

In Defence of a Great Tradition

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We need more champions for the grand tradition of the male voice choir, and especially boy trebles, in the Anglican Church. After planning another trip to England (from Canada) to attend services at a few of my favourite venues, I discovered that many of the ancient all-male choirs have been replaced either with mixed-voice treble sections or by alternating choirs of boys and girls at services. In my own sphere I have argued against this change on many occasions, not because of any inherent superiority of boys' voices over girls' (though I do believe there is an important difference in sound, which I will address), but for the following reasons.

Anglican liturgical music, in large part, has a very particular sound. And suffice to say, in this context, without getting into analysis of church music history and modalities, it is a sound which has grown up around, and reflects, the musical nature of all-male choirs. To be true to its roots the Anglican service (at least in its highest form in Cathedrals, Royal Peculiars and Collegiate Chapels) must preserve that ancient medium of its musical expression: the boy treble. Abandoning this tradition is akin to the destruction of an ancient monument, because this particular choral form is indeed a kind of priceless monument to the English church, and to a thousand years of its musical evolution.

It is a unique choral sound. There is a kind of effortlessness to the singing of the English choirboy — at the highest levels of selection and training — that tends to produce a wistful, often plaintive, sound. It is a timbre that is artless in the finest sense, and most perfect for the Anglican liturgical repertoire. By contrast, a female singer is often likely to *interpret* the note to a greater degree. I think that even in today's climate of social uniformity one cannot sensibly deny that there is a natural difference between the 'tendencies' of emotional expression between boys and girls. The boy treble seems to produce a tone of restrained emotion in his singing which ideally speaks to the ineffable nature of spirituality.

Further, it cannot be denied that the voice of the boy treble is a peculiarly precious instrument, an ephemeral phenomenon. Considering that on average the singing voice of a talented boy might first express itself with proper pitch and musical ability at about the age of eight years, the lifespan of the performing treble is at most about six years, until the age of fourteen or so. His years of peak performance are actually even fewer, when the requisite time for musical training and voice development is factored in. It is only right that something that is both beautiful and fleeting be afforded the greatest possible forum and opportunity for expression in its short-lived heyday.

Also, at risk of making too grand a point, the boy treble choir represents for me a kind of magical force *against* nature, so to speak. The expression of the male in high-voice tenderness inspires feelings that suggest the Christian call for the transformation of hearts and minds. When we hear the echoing softness of the boy's voice in solemn musical ministry we can know that it is something that is there only for a relative moment in time, and that it will all too soon dissolve into the more assertive tones of manhood. To extend the metaphor, the treble voice projects the sound of tamed masculinity. In that way, aggression is turned to love, emphasizing the necessary transformation of man's nature, as the scriptures command.

On a final point, I feel that upholding the tradition of boys' choirs (especially the Cathedral School tradition of intensive discipline and training) is important for the encouragement and support of the participation of boys in the arts in general. Young boys by nature, compared with young girls, tend to be more shy of involvement in the finer arts such as choral singing, classical dance, and theatre. If the great tradition of boys' cathedral and collegiate choir schools is jettisoned, or watered down by the inclusion of girls, I would predict that within a generation or two the number of participating boys would be reduced to a small minority; just as it is with so-called 'children's choirs' in North American schools and churches today, whose members are overwhelmingly girls.

It is the tradition of male fellowship in the cathedral choirs, boys feeling the support of other like-minded boys, which provides much of the cachet, the impetus and attraction for musical boys to be willing to join and to express themselves through fine church music. The loss of such a tradition will mean the loss of an important medium for boys to express soulfulness. And God knows, in this age especially, the world can only be a better place if more boys can be drawn away from the aggression in popular culture, in television and video games, to get in touch with their souls.

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