

RESTORING (VOCAL) ORGANS

A FORGOTTEN PRIORITY

EMILIE BELS

Organ appeals are sadly commonplace these days. The instruments are costly to maintain, and doing so requires a level of skill that few have. A restored organ is often a cause for celebration, sometimes even the focus of a special service. Yet that special service often relies on another instrument, equally central and equally in need of care, but far less cared for. Every week, voices up and down the country are used in unsustainable ways. Their falling into disrepair, however, is not the subject of public sadness or fundraisers. It is an isolated, sometimes shame-ridden experience.

A MATTER OF TRADITION?

As an outsider, I noticed a trend when I joined church choirs: sight-reading is a point of pride, born of necessity, but now often prized above painstaking rehearsal. Similarly, warming up is often overlooked and, for many singers, ‘warming up with a hymn’ is the best they can expect.

At the same time, vocal health is more talked about than ever, with scientific evidence and new approaches increasingly publicized. Yet the world of church choirs seems immune to change, instead

prioritizing efficiency and sight-reading while taking the voice for granted.

I know this from personal experience. I first injured my voice four years ago in a church choir due to fatigue and strain. A year after returning to singing (following difficult and expensive vocal healthcare interventions), the problem returned, and I may now need to step away from the tradition I love in order to protect both my voice and my career.

This is a stark reminder that the voices carrying our music are delicate, and that neglect comes at a real cost. But my experience highlights a broader reality: church choirs bring together children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly, all of whom rely on their voices to sustain the tradition we cherish. If we fear the decline of the church choir, preserving the voices that keep it going, from the youngest to the oldest, and equipping singers with the tools to look after their voices must be a top priority.

PRIORITIZING VOCAL HEALTH

What might this look like? For children, it could mean learning how to care for their voices and forming good habits that set them up for a lifetime of singing:

warming up properly, not oversinging, and understanding the physiology of the voice. Olivia Sparkhall’s book *A Young Person’s Guide to Vocal Health* and her subsequent article in CMQ (September 2021) outline plenty of strategies that directors of music could use to support young singers.

Good vocal habits should start with children, but they don’t stop there. For adult singers, prioritizing vocal health requires a holistic approach: reviewing the basics, acknowledging that voices change with age, and giving singers the physical and psychological tools to adapt. This benefits not only the singers themselves but also improves the quality of the sound they produce as they age.

Achieving this would require some systemic change. Directors of music are well placed to champion vocal health care, helping to set positive standards and raise the profile of the tradition by showing that modern scientific advice is valued and that singers’ wellbeing is a shared priority. Warming up isn’t just a perfunctory stretch of the vocal cords, it is also a valuable tool for improving ensemble sound.

Ultimately, this approach treats singers like athletes: it recognizes that their physical health is valuable and puts professional advice into practice, spending the required time to improve the overall sound of the choir.

A DIFFICULT BUT WORTHWHILE CHANGE

This would not be an easy change to bring about. Directors of music often begin as organists and may not have extensive formal training in vocal pedagogy or care. Combined with limited time and resources, a demanding musical schedule, and the financial challenges faced by many church music foundations, this can make it difficult to prioritize vocal health.

Across the church music community, considerable expertise already exists that could be drawn upon to promote better vocal health. With appropriate prioritization, training for directors of music, the publication of clear guidance, and targeted funding could all contribute to raising awareness and providing practical support.

BENEFITS, AND MORAL DUTY

The benefits to sacred choral music would be manifold: more resilient voices, and therefore a more reliable choir; a healthier, possibly more pleasing sound; a less stressful and more psychologically positive experience for singers; and improved musicality through increased cohesion, better rapport between conductor and choir, and the satisfaction of a job well done.

Yet this is not merely about benefits. Directors of music, and by extension the whole institution of sacred

choral music, have a duty of care to their singers. Just as some say it is a crime to let an organ fall into disrepair, practices that lead to vocal injury – or performances that are merely ‘scraped by’ – should likewise be deemed unacceptable. Vocal damage carries a profound psychological toll and is often a lonely experience, as singers quietly retreat from the stalls.

A choir is nothing without its singers, and its singers are nothing without their voices. The human voice is celebrated for its raw, emotive quality, which makes it especially fitting for worship. But it is precisely that humanity which makes it fragile and deserving of careful attention.

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A PRECEDENT HAS ALREADY BEEN SET

Fortunately, prioritizing vocal health is not a radical idea. It is already a professional standard in much of the rest of the choral world. The Association of British Choral Conductors runs vocal health training courses. Professional conductors are publicly saying that ‘no time’ is not an excuse – including Tori Longdon on social media – and that good vocal health is essential to a choir’s success.

Far from being a nice-to-have, vocal care is an essential investment in the quality and longevity of the voices that singers lend, often for free, to the choir. For directors, it is also a matter of pride: getting the best out of the choir and knowing that each performance is as good as it can be, thanks to the care given to the performers.

Caring for the tradition and the music means caring for the voices carrying them. Those who sing well, pray twice – so let us enable them to do so.

For advice on helping singers manage voice change, the ageing voice, and avoiding vocal damage, see *The Voice for Life Guide to Choir Training*, particular ‘The choir trainer’s toolkit’.