

Life-long learning and professional mobility
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Especially in this period of rapid and dramatic global change, experience and development places key competences firmly within the context of lifelong learning as a process.

The European Council at Lisbon in March 2000 defined its aim for the EU :

« The Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion ».

The post-Lisbon process has explored the implications of this aim for lifelong learning setting three objectives to be achieved by 2010

- improve the quality of EU education and training systems
- ensure that these systems are accessible to all
- open up education and training to the wider world.

The European area of lifelong learning established, that lifelong learning cannot simply be concerned with employability and economic competitiveness.

It involves active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion.

Lessons about good practice which have emerged also, throw light on the priorities for the EU-area of lifelong learning and challenges to achieving the Lisbon goals :

- re-engineering access to learning for continuing learning and re-training throughout life
- transnational exchange
- analyses of qualification systems

For social and labour market policies :

- the right for workers to paid educational leave
- social and economic support for individuals to access and continue successfully in learning
- better social protection systems to support lifelong learning in periods of labour market transition

For education and civil society :

- more research into relationship between basic skills and lifelong learning generally, education and active citizenship.

With Your permission would I like to talk to You about a practical case.

At the Opera of Ghent/Antwerp(B) did I come to the following needs analyses for the operachoir. Recently, the stress factor in the choir has increased. On the one hand, there was a fear for a financial disaster of our institution. On the other hand, choristers are aware of the fact they cannot find a similar job.

It is neither acceptable that the choir has to perform with less fixed contract singers than optimally necessary. It leads to a decrease in quality and has a psychological and artistic impact.

Blending is the most indispensable element in a choral song.

If more chorists are engaged, it would be a relief if each voice can perform its tessitura at his fullest sound. This is presently impossible for lack of voices.

Tenors and sopranos now have to sing too piano.

The present framework contains 3 first sopranos and 6 second sopranos. Reasonably these off balances have to be adapted to form a balanced whole.

Also when singing repetitively high tones, there are not enough voices to rest. This leads inevitably to an overload of the voice.

This phenomenon is especially noticeable with sopranos and tenors who misuse the most vulnerable part of their voice.

The goal is to give the choir members sometimes a few measures of rest. In this way they can continue to sing at the right technical level.

Speech therapists are convinced that sustaining certain tones and heights confront a singer with voice stress. Due to this burden of the voice, the chances of keeping it healthy becomes very small.

It is also valid for rehearsals. In contrast to a concert, excessive repetitions of difficult passages provoke voice damage.

The baroque era broke up with polyphony and was based more and more on harmony.

A 4 voiced harmony, with a dominant melody (voices used as instruments), was the composition style that was used from the Classic period until the Romantic period. This style is frequently used in our repertoire.

This style can lead to an overburden, especially with the highest voices. (f.i. The Ode to Joy, Clemenza di Tito, Richard III, ...). This compositional development had a great influence on the performers and put a burden on the choristers.

Instead of a polyphonic style (where the voice was used contrapuntal and moved between high and low), a harmonic approach was developed in which sopranos and tenors function as melody supporters with the lower voices as accompanists.

Ancient choral songs used the voice instrumentally in a tessiture that was meant more for an orchestral composition. Sometimes the nature of these compositions weighs on a part of the voice.

It's the challenge of each chorister to keep his voice in optima forma, in particular for the tenors who carry generally the melody. Sometimes, due to the ignorance of choirmasters, these difficult passages are lavishly repeated without knowledge and/or appreciation of voice/tessiture. This phenomenon is relatively unknown with choirmasters and even sometimes with the choristers. So this can cause unconsciously damage to the voice.

An example is "Mefistofele" of Boito. In this piece, there are different passages in which sopranos and tenors are obliged to maintain high notes fortissimo during several measures. This is considered by teachers and singers as an extra burden on the voice.

A choir that cooperates fluently with a fine intonation, blending etc... has to be build over a long period. A fluent collaboration means a good knowledge of each other on a personal and artistic level. An adequately staffed choir is the best guarantee to obtain this goal.

Why are these problems so little known?

Choirmasters, conductors and intendants pay too little attention to the technical aspect of the voice. Nevertheless they appreciate beautiful singing. However, only a few are aware of the technical impact and how to maintain this quality label.

A good singer enjoyed years of voice training. Not one non-singer can equal this education or experience. Moreover, when a singer becomes of age, technical capabilities, skills and knowledge are even more important.

Young people with a beautiful natural voice can survive by abusing their voice for a few years, but after a while vocal technics are crucial to maintain your voice in shape.

Do not forget we have to sing till we are 65!!

To achieve this, a continuous education is needed. The condition to keep on learning is necessary and thus efforts have to be made to increase the awareness amongst the singers.

Goal is to encourage the talented and to favor a good maintenance of the voice.

The social circumstances. Until now, little has been done to provide choir singers with adequate working conditions. The choir singers should be supported with a.o. "master classes" and should carry

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the quality aspect in their banner. Consulting external experts to review every aspect would be a first step in the right direction. These supporting elements are indispensable for the good working of voices and co-workers in every existing choir. The principles are an universal necessity! There is a great lack of external expertise, able to give advise on management, psychological and social issues, use of voice, correction of posture, physical wellbeing, ...

Of all employees in an opera, the choristers have no possibility to take any kind of initiative. They are the mercy of the wishes, sometimes even caprices, of directors, choirmasters, scene designers, conductors or technical staff.

It's time to make solid engagements on all echelons concerning the growth process of an opera performance, and the safety, comfort and working conditions of the choir members.

... In short: we need a change in management!!

Next to the social expectations does this choir need a guide to good practice in lifelong learning !!!