

## **Manning Britten's *A Boy Was Born*: Boys', Girls' or Mixed Children's Choir?**

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In her paper, "A Chronology of the Treble Voice in Choral Ensembles," Leslie Clutterham examines the history of the treble voice in Judaic and Christian traditions, and specifically how it leads up to, and impacts, English choral music. At the outset, she asserts that, only in recent history, have female voices begun to be used on the treble lines of choral ensembles (1). She concludes her paper by stating that, in order to re-create a piece according to "composers' intentions," a conductor should be privy to the performance practices of the given work (14). Regarding the issue of adding female voices to a piece originally written for boys' voices, she states the following:

This is not to suggest that women should be excluded from the performance of any choral music originally written for boy or adult male trebles: the female treble voice is capable of a wide range of stylistic subtleties which may complement the performance of choral music of the various genres composed throughout the centuries. (14)

Modern conductors and performers would certainly agree with this statement, due to the fact that women's and girls' involvement, in almost every type of choir, including even some Anglican and Catholic parish choirs, has become commonplace in the modern era (Young 782). However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, leading to today, there has been a revival in the desires of modern choral directors to more accurately re-create a given piece, with the performance practices of a given musical era in mind (Young 782). Certainly one of the many considerations a conductor will encounter is that which Clutterham addresses at the end of her paper: the involvement of female voices in a work conceived originally for boys' (or male treble) voices.

Of the countless pieces written over the centuries for boys' voices, is Benjamin Britten's first large choral work, *A Boy Was Born*, composed in 1932. A collection of mostly fifteenth-century poems, in theme and variation style, this highly virtuosic piece is written for SATB and boys' chorus, including a boy solo in Variation III (Woodward 260). It is the first, in a long line of Britten's works, which involves children, as he wrote much more for young voices than most other composers (Sinclair 9). It is also the first work of Britten to demonstrate his penchant for selecting and editing texts. This ability, along with his practice of writing for children, was to become one of his trademarks (Sieck 9).

Performing *A Boy Was Born* today, a conductor might consider using a mixed girls' and boys' chorus, or even an exclusively girls' chorus on the treble line. However, because of the following issues, a modern re-creation of the piece requires that girls' voices not be used on the treble line. These issues include the time period of the composition, within the context of the history of boys' choruses in England. Also to be considered are the differences of the timbres of trained girls' and boys' choirs, and the

perceptibility of each to the listener. Finally to be considered is the symbolic use of the boys' choir in this piece.

To begin, a conductor should consider the time period in which *A Boy Was Born* was composed, within the context of the history of English boys' choirs, due to the fact that the score calls for the use of such an ensemble. The practice of using boys' choirs in sacred music has existed for centuries (Moore 138). In the Western musical tradition, it had its beginnings in the early Church when there came about a method of singing—*Cantus antiphonarius*, which was borrowed from an Eastern tradition, that involved men and boys singing together at octaves. A training school for such singing was soon established in Rome, and subsequently, congregational singing (including women's and girls' voices) was outlawed at the Council of Laodicea, in A. D. 367 (Clutterham 3). As a result of this mandate, only these trained male singers were permitted to sing, and the female voice was absent in liturgical music for centuries thereafter. When Christianity spread to present-day England in A.D. 597, the musical traditions accompanied the religion (Clutterham 4), and thus came about the centuries-old tradition of liturgical choirs of men and boys.

In the early nineteenth century, there is evidence to suggest that women and girls began to enjoy some musical training and participation in choirs of many denominations (Young 782). In his chapter, "English Cathedral Choirs in the Twentieth Century," Timothy Day goes as far as to say that the "boy choir" sound fell out of favor at this point, with some preferring the strength of the women's timbre (124). However, he goes on to describe a rebirth of the preference for the light and pure, choir-boy timbre, and how it led to a "high point" in English choral music toward the end of the nineteenth century (124). Further developments occurred after World War II, the most striking of which is the participation of girls in many Catholic and some Anglican choirs. Likewise, the sound of the choirs has become fuller, richer and less reserved, as a result of the ensembles' repertoire becoming more complex rhythmically and harmonically, and because some repertoire requires orchestra. The emergence of technical factors, such as recording, broadcasting and the use of microphones, have contributed to an overall change in the ensembles' sound (Day 128–129).

Britten composed *A Boy Was Born* at the mere age of nineteen, and it was first performed in 1932 (Fancher 2). This would have fallen towards the end of the "high point" of boys' choirs in England, as Day described, and before World War II, when many sweeping changes occurred in the ensembles, particularly the addition of girls. Britten himself went on to compose many children's works, which included girls' voices, in the years after the war. Among them are *Noye's Fludde*, *The Little Sweep*, and *Friday Afternoons* (Hodgson 96 and 104). Some works, including *A Ceremony of Carols*, call for "treble voices," leaving the ensemble's gender make-up to the conductor's preference. However, *A Boy Was Born* was scored to only include boys on the top treble line.

Additionally, the distinct timbre of trained boys' voices, particularly as it sounds in a chapel or cathedral, should be considered when performing *A Boy Was Born*. Composers from Palestrina to Bach have been influenced by the aesthetic of the choir-boy sound and have therefore composed with that aesthetic in mind. Indeed, many composers were choir members themselves, as children (Clutterham 1). Day describes the timbre of boys' voices in a cathedral choir as the having a "clean, white tone," and as being "pure," "ethereal," and "other-wordly" (123). He goes on to describe some

people's distaste for the sound because it is "cold" and "passionless" (123). The distinct sound is achieved through the proper amount of breath pressure, relaxation of the jaw, openness of the throat, and by singing in a light and "unforced" manner (124–125).

Britten was heavily influenced by the timbre of a boys' choir singing in a chapel. Being in church was one of many fond memories of what he described as a wonderful childhood. Throughout his life, he wrote with the Anglican Church in mind, especially his unaccompanied choral music, because this was how he originally experienced such music (Palmer 81). Evidence of this influence includes many pieces based on liturgical chants and works such as *A Ceremony of Carols* and *Voices for Today*, both of which were composed with the acoustics of a chapel or cathedral in mind (Palmer 80). Likewise, *A Boy Was Born* was composed specifically with the notion that the acoustics enhance the timbre of the boys' voices (Palmer 80). In his chapter, "A Ceremony of Innocence," Palmer describes how Britten purposefully scored *A Ceremony of Carols* with harp, a naturally reverberant instrument, and furthermore, how his canonic writing and chordal texture are designed to be complimented by the acoustics. In the same manner, he states that the texture of *A Boy Was Born* is such that, without an acoustically-live venue, "the individual parts have no room to breath" (79–80).

Assuming that, in a modern performance of *A Boy Was Born*, a conductor would choose an acoustically-live venue in order to accurately re-create what Britten intended, the question remains as to whether the replacement of boys with girls on the top treble line would significantly alter the performance. The aforementioned recent addition of girls to many cathedral and chapel choruses, for the purpose of alleviating some of the boys' service responsibilities (Howard 35), has been somewhat controversial, in that, as some allege, girls cannot produce the strength to blend with the adult male choristers (Moore 138). The men are already trained to hold back in order to avoid masking the upper voices (Day 125). Furthermore, supposed differences of girls' timbre, which is lighter and less focused, complicate blend with the men (Moore 138). Day asserts that many people hold the belief that girls are so physiologically different, that they cannot produce the same pure tone as the boys (132). He goes on to say that when girls are added their voices are sometimes distinguishable, but are also mistaken for boys' voices at others times (132).

This debate on whether there are perceptible differences in girls' and boys' singing voices has sparked a series of studies on the issue. In one study, D. C. Sergeant and G. F. Welch determined that listeners could not, above chance level, accurately identify a boys' chorus from a girls' chorus, or even a mixed chorus (Moore 139). In an experiment designed to further this study, Randall Moore and Janice Killian tested four groups, varied by age, listening to twenty trained choruses and soloists singing two excerpts from Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. In this instance, listeners correctly identified boys' and girls' choruses at an overall rate of 62%, which is above chance level. There was a higher success rate for identifying boys' choirs and girl soloists, at 72%, as opposed to a 50% success rate for identifying girls' choirs and boy soloists (141).

In a more specific study of the perceptibility of boys' choirs versus girls' choirs, David M. Howard, John Szymanski, and Graham F. Welch, called upon two choirs, one of each gender, to sing the treble line of twenty pieces written for the *cathedral*. All were sung in the same venue, with the same director, and with the same lower voices (Howard

37). Results were very similar, with listeners correctly identifying the gender of the choir singing the treble line with 61% accuracy (42).

The authors of the study also mention the effect of “psychoacoustic masking” in which the lower voices and/or organ, depending on the texture of the given phrase, give off “acoustic cues” that hinder the ability of the listener to identify the gender singing the treble line (43). The success rate of the listener varied, depending on the “musical forces” involved in individual pieces. For example, listeners identified the girls’ choir, with over 75% accuracy, in three instances: when they sang in unison, unaccompanied, when they sang accompanied by the organ sans the lower voices, and when they sang in harmony with the lower voices, unaccompanied. The acoustic cues were such that listeners could not identify the girls when they sang in unison with the lower voices.

Furthermore, the issue of the range of each piece also seemed to affect acoustic cues. Based upon listeners’ answers, correlated with range of each piece, the authors of the study hypothesize that when the girls sang notes above  $E_5$ , they “overwhelmingly cued ‘boy’ perception.” When the girls sang within the range between  $C_5$  and  $E_5$ , without extending above, they were not mistaken for boys. And when the range of the song extended only as high as  $D_5$ , the girls, once again, cued the “boy” sound (Howard 46). They state: “It would appear that there could be some acoustic effect relevant to listener identification of whether girls or boys are singing the top line, which differs for notes above, below, and within  $C_5$  and  $E_5$ ” (46).

Given that *A Boy Was Born* was written with a cathedral or chapel in mind, the third study, especially, produces implications for the performance practice of using a girls’ chorus. In Variation I, “Lullay, Jesu,” the range of the boys’ line extends from  $F_4$  to  $G_5$ . According to the Howard et al. study, if a girls’ choir were to perform this, it would not be perceptible to listeners, given that the range extends beyond  $E_5$ . However, of the forty-one total notes sung by the boys, fifty-eight percent, or nearly half, fall within the  $C_5$  to  $E_5$  range, where it is most likely to decipher between genders. Furthermore, the texture of the variation is such that the treble line is very exposed, leaving little room for psychoacoustic masking. The lower voices trade off the thematic ostinato “lullay,” which is based upon layers of repeated and short, descending perfect fifths. This ostinato, along with contrasting phrases on the word, “Jesu,” which have longer, stepwise ascending notes, combine to create an ever-present bed of sound upon which the boys’ line rises and falls. The lower voices do carry some of the poetry, with melodic activity shifting back and forth between the men and women. However, when the boys occasionally interject with their melodic theme, the lower voices return to the ostinato, exposing the treble line. Dynamic markings at these entrances are usually very contrasted as well, with the lower voices at *pianissimo* and the boys at *mezzo forte*, featuring the latter even more. Due to these issues of range, texture and dynamics, a girls’ choir would be perceptible.

A boy soloist is featured in Variation III, “Jesu, as Thou Art Our Saviour.” The range in this variation,  $F_4$  to  $A_5$ , would, again, suggest that there would be no perceptible difference between a girls’ or boys’ choir. Likewise, only thirteen of forty-one notes fall in the  $C_5$  to  $E_5$  range. However, according to the study done by Moore and Killian, listeners were able to identify a girl soloist with 72% accuracy, which speaks to the difference, however slight, in the timbres of girls’ and boy’s voices.

In Variation V, “In the Bleak Mid-Winter,” and the Finale, “Noel,” the boys’ line is featured in similar fashion as in Variation I. When the boys enter, the lower voices

serve as accompaniment, with various rhythmic and melodic ostinati, leaving the top treble line exposed, with little room for psychoacoustic masking. The first instance, in any of the variations, in which the boys sing homophonically with the lower voices, occurs in the last fifteen measures of the Finale, where the boys double the soprano line. This might be the only instance in which there would not be a perceptible difference between a boys' or girls' choir. In Variation V, only 22% of the boys' notes fall within the "perceptible" area of C<sub>5</sub> to E<sub>5</sub>. However, in the Finale, 45% of the notes fall within this area.

Overall, in applying the results of these studies, there is conclusive evidence to suggest that using a girls' choir to replace the boys' would produce a perceptible difference in sound, and therefore would stray from the composer's intentions. However, according to the Sergeant and Welch study, a balanced mix of genders on this, or any other piece, may not necessarily create a perceptible difference. Further examination of this piece, regarding the symbolic use of the boys' choir, is necessary to produce a definitive conclusion.

Britten was very fond of children, and he often used them symbolically in his compositions. They represent innocence, honesty and purity, as they have yet to be damaged by the harshness of reality (Sinclair 9). As mentioned above, Britten himself had an extremely safe and happy childhood. He was celebrated for his talents and accomplishments and did not have to deal with critique over his music, as he would later experience. He spent his adulthood attempting, in a way, to regain this lost part of his life, and his compositions for children worked toward that end (Sinclair 9).

Examples of this symbolism include his *Spring Symphony*. Here the boys whistle and sing to the poem "The Driving Boy," symbolizing the eternal joys of spring and summer time (Palmer 83):

When as the rye reached to the chin,  
And chop cherry chop cherry ripe within  
Strawberries swimming in the cream  
And schoolboys swimming in the stream

At the end of the final movement, the boys' voices soar over the adult chorus and the orchestra to the medieval tune "Sumer is A-cumin In," ringing in the season of freedom.

In contrast, Britten uses his boys' choir for darker purposes in his *War Requiem*. Palmer describes how the composer uses them to symbolize the "extreme of non-communication with the world of fighting men" (77). Later, he states that the boys "connote a zenith of disembodied coldness" (80).

As mentioned above, *A Boy Was Born* was the first major work of Britten to involve children's voices. It may also be seen as an early example of his symbolic use of children. In this work, every line of poetry sung by the boys' choir, with the exception of one line concerning Herod in the Finale, centers on the Christ child. This suggests that the boys symbolize the baby boy, Jesus, himself. For this reason alone, use of a girls' choir would not capture what the composer envisioned.

In Variation I, "Lullay, Jesu," the boys' choir is cast in the role of Jesus, symbolizing innocence and perfection (Sinclair 12). The men of the chorus act as narrators in this fifteenth-century anonymous poem:

So blessed a sight it was to see,  
How Mary rocked her Son so free;

So fair she rocked and sang ‘by-by.’  
 The women of the chorus play the role of Mary:  
 Mine own dear Son, why weepest Thou thus?  
 Is not Thy father King of bliss?  
 Have I not done that in me is?  
 Your grievance, tell me what it is.

The boys then enter the drama in the role of Jesus (Fancher 21):

Therefore, mother, weep I nought,  
 But for the woe that shall be wrought  
 To me, ere I mankind have bought.

Similarly, in Variation III, “Jesu, as Thou Art Our Saviour,” the lower voices reverently plead to Jesus for his saving grace:

Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour  
 That Thou save us fro dolour!  
 Jesu is mine paramour.

Throughout the movement, the boy soprano soloist floats a pentatonic melody above the adult voices, as if the infant Savior is watching over them from above.

In Variation V, Britten juxtaposes two very different texts, without hesitation, causing the variation to garner the most attention from critics. (Fancher 59). The contrasting poems include Christina Rossetti’s *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, and the *Corpus Christi* poem, another anonymous fifteenth-century work. Here the women paint the chill of winter’s cold with quiet, clashing minor seconds. The boys’ choir, once again, sings above the dissonance, describing the wounded, bleeding knight, who is revealed at the end of the poem to be Christ sacrificed.

In the Finale, “Noel!” the boys’ choir further symbolizes Christ. Britten reverses traditional Christmas roles (Fancher 73), as the adults sing a rousing canon to Thomas Tusser’s sixteenth-century poem about a celebration:

Get ivy and hull, woman, deck up thine house,  
 And take this same brawn for to seethe and to souse;  
 Provide us good cheer, for thou knowest the old guise,  
 Old customs that good be let no man despise.

The boys’ choir sings above the canon about the true meaning of the season:

Hosanna!  
 This night a Child is born;  
 This night a Son is given;  
 This Son, this Child  
 Hath reconciled  
 Poor man that was forlorn,  
 And the angry God of heaven.  
 Hosanna, sing Hosanna!

In conclusion, due to circumstances in place centuries ago, the aesthetic of girls’ singing voices has only recently begun to be appreciated, whereas that of boys’ voices has been appreciated throughout the history of Western art music. In recent decades, girls’ choruses have emerged in many cities across the United States, and there is a growing list of repertoire. Questions have arisen about the difference of timbre, and

whether it is even of concern, when a girls' choir is slated to sing, or to be added to the performance of, a piece originally written for a boys' choir. Though the aforementioned studies produced similar results, the tones of their respective authors differ. Moore and Killian assert that their findings of 62% accuracy are “just 12% greater than chance level” (141), whereas Howard et al., getting an even lower success rate of 61%, state that this is “significantly greater than the 50% chance level” (41).

When re-creating a piece, conductors and performers must use discernment and explore the issues of the given piece. In the case of *A Boy Was Born*, there are some distinct issues which would lead to the conclusion that it should be performed as written—using a boys' choir. The issues are that he composed the piece before girls were commonly admitted into cathedral and chapel choirs. Likewise, there are perceptible differences of timbre, especially in pieces written for cathedrals and chapels, as this one is, and that have a certain textural make-up. The final issue is that he makes use of the boys' choir symbolically in this piece.

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