

Introduction

*Where children sing
the heavens open!*

(Spanish saying quoted by Kurt Pahlen)

“Lively Children’s Choir” – this was the only title I ever wanted to give what would sometime become a book!

From then on, like a butterfly, these joyful words accompanied my first written notes and kept faith with me: encouraging, inspiring, enlivening and endorsing.

In fact this picture of a butterfly is symbolic for what is important to me in working imaginatively with a children’s choir beyond curricula and the pressure to do well:

- a happy, relaxed basic atmosphere
- the colorful flow of a lesson
- the varied alternation of methodical paths and thematic focal points
- learning to sing with emphasis on enjoyment through playful activities and forms of communication
- individual expression in movement, dance and improvisation as a sister-activity of singing
- encouraging the enjoyment of fantasy and experiment
- singing as a source of joie de vivre

These “butterfly” images provide a kind of colored foundation upon which over the years I was able to form a particular concept of methodical, educational procedure.

This practical handbook is therefore the outcome of many years’ work with a children’s choir, a work that seeks to address the child in his/her unity of body, mind and spirit.

In addition to promoting a musical and generally artistic, aesthetic education, the personalities of the children are of particular concern to me. This necessitates allowing the interaction of singing, speaking, making music, moving and dancing as the artistic and aesthetic media of an “integrated” way of working with a children’s choir. For they mutually complement, fertilize and enrich one another and in their playful, combined use can contribute to the unfolding of children’s inherent creative powers.

For the sake of clarity of full-roundedness and understanding of what is practically possible it has been necessary, at least in the main part of the book, to separate into individual chapters those elements of teaching practice which are usually given in one flowing, organic sequence.

As a result, time and again one sees that many exercises, because of their many-faceted content, could equally well have been placed in a neighboring chapter.

A speech exercise for instance, placed in the “Speech Games” chapter because of its possibilities for speech development, could equally well have been placed in the “Rhythmic Games” chapter because of its interesting rhythmic structure; on the other hand it could have served as a model for the inventing of a melody and even more for a movement creation.

All the examples in the chapter “Vocal Games” are at the same time aural exercises, or can be used as a basis for Relative Solmization or can lead to individual melodic invention.

The examples can be extended at will...

As we know that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, the necessary division into themes remains a provisional measure that always has the whole in view but cannot convey all its interconnections. This situation is not new for us teachers in our use of many practical and specialist books!

It should nevertheless be expressly mentioned: It will need some experiments and quite a lot of experience to avoid making a “hodge-podge” out of these themes and the many different playful ways of learning, and instead to conceive a logical educational sequence.

There will of course be a period of “trial and error” and of “learning by doing”. But this can lead to a pleasurable liveliness in working with a children’s choir, when the unexpected and the spontaneous contribute to a personal style of teaching.

In the chapter “Lesson Models” the given examples are to be thought of as a kind of “helping hand”: examples of how the theme for a lesson can be prepared and given various aspects and directions.

It may be that for some readers the words “Children’s Choir” in the title have such a demanding implication that they shrink back feeling: “I can’t do that.” These are readers who associate singing with too high a quality or even have performance standards for themselves which are too high!

If Kurt Pahlen says: “There are no unmusical children,” then this applies equally for those who have meanwhile become adults!

Sadly, however, there are far too many people who have experienced a negative impression in their childhood – through family home or school etc. – which took away their belief in their own musicality. This is often accompanied by a blockage with regard to the capacity to sing.

Remarks from adults of every age such as “I can’t sing”, “I was always told that I was unmusical!”, “I’ll only make a fool of myself”, are plentiful evidence of this.

(And we hear similar remarks from our youngsters, don’t we!)

This is utterly deplorable, particularly for the waste of often available, unused potential! Where it nevertheless becomes possible to break down these barriers it is often the case that there is a slumbering affinity to do something musical which can be re-awakened!

Therefore it is never too late!

This book wishes to address, encourage and stimulate all those who sing with children or who wish to do so: teachers in general and music schools, daycare and home-school teachers, those involved with church music and also in therapeutic professions.

Of course a basic knowledge and a certain competence with musical material (reading notation, singing at sight, security in rhythm and intonation, playing an accompanying instru-

ment), leading singing, educational experience and a clear, more or less trained singing voice is needed in order to be an example in which the children can trust.¹ But of course all that can be acquired and practiced!

The numerous positive experiences that I have had with participants on my in-service training courses and seminars – given on working with children’s choirs in many different countries – really justify encouraging people to become leaders of singing whether with a choir or a simple singing group. This is particularly the case with those who have an inclination towards this splendid task, but whose demands on themselves are (still) standing in the way! Many of these have later told me of their “jump into cold water,” of the enrichment of their own singing as a source of power, of their own growth within this educational and musical undertaking and of the beneficial effect on the children and their homes.

An “everyday culture of singing” (Karl Adamek²) means the cultivation of singing in all social areas and in every phase of life, from the (passive) pre-natal time to extreme old age: the expectant mother singing for her child, singing entirely for oneself, singing for and with one another in the home, kindergarten, school and music school, singing in youth groups, in homes for the elderly, at church and other festivals and celebrations – a singing that happens out of sheer pleasure at feelings of acceptance and well-being in society and out of personal satisfaction!³

The work with a children’s choir introduced here is to be understood entirely in connection with this spirit of everyday singing, and not from singing on a platform or stage because of the resultant demands of professionalism. It should be seen as:

- a fully experienced co-operation
- a community in which every child who wishes to belong is welcome, even when they are not (yet) able to sing with confidence!
- a way of working whose playful, artistic incentive stimulates the children to special achievement.
- a way of working that drives forward the process of making music in multiple creative ways through the voice, the first and the most personal instrument
- a way of working in which the path – the practicing, playing and creating with all their good and bad experiences, with all their low and high points is the actual goal
- a process whose prevailing yearly highpoint should not be thought of as an end in itself, but as the crown and “harvest” of all the work:

the final concert, the staged musical play, the guest appearance, open singing (and dancing!) with the parents, siblings and guests, competitive singing or taking part in a children’s choir festival.

1 See also “Thoughts on singing with children” (p. 25ff.).

2 Karl Adamek: “Singen als Lebenshilfe. Zur Empirie und Theorie von Alltagsbewältigung” [Singing as an aid to living. Empiricism and theory of coping with everyday life], Waxmann Verlag, Münster.

3 Zoltán Kodály, the Hungarian composer and founder of the music teaching method named after him, when asked how early music education should begin, answered: “Nine months before birth, with the mother!”

An artistic-aesthetic educational work, as is possible in an exemplary way with a children's choir, has relevance for the whole of society. Its promotion is of particular urgency just now! For years experts have been warning of the rapidly advancing loss of singing in our society and with it the ability to sing in general! Ever fewer children have the experience of singing in their early years, for it takes place in the home to an ever lesser degree. Also the tradition of passing on the wealth of children's and folk songs from generation to generation is in the process of dying out. Where the lively resonance of singing is absent, so also is the positive experience that singing can provide: contentment, balance and a capacity for enthusiasm.

Over the decades we ourselves have created a world in which the passive consumption of music and pictures has ever more blunted our senses. In the media glut and the flood of objective information we have become distanced from ourselves, so that the slumbering spiritual powers within us are unable to unfold! And further, we are suffering in an atmosphere of growing coldness in relationships and poverty of communication; we believe that we have no time for things which do not bring material gain, or that appear "useless"!

Everywhere we encounter hectic life styles, competitive thinking and intolerance to the point of workplace bullying which engenders withdrawal and anxiety!

It is small wonder that teachers and parents notice an increase in behavioral problems such as aggression and the propensity to violence in our children and young people (and occasional signs of this in themselves). The reaction is mostly helplessness or a cry for therapeutic help.

In equal measure the need for warmth, security and a sense of community in all levels of society seems to be growing. It is the longing for our own authentic being, for sensory activity and individual expression.

We should now consider our musical roots which only appear to be submerged, but never buried. Our basic need to produce, to create with artistic material such as singing, is as alive as ever, though often not admitted.

There have always been and still are hopeful signs and forward-looking initiatives in this direction. Such a one is the founding of "Il canto del mondo" [The song of the world] – International Network for the Support of the Daily Culture of Singing e.V."

It was established in 1999 under the patronage of Yehudi Menuhin as an "Initiative for a practical art for life"

Lord Yehudi Menuhin (1916–1999) the brilliant violinist and sensitive teacher, the great humanist and world citizen wrote a treatise for "Il canto del mondo" on the significance of singing for mankind. It should become his legacy, for he died in 1999 just before the project went to the press...

Menuhin's declaration of belief in singing is like a great poem, a poem on a wonderful subject!

His profound petition concerns us all in the extent to which singing contributes to peace, friendship and tolerance. It is impossible to formulate it more truthfully, more strikingly, more inspirationally or more conclusively than Yehudi Menuhin was able to:

Lord Menuhin's Legacy on the Meaning of Singing⁴

*Singing is the true mother tongue of all human kind:
for it is the most natural and simple way
in which we are undividedly there and can communicate fully
with all our experiences, our feelings and our hopes.*

*Singing is firstly the inner dance of the breath, of the soul,
but it can also free our bodies from all stiffness
into dance and can teach us the rhythm of life.*

*Singing unfolds to the extent in which it grows
out of listening and attentive awareness.
In singing we can refine ourselves so that we respect
our fellow creatures and the time in which we live.*

*The song of a human being always touches us directly,
leading to growing understanding, participation and comprehension beyond all words.*

*I believe this is only possible
because human beings' double nature is revealed in singing:
without question singing belongs to the very nature of humankind,
for there are no cultures where singing does not take place.*

*In a time when our natural, intellectual and spiritual powers of imagination
seem to become ever more stunted,
so that our entire future is possibly threatened,
we need all possible sources of contemplation
open to us.*

*In an incomparable way singing holds the dormant potential
to become a real universal language for all humankind:
singing reveals the whole meaning and sensuous richness of all peoples and cultures.*

*This unique treasury of language
must not become lost to us,
a process which is in fact taking place.*

⁴ Yehudi Menuhin composed this text in German as Patron of "Il canto del mondo" on February 12, 1999 in Düsseldorf (further information at www.il-canto-del-mondo-de).

*Therefore singing must not only be preserved,
but also promoted worldwide.*

*For singing makes possible, as nothing else,
a direct communication of hearts
beyond all cultural boundaries.*

*I could name a hundred cogent reasons
for the development of a new world culture of singing
that I have in mind as a vision of the future,
which humankind can realize in everyday life from their inner resources,
which can further the peaceable nature of human cultures with one another
through the strengthening of personal contentment and liveliness
and through a growing trust in individual lives
with their responsibilities and joys, their exertions and hardships.*

*If we human beings become aware of ourselves
as orchestral instruments in the symphony of creation,
and in singing learn ever afresh how to pacify,
then possibly
– with the help of our recuperation through music –
we may learn to heal earth's wounds that we have caused.*

*In singing we become inspiring and creative beings of sound:
through singing we breathe life into our world and actions,
offer love, joy, hope and confidence
but also sing away the pain in our souls
and in forgiving others enliven our hearts:
we are able to become the unifying song of the hymn of creation.*

*The ancient wisdom of peoples
and the latest findings of those scientists,
who seek to concentrate on the accumulated knowledge of past millennia
to the creative enrichment of cultures,
give us courage and capability enough
to found a world culture of singing.*

*Singing as a sound out of silence,
out of the richness of inner consciousness,
is a singing comprising
attentive listening that responds to others.*

*In the world it affects active listening,
receptive tuning,
and demands the most intense vivacity
in dancing, free-swinging encounters with all living beings.*

*Thus singing can at the same time move us in our inner being,
may even cause a gentle pacifying revolution
and perhaps increasingly help to release us human beings
from hostile personal and social situations.*

*All our experiences and our knowledge tell us
that it can be so.*

*On this path – as individuals from within to without,
and socially from below to above –
we human beings can develop the strength
to erect and maintain new structures
that will allow a living peace to grow under protection.*

I know of nothing that will gainsay this.

*Why should we not therefore in all confidence try,
together with all artists of this world and those who feel called upon to do so,
to develop such a world culture of singing
fed by all the world's cultural sources?
We have nothing to lose, but much to gain.*

*Every beginning,
even the smallest step along this path would be uplifting.
In singing we acknowledge one another and the world,
Nature and all those who are with us.*

*Georg Philipp Telemann recognized this when he said:
“Singing is first and foremost
the foundation of all music.”*

*Those who sing from their souls heal their own inner worlds at the same time.
When all sing from their souls they heal the outer world.*

*I would be filled with joy
were I to experience such a “Song of the World”
in the way that I can hear it in my mind:
“Il canto del mondo”*