their responsibilities in terms of developing and protecting singers' voices differently to those working with adults. It was considered that groups of singers may choose to describe their activity in various ways and that the term 'choir' is not used by all groups of people congregating to sing together, with certain groups using terms such as 'chorus', 'chorale', or 'song circle', among others. Within the study, the term 'choir' is used to denote any form of singing group, and no stipulation was made during data gathering that singers should have any particular form of experience in terms of type of group singing. Equally, the terms 'conductor' and 'choral leader' are used as general terms to denote anyone leading any form of group singing and are not intended to connote any particular form of group singing activity.

No distinction was made between amateur, semi-professional, and professional choral singing in designing the data gathering process. It was considered that in practice it is possible that the lines between these distinctions are impossible to define. Does, for example, a singer who receives payment for their service to a cathedral choir consider themselves to be a professional performer due to the remuneration they receive? Alternatively, if they hold a non-musical job outside of their cathedral service do they instead consider themselves an amateur singer and offer their service to the cathedral simply for their own musical or spiritual reasons? Is it also perhaps possible that a single

singer may participate in both 'amateur' and 'professional' singing as part of their choral activity? The conceptual framework for this study is based on paradigms of leadership theory (see Chapter 4) which do not draw distinctions between leaders of employees in professional organisations and other types of group leaders. It was therefore determined that data gathering would not distinguish between singers who identified as amateurs, semi-professionals, and/or professionals.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is significant in three ways. Firstly, it represents theoretical development within the choral conducting field. At present, there is no holistic model of choral conducting which addresses both the role/responsibilities *and* the skills/qualities expected in a conductor, focusing on the UK choral community. In addition to this, a voice-centred focus in holistic choral conducting research is novel.

Secondly, the study is innovative in its methodology within the choral conducting research field. The use of an inductive, singer-centred methodology and the collecting of a large, predominantly qualitative data set is novel. Previous holistic choral conducting research has relied on qualitative methods but has either followed a deductive conductor-centred process (Durrant, 1996) or has used, comparatively, a very small sample size (Jansson, 2013).

In addition to this, conceptualising the conductor as a leader and using leadership theory as a framework, whilst not novel, is an underutilised method of exploring the conductor's role within the literature. UK choral organisations are increasingly using the term 'choral leadership' in place of choral conducting (*About ABCD*, 2020; *Choral Leadership Network - About us*, 2019; *Wavelength - Celebrating Women in Choral Leadership*, 2018) and it is argued that the conducting literature's long-term conceptualisation of the choral conductor as an educator may not respond to this shift in the choral community's perception of conductors.

Thirdly, the study's focus on UK-based choral conducting is significant if viewed in relation to the fact that the majority of choral conducting studies have been undertaken in the US where the training and practice of choral conductors are generally more structured and systematic than that of the majority of UK conductors (Durrant & Varvarigou, 2019). The prevalence of American research into conducting is reflected in the development of peer-reviewed academic journals. In the US, the earliest academic journal of this kind, *The Choral Journal* was founded in 1959 and published academic articles, alongside book, concert, and choral work reviews. In contrast, it was not until 2020 that the Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD) founded the Choral Directions Research Journal, their own journal of scholarly research in choral singing.

This 61-year gap between the founding of *The Choral Journal* and the Choral Directions Research Journal is relatively unsurprising due to the respective availability of formal choral conducting training and differing choral systems in the UK and US. Until relatively recently,

training for choral conductors in the UK has been limited in availability and scope (Durrant, 2006; Durrant & Varvarigou, 2008), “contrasting the situation in North America and other parts of northern Europe (Durrant & Varvarigou, 2015, p.2)”. This discrepancy in the amount of available training for conductors in the US and UK arguably stems from differing levels of choral singing being incorporated in daily life in these countries. In the US, choral singing is a daily part of classroom activities in elementary and high schools and colleges, and universities offer courses and qualifications in choral singing (Haygood & Scheibe, 2015). In contrast to this, the UK has relatively few formal school classes and FE/HE courses (Durrant, 2018, 1999).

It is therefore significant that this thesis focuses on UK-based choral conducting and develops a model of choral conducting based on the expectations of choral singers within the UK.

1.6 Overview of Study

This chapter will conclude with an overview of the thesis. As indicated above, the research began with a review of relevant literature. This literature review is presented across three chapters (2 – 4).

The first of these, Chapter 2, describes categories of relevant literature. The first half of this chapter scopes genres of literature pertaining to the choral conductor’s role and concludes with an explanation of the contributions of two key researchers in particular, Durrant and

Jansson, whose research models choral conducting practice holistically, as opposed to sets of discrete skills and behaviours. The second half of the chapter then outlines categories of literature that focus specifically on voice-centred conductor functions, falling into three categories: choral-vocal pedagogy; warm-ups; and choral-vocal health.

Following this, Chapter 3 problematizes the literature described in Chapter 2 using Alvesson & Sandberg's problematization methodology (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). The results of this process are used to develop a theoretical framework for research and the chapter then concludes by presenting the research questions generated as a result of the problematisation process.

In Chapter 4 the results of the problematization process are used to critically review conducting literature from a leadership perspective. 4 paradigms of leadership are highlighted which will be used to structure discussion later in the thesis. This 4-part structure is then used to review the small but relevant body of choral conducting literature which takes leadership theory as a framework for research.

Chapter 5 then outlines the methodology created for the study. Following a pragmatic approach, two data gathering methods are combined, namely the collation of job adverts seeking UK-based choral conductors and a UK-wide online survey of singers, collecting primarily qualitative data with a small quantity of quantitative data also gathered. A

rationale for the use of a combination of Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Codebook Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020a) is then presented.

Chapter 6 follows this by presenting a description of the analytical processes engaged in with each section of data gathered, and the results of this analysis. This chapter is structured around the project's research questions and presents relevant tables of results in combination with written descriptions of meta-themes, themes, codes, and sub-codes generated during analysis in response to each question. The four meta-themes encompassing all other findings in the analysis are presented, namely: Variance; Areas of Responsibility; Voice-centred Concerns; and Attributes.

Chapter 7 then presents a model of UK-based choral leadership based on these meta-themes, entitled a Model of Voice-centred Choral Conductorship. This model is presented as a response to the study's final research question and is accompanied by a discussion of the study's findings, using leadership theory as a lens for interpretation.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes with an overview of the thesis, followed by a consideration of the limitations and implications of the findings presented.

