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Artistic Leadership. The Design of a Study for Making Visible Mediating Tools for Choir Directors

Pia Bygdéus

Introduction

In my own work as a musician and pedagogue I have often thought about how musical quality and knowledge can be developed in the work with choirs, where the role of the choral director is a complex one (Durrant, 2003). When working with a choir, the same person often has several guises, and in a previous study of how choir directors talk about leadership (Bygdéus, 2006), I found six aspects of their professional role: the pedagogue, the conductor and the leader, all with administrative, social and artistic functions. The study gave rise to new questions on whether it is possible to investigate and make visible the mediating tools that choir masters use and the way in which artistic leadership is exercised. In this article, I will describe an ongoing study where I have followed children's choir directors in their professional development as individuals as well as at a collective level. I will also describe the design of a project that aims to study the mediating tools choir directors employ in their work.

An Ongoing Study of Choral Directors' Work with Children's Choirs

A pilot project aimed at widening the scope in the recruitment of students of music through working with children's choirs was launched jointly by the Malmö Academy of Music, Körcentrum Syd and a culture school in Malmö as a co-operation project in 2009. The purpose of the project was to engage with seven to eight year olds through choir sing-

ing and to give children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds a chance to meet and make music together. In order to clearly show their desire to encounter new groups of children, the partners have carried out a dedicated pilot project.¹ The purpose of the pilot was partly to encounter new groups of children and partly to give children a chance to sing in different types of choirs and at different levels. This project was initiated against the background that the municipally-run culture schools in Sweden are tasked with being available to all Swedish children (Hübner, 2002).

The Planning Stage

Three planning meetings were scheduled during the spring and summer of 2009, during which three choir directors/pedagogues and their school leaders were to draw up objectives and a project plan. I was present at these meetings as a PhD student and researcher, and a fourth choir leader joined at a later stage. The study was designed as a qualitative, longitudinal study with an inductive approach, where I followed four Swedish choir leaders closely in their work with children's choirs throughout the academic year of 2009/2010. In order to be able to study what goes on in practice and to verbalise the process of artistic leadership, several different methods for data collection were considered before the outset. I chose observations in combination with note taking (Bryman, 2002) as the main method that would allow me to get to know the work process of each informant. For this purpose, I designed a scheme in which my own observations and reflections could meet the participants' reflections on the subject. To the researcher, note taking is partly a way of making visible that which has not yet been formulated, partly a tool which, in combination with observations and interviews, can be used for triangulation during the analytical phase (Larsson, 1993).

By observing the informants and by going back to my observation notes, I was able to clearly formulate the problems by studying the material. By not filming, but instead building up empirical results based on observation notes and my own reflections, my aim was to approach the choir directors' work with the children in a relaxed way that allowed them to concentrate on their work without paying attention to a cam-

¹ The fact that the project is labeled as a pilot project does not mean that it is a pilot project within my own body of research. The pilot project has allowed me to collect empirical data for my own thesis.

era. I also used complementary methods such as portfolio notes, interviews and focus discussions. The different methods complement each other and allow many different ways of analyzing the object of analysis, i.e. the choir director profession.

As a researcher, my role was planned as that of a participating observer (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Heiling, 2000), and the study was also inspired by participatory action research as described by Rönnerman (2004). Initially, the central points of study were the researcher's observations and the participants' reflections. During the observations in class I used two questions: *What* is he/she doing? *How* is he/she doing it? These questions were used in order to obtain a broad view of the phenomenon (Säljö, 2005).

When planning the structuring of participants' reflections I was inspired by an evaluation model called *The Portfolio*, developed by Ulla Wiklund (1996). It is based on continuously noting down one's own thoughts and reflections in a so-called portfolio during a limited period of time. Five questions were devised for this study:

- 1) How does the lesson begin?
- 2) How does the lesson end?
- 3) What did I think was good about today's lesson?
- 4) What can I change/improve before the next lesson?
- 5) Other ideas?

After each lesson, the choir directors answered these questions in writing. The reflection period consisted of six lessons.

Preliminary Study Autumn 2009

During the autumn of 2009 I carried out a preliminary study with one of the choir leaders, here called Anna, who started a new choir with children between seven and twelve years old from different cultures. I occupied roughly the same place in the room for six consecutive lessons, computer on my lap, noting down *what* was rehearsed and *how* it was done. I compiled my notes in a document called 'Observations'. From my place in the room, I could clearly see the choir leader in action at the piano or on the floor. The choir leader was asked to answer the five portfolio questions after each lesson over a period of six weeks. After the sixth observation, she was asked to compile her notes in a document she would be prepared to show to me and talk about at a future interview. This inter-

view was conducted in two parts. First, Anna was invited to talk about things that had come up while she was writing her portfolio notes, and then I presented my own compilation, which included observations that I had sorted under four separate headings.

At each observation, it became clear that the choir leader reflected on everything she did and that she tried to be completely present and receptive. She appeared to be prepared to improve her teaching methods and the children's activities week after week. She switched between different tasks and methodologies, and was musically and administratively prepared when she met the group. She had a didactic approach that can be described as both *techne* and *fronesis* (Gustavsson, 2000). In her work with the children, she focused on their relationship to the music and different ways of creating and performing music, i.e. musical expression.

The choir leader's rudder – the various planned concerts she will perform together with the children – becomes partial goals on the path to learning more about choir singing through singing. On several occasions she tells the children, 'Do not speak – sing'. During our conversation after the observation period, the choir director tells me that the children learn quickly and that they learn by doing, by singing more and talking less. They very quickly accept and learn new things. The choir leader was keen to continue to stimulate this quality and to teach them to keep the room in good order. Each have their own seat so they can begin to work quickly, and the teacher can learn their names if they always sit in the same place. She also moves them around now and then to accommodate the way the children's voices develop and go together with the others'. At the interview, the choir director tells me that she is constantly thinking about short-term and long-term planning. She is inspired by her work, which not only becomes clear at the observations, but also at the interview in autumn 2009. She can be described as one of the gardeners and sculptors that Øivind Varkøy describes in his *Instrumentalism in the Field of Music Education* (2007). She has a positive outlook on life, and she becomes close with the children during the time they work together. In *Pengene eller livet!* (The money or your life!, 2007), Varkøy mentions that dialogue must be guided by the matter in hand, by the work/task/content. This particular choir director constantly proves, by her attitude to the children, that her focus is on the music and the children, and that they work together in order to work out forms of expression. The dialogue is about tackling the matter in hand, the content/task (Varkøy, 2007), which the choir director is doing by working according to a process she has developed by working with children. During our conversa-

tion and during the interview that was conducted after the observation period in the autumn, she wonders why choir directors are not trained or encouraged to discuss how choristers should be approached and treated.

My own reflection during the observation period was that the choir director had found time for reflection, discussion and development. Tasks and reflections were made visible and communicable when both the choir and I, as the observing party, continuously wrote down our reflections. Through this, the observer and the informant form a link in a chain of development possibilities for the choir director. The method of doing, writing, reflecting, doing, writing, reflecting over and over again, triggers a process that allows you to verbalise and make visible the choir director's work, his or her type of leadership and professionalism.

After completion of this preliminary study, the overall study design, which included this informant, Anna, was determined.

The Participants and Their Background

Three female and one male choir director were included in the project and were given names in alphabetical order: Anna, Beatrice, Carl and Desiree. All four were graduates of the Malmö Academy of Music. Three work at a culture school and one at an academy of music. In their everyday work they lead several different types of choirs and work with children's choirs as well as adult choirs.

Data Collection

After completion of the preliminary study in autumn 2009, the collection of data began in earnest with all four choir directors during the academic year of 2009/2010. The four informants were studied individually. As planned, observations were made by me during lessons with a children's choir and documented in the form of note taking. In order to compare each choir director's reflections with my own observations, they kept portfolio notes after each observed lesson (Wiklund, 1996) and were given a chance to discuss it at a later interview. The interview was conducted after both the informant and the researcher had documented their own reflections by independent note keeping.

It was decided to record the individual interviews and the focus interview on film, which meant that they could be conducted without my being distracted by note taking. The questions I asked at the interview were the same five questions that were used in the Portfolio, and I

allowed the choir directors to develop their written reflections and talk freely about their answers, including things that they had not written down, but that came up during our conversation. We were then able to talk about the things that the choir leader had mentioned. An interview is not democratic as such since it is planned by the researcher (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), in this case me, but during the interviews I allowed myself to assume a collegial approach based on their and my professional identity as choir directors.

The study encompassed nine phases:

1. Each choir director was observed during six lessons, which equals a total of 24 observations. The observations were documented in the form of written notes, 108 pages of information in total.
2. At the end of each lesson/observation, the choir directors were asked to answer five questions. The five questions, or portfolio notes, were the same each time.
3. After the end of the observation period, the choir directors were asked to summarise their written material on each question and produce a conclusion of the five summaries, which they had talked about and handed in at one of the interviews. The written portfolio summaries are 29 pages in total.
4. The observation notes were compiled for each choir director in a document labelled 'Observations'. Each choir director read the observations made about him or her at the interview. They were read aloud at the end of the interview, and the choir director was given the typescript to keep. These observations are 6 pages in total.
5. I conducted one 105-minute interview with each choir director. It was divided into two parts. During the first, the choir director talked about his or her portfolio notes and what it was like working with the children during the observation period. At the end of the interview they handed over their portfolio notes to me. This gave the choir director a chance to speak freely in answer to the questions and ventilate his or her reflections. During the second part of the interview I read and presented a written summary of my observation notes to the choir director. He or she listened and commented on my observations. At the end of the interview, the choir director was given a written compilation of my observations. All interviews were filmed.

6. During spring 2010, the choir directors met for three separate joint conferences, which were documented by the researcher.
7. The four choir directors and I met for a two-hour-long focus discussion after completion of steps 1–5. The interview started with a spontaneous personal and collective summary of the past year. What had occurred, what were the choir leaders' own experiences, how did the joint children's choir concert turn out? Each choir director talked about their own part of the study. After about one hour, the focus discussion was abandoned for a group interview that dealt with two, previously prepared, themes:
 - a) What form does the artistic aspect of working with a choir take?
 - b) The leadership model A–S–K (Bygdéus, 2006) was introduced to the group. I drew it up and explained how it can be viewed as a model for choir leadership and as a starting point for an informal discussion on the way in which leadership could be made visible and described. I used the model (see Figure 1) as a tool for starting a discussion on choir leadership. The focus discussion was filmed in its entirety.
8. Each individual interview generated 15 pages of notes and six hours of footage at my first assessment.
9. The focus discussion generated 5 pages of text at the first assessment, and two hours of footage.

Below is a more detailed description of point 7b, which differs from my earlier, inductive, approach since I at this late stage of the data collection process introduced a previous research result as a methodological tool for talking about leadership without the choir leader themselves having formed an overall image of the work. Instead, I introduced an image that they would later be invited to discuss.

This part of the survey started by me reading out a number of descriptions of qualities that may be present in a choir director. These were all quotes taken from questionnaires filled in by choristers, without further explanation or background information. The words were read in the order they were found in the questionnaires and without clarification or comments made by me as follows:

musical, accomplished, able to bring out the best, good pianist, arranger, being clear, to the point, modest, ability to go through with what you have planned, persistent, thorough, enthusiastic, dedicated, funny, happy, natural

authority, serious, calm, sensitive to others, patient, developing, good leadership skills, has control, being honest, self-distance, companionship, ability to realise ideas.²

When the above comments were read out, the four informants went quiet, laughed out loud occasionally and made comments. Spontaneous comments included:

'Oh no.' – 'Super choirmaster' – 'Super teacher' – 'We're supposed to be all of that.'³

It was clear from their physical reactions and expressions that they recognised the descriptions and that they identified their own profession – that of being a choir director.

I then showed the four choir directors a leadership map of the so called A–S–K model:⁴



Figure 1: The A–S–K (English: A–S–A) model

The various aspects of the profession 'leadership for choirs' that is described in Figure 1 was read out to the four informants. These aspects are based on results from my earlier study (Bygdéus, 2006):

Administrative leadership includes organizing concerts, financial controlling, being an administrator on various levels, including being active on the management committee and leading the organisation. A strong management committee consisting of persons who can and want to deal with practical details on various levels is important. It is also important to delegate tasks to

2 These descriptions were based on earlier results from a survey including 37 choristers (Bygdéus, 2000, 55), in which the choristers were asked about what the qualities of a choir leader should be.

3 Swedish: "Usch" – "Superkörledaren" – "Superpedagogen" – "Vi ska helst vara allt det där."

4 The A–S–K (Eng. A–S–A) model is based on results from an earlier investigation involving three choir directors (Bygdéus, 2006). A = Administrative, S = Social and K = Artistic (*konstnärligt*) leadership.

choristers who are able to take on responsibilities and administrative tasks. The director has overall responsibility and needs to make sure that everything is done properly. The choir director is the leader of the organisation.

Social leadership includes creating a pleasant atmosphere at rehearsals, making sure that people are happy and that they enjoy making music together. The management committee can come in useful here too. Important skills include basic psychology, people skills and awareness of the importance of allowing everyone to be seen and heard. The choir leader can help choristers reach beyond their limitations in terms of expressing themselves and finding courage to become absorbed in and express themselves through music. Awareness of the music becomes a shared experience, which is the source of the overall expression of the choir. It is also important to understand the time aspect: learning and practice takes time, and they must be allowed to take time. The director knows the body and spirit of the choir by past experience as a chorister and of various choir-related tasks as well as experience of being on the management committee. In time, the director learns to appreciate the various aspects of different people. It will inspire a desire to developing the self and the group with a feeling for quality in terms of achievement and programming/repertory. Commitment and experience promote social leadership skills.

Artistic leadership is based on that which one respondent refers to as 'height' of knowledge and 'depth' of knowledge. 'Height' of knowledge is achieved through greater professionalism. 'Deep' knowledge is achieved over time and with growing experience, and there is no contradiction between 'height' and 'depth', 'depth' requires 'height', and the expression can be used as a metaphor for a complex profession. The professionalisation process emanates from a high degree of talent. It is further developed through education, practice, being, knowledge; a professional practitioner's attainment of a high position is based on time and experience. (45–46)

Apart from the above mentioned three aspects of leadership, the four choir directors embody the three more generally described professions of choir leader, choir pedagogue and choir conductor, as outlined in different educational programmes (Bygdéus, 2006). These six aspects together form the model in Figure 1.

In the focus interview, the choir directors reflected on these concepts. Below are some quotes from the discussion. Carl does not think that you can achieve artistic quality without the administrative and social aspects,

that is to say: you reach further when you apply all the ingredients.⁵

⁵ Swedish: "eller rättare sagt: man når högre med alla de ingredienserna."

Anna says that these aspects are all interrelated to a very high degree:

and then I need to be a social person and deal with conflicts, etc. If I fail to hand out administrative information, everything fails; everything is interrelated. Something may be more prominent, but only for a short moment.⁶

Anna discusses the concepts of choir leader, choir pedagogue and choir conductor and remarks that there is a difference in status between a choir leader, a choir pedagogue and a choir conductor:

We need to make an effort to strengthen our status. In some ways, the conductor's status seems to be higher and better, but the leader is somehow superior, because there are so many functions included in the term. A conductor is someone you see just standing there conducting, but the leader is the pianist, the administrator, the social jack-of-all-trades as well as the conductor, but leader seems to be more ordinary. Pedagogue is a wider concept, a pedagogical idea, you want a result and you have an education you want to share. The term 'conductor' doesn't even include 'pianist'.⁷

Anna says that these concepts are important, and that as a children's choir director you double as leader, pedagogue and conductor. When she is working with the children's choir, she leaves the piano, stands in front of the children and conducts, and she asks them to look at her hands. This is when they all come together musically, and the children get a sense of being in an artistic environment that is more than just the teaching of music.

The above excerpts from the material collected from the focus discussion shows the many aspects of the choir director that come to the fore, and that are part of the profession.

⁶ Swedish: "så måste jag ju vara en social människa och bemöta konflikter med mera. Kan jag inte dela ut administrativ information så faller hela kören, allt är sammanflätat. Kanske att något för en stund står i fokus."

⁷ Swedish: "Det finns en statusskillnad i begreppen körledaren, körpedagogen, kördirigenten. Vi måste jobba för att stärka vår status. På sätt och vis verkar dirigentens status högre och finare, men ledarbegreppet är på något sätt överordnat, för i ordet ledare ingår det så många fler funktioner. I *dirigent*begreppet ser man bara att stå där och dirigera, men ledaren är pianisten, administratören, social allt-i-allo och dirigent men *ledare* känns mer vardagligt. *Pedagog* är ett vidare begrepp, en pedagogisk idé, man vill någonstans och har en utbildning man vill förmedla. Ordet dirigent, där finns inte ens pianist."

Analysis

Bjørndal (2009) sets up a number of criteria for analysis: simplification, classification and comparison, charting of clearly defined patterns, explanation and reasons for why these patterns appear and evaluation of the consequences. Staffan Larsson (1993) emphasises the importance of perspective awareness, that is to say awareness of the importance of theories about and previous knowledge of the phenomena that are being studied. One hermeneutic idea that I call to mind is the degree of harmony between the part and the whole that offers harmony of scientific pursuit. In this project I am striving to harmonise the topic of research, the nature of the phenomenon that is being studied, data collection and the method of analysis. I am trying to distinguish the whole with which all the individual parts can be associated. As a practicing musician, and based on my reflections on Bjørndal and Larsson, I would like to compare my own research project with the artistic pursuit of making music. A main clause/main theme and a subordinate clause/auxiliary theme can be found in, for example, a musical form. A structural, good rhetoric, is achieved through the work and practice of finding main themes to which everything can be related, where the auxiliary themes do not exist by chance, but because they are equally important as the main themes. In academic work as well as in artistic work, in my case research on choir leadership and making music, nothing is left to chance. Every written note, improvisation situation and presentation is explored through practice, preparation and performance. I am becoming aware of the fact that the method that I have been pursuing when working as a musician is a physical, corporeal experience that helps me develop a methodology for my research. This means, for example, that things may take time to reach maturity and that it will take time for me to discern the parts of the whole, Things-Take-Time. I am now beginning to associate the categories that have come into view during my analysis of the empirical material with the way the choir directors' personalities have appeared to me during the observation period.

In choral practice the music, the children and the choir leader together form the choir, and none can exist without the other. Who is the subject, what/who is the object and what are the mediating tools used? What do various types of interaction look like? The analysis will continue with a sorting and categorization of all the statements on qualities, abilities and tools included in the study from a socio-cultural perspective (Säljö, 2005). They will be analysed as mediating tools in terms of

the relationship between the subject (the choir director) and the object (choir leadership).

Preliminary Results and Continuation of the Study

Preliminary results suggest that the way this study has been conducted has contributed to making the work of the choir directors visible to the choir directors themselves as well as to the researcher. The pilot project started a reflective process of change within each choir director. They all reported that they had become more aware of what they are doing, of how they would like to develop and how they would like to change their current situation. They expressed a desire to continue to meet up for joint choir director conferences, planning meetings and joint concert projects. The choir directors have also focused on the questions of what is done and how it is done as well as what they can and want to change, both as a result of the two what/how questions and the five portfolio questions on which the observations were based.

No negatively formulated questions were asked during the study. However, the methods and strategies that were used in the study made it possible for the participants to formulate both what was not working and what was working, which made them aware of strengths and weaknesses in their practice. This became clear in their portfolio notes, which also made them aware of how they could develop their own work situation, which is constantly changing and in which self-evaluation is an important asset.

The questionnaire helped Anna, for example, to think more about her own situation. She says that it has become a way of getting things down on paper, to look back and to formulate new ideas. Note-taking has stimulated Anna to work in a slightly different way, and she plans more than she used to. She enjoys having more time for planning ahead. The questions have put more urgency into her tasks. How can you as a choir leader communicate attitudes and behaviour? These are issues that Anna has come to discover and which she wants to continue to elaborate further.

The conclusion is that the study brings to the fore the way in which individual processes of reflection and change began with the pilot project and by the fact that the researcher took active part in it. Discussions with colleagues in the presence of a researcher can lead to the development of ideas about choir leadership at the collective level and benefits each individual in their musical practice.

The Next Phase: the Analysis of Mediating Tools for Choir Directors

Each choir director works differently during rehearsals and lessons, and the study pinpoints several variations in terms of making music together with groups of children. During the upcoming phase of analysis, I will focus on the mediating tools that emerge as important to the subject (the choir director) in relation to the object (choir leading). At present a number of tools have emerged. These include among others: basic musical ideas, reflective practice and story-telling. Against the background of a socio-cultural perspective and the view that both words and actions describe who you are (von Wright, 2000), the study will continue with an analysis of verbal and non-verbal aspects of choir leaders' professional roles.

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