



**ARE LARGE CHOIRS LOSING CONTACT WITH THE
COMMUNITIES THAT GAVE THEM BIRTH?**

Simon Tipping
Massey University
New Zealand

© Simon Tipping 2005. All rights reserved.

Focusing on the New Zealand context, the author explores the relationships that choirs in general, and large community choirs in particular, have with their communities (in the British musical tradition). For the purpose of this study, a large community choir is defined as one that has more than 100 singers and is independent of any other organization, such as a university, school, or orchestra.

My recent study of a large community choir in Wellington, New Zealand resulted in a book: *Orpheus: Portrait of a choir* (2002). As part of that project, data was gathered from three large choirs in New Zealand, four in the United Kingdom, and one in Canada. It became apparent during my study that many large choirs face very similar challenges. This paper is the beginning of a wider study to analyze those challenges.

In this discussion I suggest that while community values in New Zealand have changed over recent decades, this is not often the case for large choirs. This

asymmetry has produced a dislocation between large choirs and their communities that threatens their survival. To use an illustration drawn from evolution: when the environment changes dramatically, many small animals adapt and survive, but the larger dinosaurs can't adapt, and therefore perish.

Choir-Community Relationships

The relationship of a choir to its community is a subtle two-way process. In the first place, choirs need input from their community. They need singers of appropriate voice ranges and group commitment, audiences to buy tickets and attend performances, and community venues of suitable size and acoustics. Large choirs also need community-based orchestras to accompany performances, and vocal soloists. Also, large choirs often need community sponsorship to make up the budget gap between what can realistically be charged for tickets and what each concert actually costs.

What a choir provides for its community is more difficult to define, but nonetheless valuable. The choir provides cultural enrichment and entertainment for the community, and an outlet for individual artistic activity. It also provides opportunities and encouragement for young vocal soloists, and for the preservation of repertoire and community traditions. Lastly, a choir provides education and personal development for community members, and employment for the conductor, soloists, and sometimes for orchestra members (Tipping, 2002b).

Large amateur choirs have been chosen for this study because their size brings greater complexity to their relationship with their community. They need to

attract more singers, and, as we will see later on, their repertoire is to some degree limited to works that use soloists and orchestral accompaniment. Orchestras and soloists often have to be paid. This requires a large budget, which, in turn, requires a large audience to recover expenses. Large choirs need large performance venues, which are sometimes scarce and expensive.

Small choirs can exist happily with minimal connection to their communities. Large choirs need to manage the relationship very carefully to survive. While smaller choirs can afford to exist as more spontaneous expressions of community music, meeting together for the pleasure of singing and giving performances, which may attract only friends and supporters, large choirs need to structure themselves like businesses, handling an annual budget of well over \$NZ100, 000. In this financial climate, one poorly attended concert can mean the difference between solvency and bankruptcy.

Let us now examine the large choir-community relationship through four aspects: membership, repertoire, audience, and finance.

How Changing Values in the Community Affect Singing Membership

Choral singing in New Zealand schools is in good health. National and local youth choirs are flourishing, and the annual secondary schools choral festival is well attended. However, this situation does not translate into recruitment for large choirs. All the choirs I surveyed reported a lack of younger people in choirs and audiences.

I recently conducted a survey of the 46 members of the New Zealand National Youth Choir (aged 19 – 25). Singers were asked to indicate what size of choir they might join on leaving the NZNYC. None said they would join a choir of over 100 voices. When they were asked to give reasons, the most common responses were “they learn the music too slowly,” “my contribution would get lost in the whole,” and “it’s too difficult to hear how the whole thing sounds.” While these attitudes to some degree reflect the choral experience these singers have had in chamber choirs, and are currently having in the NZNYC, they deserve further analysis.

Those in our community currently aged between 21 and 41 years of age belong to generations often referred to as Generation X (born 1963-1977) and Generation Y (born 1978-1983). The attitudes of these generation groups have been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years. In his study of Generation X in the workplace, Tulgan (2000) found that its members “examine institutions for very specific virtues before deciding to make a personal investment . . . Xers develop loyalty to institutions that reflect back to Xers’ own values.” These values include:

- the ability to make a meaningful individual contribution;
- sufficient access to information;
- the opportunity to work in one’s own way;
- the ability to monitor the return on one’s investment in the organization.

A brief glance at these values seems to show that singing with a large choir may not necessarily provide much satisfaction in these regards. Why not?

- Although a singer makes an individual contribution to the sound of the choir, it is the essence of choral singing that the individual is not audible.
- Information is sometimes so scarce that some choir members must request English translations of the texts they were singing; and it is often difficult for individuals to see where their part fits into the whole.
- While choir members can practice at home in their own ways, group rehearsals are often conducted under strict discipline.
- The return on a singer's investment in a choral situation is often only apparent at the final performance – sometimes after several months of rehearsal. This return has none of the immediacy that Xers tend to value.

Generation Xers also tend to exhibit a bias against “belonging,” or long-term commitment to organizations. In many cases, this extends to an outright suspicion of institutions. In commenting on the decline in membership of organized mainline churches, Ward (2004) compares declining church membership with declining membership in sports clubs, noting that in New Zealand “active participation in rugby declined from 400,000 in the 1970s to 120,000 in 2000, despite the belief that support for the ‘national’ sport remains strong.”

Although the values of postmodern society are strongly individualistic, large community choirs have flourished since the 19th century, partly as an expression of democratic ideals. Activities that involved groups of people assembling with worthy aims were “naturally” democratic and encouraged. Russell (1987) notes that in the 19th century, the heyday of the establishment of

large choral societies, there was “a belief that by bringing people together from different backgrounds music could act as a social cement” (p. 19), and that “attempts to harness music to the service of popular improvement were made by industrial entrepreneurs” (p. 21). In the language of the 1980s and 90s, choirs were creators of “social capital” (Schuller, 2004).

The aims of the Hutt Valley Music Society (established in 1947 as the parent body of the Orpheus Choir) offer interesting reading:

- to promote and stimulate an interest and appreciation of music in the Hutt Valley;
- to establish groups for the study and performance (public and otherwise) of choral, orchestral, chamber music, and kindred arts;
- to provide lectures and classes in other musical subjects.

These aims included a concern (stated more or less implicitly) for social and individual improvement. For some groups today, one aim would replace the above aims: “to produce excellent music” (which is not stated in the 1947 manifesto). In the 1947 objectives of the choir, several values from the 19th century still survive: the use of music to improve and elevate the participants (for example, and in extreme cases, to keep certain citizens “off the streets” and away from drunkenness and, in a spiritual sense, to bring people closer to great art and/or to God). In other words, there is an echo of the singing schools movement and the workers educational institute in the Hutt Valley aims.

It is worth noting that public libraries of the time reflected the same ethos: to elevate and educate. Libraries and arts activities were a “public good” that

should be facilitated by the community. Such values were not only changed (as is shown in the attitudes of Generation X), but also rudely overturned in the commercialization that occurred in the 1980s. “User pays” replaced “public good” which, in turn, emphasized a change in values and ideology. Reflecting this dramatic shift, I suggest that my postmodern New Zealand society has become more cynical, skeptical, and individualistic.

Sacks (1996, p. 161) identifies “hyperconsumerism” as one of the traits of postmodern society in developed countries. This, he says, produces “a society based on the near absolute right to consume one’s way into happiness, or into the middle class, or wherever consumption might lead one.” In this kind of society, responsibility for one’s own lack of happiness, self-improvement, or performance of any kind can easily be offloaded onto a government or organization. These values are in direct opposition to the values of co-operation and responsibility that are illustrated by the Music Society’s aims.

My interviews with members of the Orpheus Choir confirmed that relationships of significance are formed with long-term choir membership. Further, in the survey of members of the New Zealand National Youth Choir, 73% of respondents identified social interaction as one of the five most important aspects of choir membership. However, it was also suggested that the social aspect of choral singing has been eroded by the increased seriousness and technical perfection required of community choirs (more time spent singing, less spent relating socially).

The Orpheus Choir’s social programme in the sixties and seventies was a full and vibrant one, including annual dinners, parties, and informal concerts. As

time went on, the time spent socializing diminished, as the pressure towards higher standards increased. As amateur choirs struggled to match their standards to those of the professional orchestras with which they were increasingly associated, and of the numerous other professional performing groups that became accessible through radio and recording, as well as live performance, they entered a no-man's-land halfway between amateur and professional status.

Russell (1987) reports that some English choirs in the 19th and early twentieth centuries generated “not merely intense local pride, but an enthusiasm for choral music of almost epidemic proportion.” (p. 226). Similarly, in its earliest days, the Orpheus Choir was the pride of its community. Local newspapers reported its concerts at generous length. The mayor was an active patron and attended its concerts and social occasions. A former mayor held soirees for members in his large residence. Now, newspapers print minimal notices, or “bad-news” items. Moreover, the choir’s relationship with its mayor and council, though still extant, is mostly a financial one.

Changing Values in Repertoire

Young (2003) suggests that as the 20th century progressed the concept of a monolithic, universally applicable choral ideal was called into question. A symptom of this was the international move towards historically informed performance. The concern for historical accuracy suggested that “heavyweight choirs” like Orpheus, with over 100 singers, should not attempt the works of Palestrina, Bach, Handel, or even Haydn and Mozart. Smaller, specialist choirs emerged to present this repertoire.

While the Orpheus did not accept this doctrine completely, its programming started to reflect this mindset. Fewer baroque and classical pieces were programmed, and the “cash cow,” *Messiah*, was performed only every second year, instead of annually.

This change had far-reaching consequences for large choirs that adopted the new principles. A large amount of interesting and sing-able choral music was unavailable to programmers. Thus, some singers’ satisfaction was diminished. Perhaps more serious were the financial implications: on one hand, baroque and classical scores generally call for small, cheaper orchestras; on the other hand, while 19th and 20th century works generally call for large, expensive efforts, the latter often help to balance the books. Moreover, unaccompanied works – the least expensive to perform – were largely from the “out-of-bounds period.”

The religious values of the community are also changing. Membership and repertoire for major choral societies in England and in New Zealand was deeply rooted in religious tradition. Choral society membership was built on church and chapel choirs. Singers who started in these smaller choirs graduated, almost as a rite of passage, into the larger oratorio choirs. The large choir’s repertoire “firmly grounded in cantata and oratorio, provided ‘respectable’ society, be it patrician or plebeian, with national entertainment steeped in sacred sentiment” (Russell, 1987, p. 13). Writing of music in the small New Zealand town of Hawera in 1947, Allan Thomas (2004) says:

The performance of sacred music had itself become a religious act.
Choral and solo music was not simply an aid to worship but one of the

central acts of it. When the music occurred outside church, in concert hall or band, an emotional piety was evoked which the community recognised as an end in itself. Music had become a religious observance. (p. 145)

The repertoire for large choirs is still predominantly sacred. New Zealand, more than many countries, has become a secular society. Weekly church attendance in 1960 was about 20 percent of the population; by 2000 this had been halved to 10 percent. Singers and audiences are no longer willing to accept as a matter of course the relevance of bible stories, masses and other sacred texts. What was accepted and/or familiar to previous generations is not familiar to current ones. Apparently, 21st century New Zealand society has no need for the “sacred sentiment” or “emotional piety” which Thomas discerned in earlier choral performances, regardless of whether the works being performed had sacred or secular themes.

To develop this point, I analyzed the repertoire of nine community choirs (located in New Zealand, the UK, and Canada). I found that over a four-year period an average of 58% of their repertoire was sacred. The two ends of the scale are particularly interesting. The Wellington Orpheus Choir had the highest proportion; 75% sacred repertoire; a very successful London (UK) choir, the Crouch End Festival Chorus, had the lowest with only 38%. On the other hand, in the NZNYC survey, though 97% of singers felt that their choir sang a lot of religious music, 82% were happy with that situation.

The church and chapel choirs that provided breeding-grounds for choral society singers in the 19th century and first half of the 20th are rare in New Zealand today. The concept of massed singing has moved beyond the margins of adult

experience. (Even the NZ national anthem at rugby matches has to be sung by a soloist, to save the crowd having to do it!). Most people's only contact with mass singing now comes occasionally through school – a worthwhile contact, but one which most young adults associate only with school and not with the confidence-building, fellowship, and religious experience that previous generations experienced through it.

In the New Zealand community there are cross-cultural considerations that affect both audience and membership of community choirs. The annual secondary schools' choral festival run by NZ Choral Federation demonstrates some relevant cross-cultural issues. Among choirs with large Maori and Pacific Islands representation, the repertoire is often narrow, focusing predominantly on popular and gospel styles. Technique is also an issue. When choirs of this type attempt European music, they are often unable to use their head voice effectively, as the chest voice is the cultural norm. (There are some remarkable exceptions to this). As an audience, too, these young singers want to apply the rules of their own culture (whether popular culture, Maori, or Pasifika), by talking and moving during performances in a relaxed and informal way. Choirs singing Western art music often interpret this as lack of respect. While these issues are observed at secondary school level, it is reasonable to extrapolate to the formal large choir, which operates mostly with Western European values and traditions, and to see it as to some degree dislocated from the multicultural community in which it operates. Maori and Pacific Islanders are under-represented in the formal large choir.

Changing Values in the Audience

How has the large choir been distanced from its community audience? In the last 15 years, the loyalty of the choral audience has declined. There has been increased competition from live theatre, dance, and cinema. The postmodern generation is just as likely to find entertainment from sitting in a café with friends as from attending a formal concert. The loyalty of the annual subscriptions from the 60s and 70s implied commitment; this gesture is currently not in favor.

While the audience has changed – the performance has not. A recent marketing study on the Orpheus Choir showed that young people have a less positive image of choral concerts than older people. One younger respondent said: “watching a choir of 100 members sing does not appeal” (McArthur & Balasubramanian, 2003). The comment is revealing, echoing an Australian school pupil: “I don’t know what to look at when I listen to classical music” (Gillies, 2004). This emphasis on the visual aspect of music surprises many seasoned choral music followers. Many have never thought it necessary to look at anything except the choir while listening to a concert. But the postmodern audience is accustomed to spectacle – the moving picture on the screen, the music video, the large screen at sports events relaying, in great detail, details normally hidden from standard viewing. As Sacks (1996) puts it: “Born into the postmodern spectacle, GenXers know no other language than the language of the spectacle . . . and by definition, the spectacle knows so completely the language of the youth culture” (p. 152). The standard large-choir performance is no spectacle at all. It is a relatively static and formal event. Choir, orchestra, and soloists enter and exit with military precision, and remain as still as

possible while performing.

A marketing survey by McArthur and Balasubramanian (2003) showed that 75% of younger respondents were interested in performances that combined choral music with modern dance or ballet. The Wellington Orpheus Choir has introduced elements of drama in some choral performances. Most notable was a semi-staged version of *Elijah* in which soloists moved around a small stage to create a series of tableaux. A performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers* moved soloists around a large cathedral to add a visual and spatial dimension to the music. Responses to such adaptations have been encouraging, but this type of innovation is still the exception.

The cross-cultural issues already mentioned between Maori, Pacific Islanders, and European New Zealanders may have an equal effect on audiences as on choir members. However, such matters can yield a potential disruption between the formal large choir and the multicultural community in which it operates. The Maori and Polynesian audience expects to be more active at a choral performance – to call out and applaud at the beginning of a song and section of a piece that they liked, to move to the music when it suits them, and to get up on stage to spontaneously join the performers. The gulf between this type of community and a traditional choral performance is obvious.

Changing Values in Finance

The community finances large choirs in three ways:

- through fees that singers pay to belong to a choir (these generally cover fixed overheads such as rehearsal rooms, payments to the conductor and accompanist, and the maintenance of the music library and fixed assets – some choirs could exist almost solely on these sources, as long as they never gave concerts);
- through the money paid for concert tickets (in this sense the community pays for the “service” that the choir provides);
- through sponsorships that commercial organizations, arts councils, and local bodies give choirs.

Dislocation between the community and the choir can occur when fees and subscriptions are so high that potential singers cannot join. Amounts vary widely between large choirs in New Zealand, and some singers in the Orpheus Choir mentioned that the fees had grown oppressive.

When it comes to the sale of tickets, though, the situation becomes critical. As I mentioned briefly above, as a result of the repertoire restrictions imposed by choir size and the demands of historically informed performance, large choir concerts are often extremely expensive to organize. The cost of hiring a professional orchestra for much of the standard large-choir repertoire often exceeds 60% of the total concert cost. To cover this cost, ticket prices have to be high. This is where dislocation occurs again. The community is unwilling to pay the high (“inflated”) prices needed to balance the large choir concert’s budget. In earlier years, when the community did not demand any adherence to historical performance practice, large choirs could balance their budgets by alternating lightly accompanied works (e.g., works of the Baroque, or earlier,

which are cheaper to perform) with the heavyweight works.

The question to be asked is this: What fuels the desire for historically informed performances? Is it the community at large, or merely a small proportion of it – the musical cognoscenti? How should the choir respond?

This is where the third income source – sponsorship – comes in. While it must be acknowledged that commercial sponsorship of the arts (a relatively new phenomenon in New Zealand) might be regarded as a way that community and choir may align again, the danger is as community values change, the large choir may no longer be a suitable subject of sponsorship. Sponsorship from non-commercial bodies, e.g., arts councils, local authorities, and community councils are often present, but variable, and frequently follows the dictates of what the members of these bodies regard as worthwhile artistic undertakings.

The financial situation of large choirs in New Zealand is precarious, to say the least, and it is not difficult to see this as another piece of evidence of the dislocation of choir and community.

Summary

I began by suggesting that community choirs exist in a delicately balanced relationship with their communities and that the large choir, as the product of an earlier and different set of community values, is now threatened by changes in these values. I have traced the changes in these community values as they affected the memberships of large choirs, the repertoire that the choirs sing, the audience, and finally, as a result of all these changes, the choirs' financial

situations.

The future for New Zealand's large choirs is not certain. Nor do we know for certain whether these changes in the circumstances of large choirs are occurring in other parts of the world that follow the Western European musical tradition. I am currently pursuing answers to these questions by broadening the scope of my study to include information from an extensive survey of large community choirs in England and Scotland.

References

- McArthur, S., & Balasubramanian, R. (2003). *Beyond demographic segmentation: A behavioural approach to performing arts marketing*. Wellington, N Z: Massey University seminar presentation.
- Russell, D. (1987). *Popular Music in England 1840 – 1914*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Sacks, P. (1996). *Generation X goes to college*. Chicago: Open Court Publishers.
- Schuller, T. (2000). Thinking about social capital: Lifelong learning – a global colloquium. Retrived March 2004 from http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/papers/393B8E05-0008-65B9-0000015700000157_TomSchuller-paper.doc

- Thomas, A. (2004). *Music is where you find it: Music in the town of Hawera, 1946: An historical ethnography*. Wellington, NZ: Music Books New Zealand.
- Tipping, S. (2002a). *Choir of the world: The New Zealand National Youth Choir 1979–1999*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Tipping, S. (2002b). *Orpheus: Portrait of a choir*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Tulgan, B. (2000). *Managing Generation X: How to bring out the best in young talent*. New York: Norton.
- Ward, K. Finding god in godzone. *Novant health: Presbyterian healthcare*.
Retrieved March 2004 from <http://www.presbyterian.org> (nz/2220.0.html)
- Young, P.M., & Smith, J.G. (2003). Chorus. *The new grove dictionary of music online*. Retrieved July 2003 from <http://www.grovemusic.com>

Simon Tipping is Associate Professor and Programme Leader of the BMus at the Massey University Conservatorium of Music, Wellington, New Zealand.

S.R.Tipping@massey.ac.nz

