
Connecting aural training and choral singing

Soila Jaakkola

Abstract

This presentation is based on a paper given at the GEFFF conference in October 2012, which in turn was based on the present author's dissertation (Jaakkola 2012), where methods for connecting aural training and choral singing were explored. The study focused on choral aural training, which is understood as activities in choirs intended to improve the music literacy and aural training skills of choral singers. The research was a qualitative content analysis of sight-singing books (n = 41) written for amateur adult choral singers. These books were published in the Nordic countries, central Europe and North America between 1980 and 2007. The material included a number of sight-singing books with very different approaches, and the six books that stood out from the rest were discussed as case studies. These six featured a diversity of perspectives on aural training that led to the outlining of six approaches or 'pathways' to choral aural training. These pathways are briefly introduced in this presentation.

Keywords: choral aural training, music literacy, aural training, sight-singing, choral education

The choir is an instrument like any other. Musicians are required to sing in aural training classes even when their own instrument is not the voice. Singing has in fact been one of the principal working methods in aural training for hundreds of years, yet there has been relatively little interest in singing as a working method in rehearsing polyphonic music, until recently. This argument is based on the content analysis of aural training books, which seem to be concentrating on one voice melodic line in a noticeable degree during many decades.

In my dissertation (Jaakkola 2012) I explored methods for connecting aural training and choral singing, and here I will present six “paths” to choral aural training with the help of my case books. In my dissertation every case is presented with some excerpts from the actual book. The reader of this presentation, who is interested in becoming familiar with this material, can read it on the internet (see webpage under the references, and page numbers referred to in each case).

1. Abilities of a choral singer needed in choral singing

Choral singing is singing in a choral environment. Singing in a choir demands various abilities (1–5 below) or learning environments (6–7), which I find important for the choral education. I gathered these points for my GEFFF paper to find the frame of reference for this presentation and for my viewpoint on connecting choral education and higher music education in aural training.

Choral singers need a (1) good voice quality combined with a good vocal technique. Aural training students do not have to become professional singers, but aural training teachers should be able to help students with their voice control. In Finland at least, we aural skills teachers do not focus enough on the voice itself in aural training classes.

Choral singers need to (2) learn to adapt to both vertical and horizontal lines in music. This is a crucial skill in choral music. Also, (3) being able to read the score and to hear the harmonies are both necessary when seeking good intonation.

(4) An awareness of music theory, history, stylistic questions and musical concepts connected to music-making is an essential part of understanding music as a whole.

In choral singing (5) certain special skills are also needed, such as how to use a tuning fork and how to read the conductor.

For choir singers (6) aural training should be connected to choir rehearsals. Training the voice with aural training exercises during choir rehearsals and having warm-up exercises for both the ear and the voice before starting to rehearse are important. These warm-up exercises may concentrate on intonation, different types of intervals and chords, chord progressions, and so on.

Choral aural training should be part of the whole choral education, (7) connecting musical and social aspects while singing. This is a simple product of learning music in a group, taking the social aspects between the group members into consideration, very similar to what happens in chamber music. Connecting choral singing and aural training in music education also yields other benefits such as being connected to live music and hearing ‘real-life’ musical examples.

2. Pathways to choral aural training

The purpose of this presentation is to share certain key ideas presented in my doctoral dissertation (Jaakkola 2012). The study was a qualitative content analysis of sight-singing books (n = 41) written for amateur adult choral singers.¹ These books were published in the Nordic countries, central Europe and North America between 1980 and 2007. The majority of them share almost identical pedagogical choices and conceptions about the contents of music theory and sight singing, and concentrate on presenting basic notation put into practice with unison singing exercises. The examples or exercises used in the books are usually well-known songs or short melodies composed by the authors. The main elements (or fundamentals) of music featured in these books are rhythm, melody and dynamics. Harmony, structure and timbre are seldom mentioned. Although these sight-singing books were supposedly intended for choral singers, they in fact touch very little upon choral singing, choral music or polyphonic music in general.

Fortunately, my material included six sight-singing books that featured very different approaches and thus stood out from the rest, and accordingly I used these as case studies. Moreover, these six books featured a diversity of perspectives on aural training, to such an extent that I was able to identify six different approaches – or pathways, as I call them – to choral aural training. We should note that for my purposes ‘aural training’ is a broad concept of which reading ability (sight-singing) is only one part.

The six pathways and the books featured in the case studies are (in alphabetical order):

- (1) The diversity pathway (Bergroth et al. 1998)
- (2) The contemporary music pathway (Edlund 1983)
- (3) The overtone series pathway (Hölzl 1987)
- (4) The aural training method pathway (Nyström 1996)
- (5) The traditional pathway (Reitan 1998)
- (6) The musical element pathway (Telfer 1992, 1993)

¹ Originally there were 122 books, but only 41 remained in the research material. Whether a book was determined to be a book on choral aural training depended on the title of the book, its introduction and its back cover text. Other factors used for delimiting the material included the age and language of the publications and whether they were specifically intended for adult choral singers. (Jaakkola 2012, 48–50, 68–71.)

3. Pathways developing a choral singer's ability to read music

3.1 The diversity pathway

Bergroth, Hesthammer and Sundell (1998)² start from a music education foundation where diversity is the key in all areas. The authors present sight-singing as a skill in which choral singers can be trained through a variety of tasks to be performed by both individuals and groups. Sight-singing is also seen as part of a larger entity, an essential part of making music in a choir. The exercises in *Sjung nu! Körsång. Rätt, lätt och roligt* aim not only to improve singers' sight-singing skills but also to enhance the social cohesion of the choir. The choral sight-singing exercises train choral singers much more widely than just teaching them to read music.

The diversity of this approach is apparent in the extensive and many-faceted nature of the teaching materials included. This book is in two quite large volumes. The book is designed to facilitate the learning process in many ways: the text is easy to read, the music is typeset with much white space, and the illustrations are in colour, which is a rarity in choral sight-singing books.

This is called the 'diversity pathway' because it has a multiplicity of both means and aims: developing sight-reading skills is a tool that works towards both the musical cohesion and the social cohesion of the choir. An individual choral singer is seen as an active participant in a group. While the process to learn music reading and sight-singing is important, it is not an end in itself, more a means for attaining broader pedagogical goals. Choral aural training is here seen as a comprehensive discipline that blends seamlessly with other areas of choral education. This pathway incorporates many areas of choral aural training and features a large number of theoretical musical terms and a great variety of exercises. Through the diversity pathway, the choral singer gains a wealth of information about the various areas of choral aural training and learns sight-singing skills through an incredibly varied range of exercises.

3.2 The contemporary music pathway

Körstudier by Edlund (1983)³ focuses on choral aural training from a musical era perspective. This book is designed to introduce singers to the notation, rhythms, melodies, (free-tonal) harmonies and tonal colours of contemporary music through preparatory exercises and eventually entire choral works, all written by Edlund himself.

2 See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 122, 124, 126.

3 See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 131-134.

Contemporary choral music forms both the starting point and the content of the book. All exercises and compositions in the book have one and only one goal: to teach the student how to interpret composition techniques in modernist contemporary music – roughly, music written after the Second World War. The style and period delimit the content and teaching methods used.

Edlund's book is not a primer: it is intended for the advanced student. The era and style featured are in fact a practical starting point for improving the sight-singing skills of a choral singer with some experience. After all, the interpretation of choral music and ultimately the details of how it is read are all dependent on the style of the music.

The contemporary music pathway assumes a relatively good level of choral sight-reading skills that is then augmented with features from a certain style and era of music. This pathway allows a choral singer to become familiar with a wide range of choral music styles through technical proficiency acquired in aural training. The choral singer for whom this approach is intended is one well versed in basic sight-singing and repertoire and interested in tackling unusual and challenging exercises.

3.3 The overtone series pathway

Ein Weg zum Singen nach Noten by Hölzl (1987)⁴ is based on the overtone series, so much that understanding it is essential for understanding the book. The overtone series is presented as a 'deep-level' structure in music that influences many of the practical components of aural training, such as understanding scales, intervals, harmonies and harmonic movements, and intonation issues. Hölzl explains these largely through text, with only a few exercises.

Hölzl's book is an example of an approach where basic musical concepts are explored through deeper-level structures. Sight-singing books are usually dealing with the surface level of music, leaving its structure and deeper levels completely untouched. Hölzl's book is thus unique among the pedagogical approaches in my study material.

The overtone series pathway is challenging due to its theoretical nature. Hölzl divides his book into chapters by topic, requiring the reader to make sense of larger entities on his own. Hölzl also assumes that his readers are adult students who, thanks to age and experience, are able to comprehend complex frameworks and causal relationships. As Hölzl explains the overtone series using numerical descriptions, the reader must also be mathematically literate.

⁴ See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 137–142.

The overtone series pathway asserts that understanding the deep-level structures of music will lead to an understanding of the basic structures of music theory. This is the pathway among the six described here that really addresses adult choral singers. I would consider this pathway too challenging and complex for use in choral aural training with children or adolescents. Moreover, in my view the description of the overtone series in the book is far removed from practical music-making, being presented as a theoretical framework only. Choral singers following this pathway are assumed to have the desire and ability to understand the big picture and how music is constructed.

3.4 The aural training method pathway

In *Prima vista. Att sjunga efter noter – från grunden* by Nyström (1996a, 1996b)⁵, choral aural training is approached through the pitch function method (*tonplatsmetoden*). In this method, degrees in the scale are given numbers. The method is systematically explained in the exercise book and in the last chapter of the theory book. The method involves exercises with a single melody line, to be practiced on one's own using the book and CD as a guide. The purpose of the method is to learn how to read one's own part and how to blend into the choral texture. Nyström also uses the pitch function method for explaining basic concepts in the theory of music. The theoretical content in Nyström's book is actually quite extensive. With all its auxiliary material and examples, plus a collection of Swedish songs for mixed choir (called *Körprisma*), this is by far the largest package among the six studied here in terms of the number of pages. Nyström goes quite a long way in aural training with the pitch function method, from understanding one's own choral part to an awareness of four-part harmony, bringing the theory of music and sight-singing together into a single pedagogical entity.

The aural training method pathway employs a practical method for choral aural training. The principle is that tonal choral music will be easy to grasp once the student learns one aural training method really well. The method used is presented using practical examples from choral music and a lot of repetition through exercises, supported by the CD included. A considerable amount of music theory is acquired along the way. A choral singer following this pathway is assumed to become a good sight-reader through mastery of a specific method.

⁵ See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 147–151.

3.5 The traditional pathway

Reitan (1998)⁶ approaches choral aural training through traditional aural training means. *Finn tonen – hold takten. Lærebok i melodilesning og musikkteori for korsangere* addresses basic concepts in the theory of music and illustrates them with sight-singing exercises. The theoretical content in the book is broken down into numerous small sections, and the principal elements of music recur in various contexts. The methods employed in the book are familiar from traditional aural training classes: singing, reading out rhythms, listening and transcribing melodies by ear. The sight-singing method is not prominently discussed, although Reitan does recommend the pitch function method. An interesting feature in Reitan's book is that sight-reading a melody is grounded in good sight-singing skills and also comprehension of key. The book focuses on understanding sight-singing through the framework of tonal scales and contains a wealth of one-part sight-singing material in various keys. Reitan approaches four-part mixed choral music through mastery of one's own choral part.

The Reitan case study represents a traditional combination of aural training and theory of music, with theoretical concepts linked to (mainly) one-part melodic sight-singing exercises. In fact, most of my research material is similar to Reitan's book, with most of the emphasis placed on theory and not so much on sight-singing itself. This case study thus represents the great majority of my research material, although I selected Reitan's book for further study because it goes further than traditional sight-singing materials in discussing choral aural training. The book contains instructions on how to read a choral score and how to use a tuning fork, and it also includes four choral works with instructions on how to approach them and a CD with examples. The book is spaciouly laid out and has illustrations, and the correct answers to the theory assignments are given at the end.

In the traditional pathway, choral aural training is seen as a process for learning basic concepts in the theory of music and how to read one's own choral part, a single-voice melody. Sight-singing skills are mostly acquired through repetitive exercises in various keys. There are also theory, listening and transcription assignments. The pathway is called traditional since this is how sight-singing has been taught for more than two centuries. Choral aural training is something of a sidebar in this traditional sight-singing, with some added pointers relevant for choral singers. The book contains traditional choral pieces for pedagogical purposes. A choral singer following

⁶ See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 156–157.

this pathway follows traditional aural training and relies on a single pitch function method to gain sight-singing skills.

3.6 The musical element pathway

Telfer's (1992, 1993)⁷ books *Successful Sight-Singing. A Creative, Step by Step Approach. Vocal Edition Books 1 and 2* are grounded in solfège teaching. The premise here is that a choral singer's music reading skills can best be improved by working with unpredictable and unfamiliar music instead of familiar or predictable melodies. Because of this, Telfer has written all of the books' exercises (in two and three parts) herself. These are characterised by the use of certain rhythmical figures and metres and frequent shifts between them. Telfer emphasises the rhythm component, which is rare in the context of my research material. Melody is usually far more prominent, rhythm being dealt with in separate rhythm-reading exercises. The logic behind this is probably that sight-singing exercises can become too difficult if they have complicated rhythms in addition to tricky intervals.

Telfer focuses on intervals as an essential feature in sight-singing alongside rhythm. She uses a movable-do solfège method, which is also relatively rare in the context of my research material. The harmonic basis for her exercises is tonal, although towards the end there is an extension towards contemporary harmonies.

Telfer provides each lesson with a pedagogical summary, collected in two teacher's guides. The student's books are rather traditional in their content, and do even ignore major and minor scales and chords. By contrast, the approach is augmented with the addition of sight-singing instructions, exercises featuring choral music with piano, and a discussion of modulations. Telfer's book also has added clarity through the use of colours and layout.

The musical element pathway emphasises mastery of a single element of music and the use of this as the basis for further improvement of a choral singer's sight-singing skills. The single element chosen could of course be something else apart from rhythm, being the focus here. However, notwithstanding the emphasis on rhythm, it is not the only element covered in this material: a handful of carefully selected basic concepts in music theory (e.g. two functions only: tonic and dominant, and very large selection of intervals 1–11) are discussed alongside the two-part and three-part exercises that simulate traditional choral music. Comprehension of musical material and concepts in music theory is facilitated through the use of a solfège method. In addition, the use of

⁷ See examples of this case book on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 161-162, 164, 166-171.

colours supports the reading and classification of musical concepts. In this pathway, the student is seen as a motivated choral singer who is inspired to play around with slightly unconventional musical materials. Students will acquire basic skills in solfège and rhythm control, assumed to lay the groundwork for further improvement of aural skills through the choir's own repertoire.

4. Conclusion

The above examples are simple but effective. My research material is rather coherent, and although all of the books I reviewed are intended for choral singers, the connection between aural training and choral music or educational concepts concerning choral music appeared quite tenuous and practically non-existent apart from the handful of books that I selected as case studies. Most of the books being reviewed attend basic concepts in music theory and notation. Pedagogical ideas specifically pertaining to adult education were rare.

In my dissertation, choral singing is described as a complicated set of skills comprising many different skills. I therefore prefer to consider choral aural training as much more than developing the skill of reading one's own part in a choir. Choral aural training should cover more than just the teaching of sight-singing.

The majority of the books I selected as case studies contain a wide range of exercises in multiple parts and examples from actual choral works. These cases constitute textbooks of choral music that introduce choral singers to repertoire on the one hand and to concepts of music theory and sight-singing strategies on the other, in a unified pedagogical scheme. Each book provides its own perspective on how choral singers should be instructed and how choral aural training should be approached. The exercises in each book are grounded in the context of actual choral singing, meaning that the exercises are designed to support choral rehearsals. The theoretical concepts highlighted in the case studies are impulses for practical actions. Choral singers are instructed in how to apply theoretical knowledge in their singing. The case study books approach choral singers as active individuals who, given a certain amount of theoretical background information, will be able to manage their own choral parts independently and also to identify various larger elements in the printed score – whether rhythmic, melodic or harmonic. Choral singing is considered an artistic pursuit where the music literacy skills of choral singers are a vital component. The main responsibility for rehearsing choral music naturally lies with the choir conductor, but choral singers are both able and expected to take greater responsibility for their

contribution to the whole. These books consider choral aural training as a mechanism that translates music literacy into practical music-making.

To put it another way, the case study books consider choral aural training more broadly than most of the other books in my research material. Each case study provides a different example of how choral aural training may be addressed in great depth. The 'pathways' I described in my dissertation emerged from these case studies, and I do not pretend that these are the only possible approaches to choral aural training or sight-singing skills. My feeling is that a skilled choral singer will leverage his/her knowledge of the theory of music, vocal technique, score reading skills and ability to analyse what he/she hears in order to blend with the choral texture. This principle can open up any number of pathways towards merging choral aural training and choral singing.

References⁸

- Bergroth, Ulrika; Hesthammer, Håkon and Sundell, Charlotta (1998). *Sjung nu! Körsång. Rätt, lätt och roligt*. Vasa: Finlands Svenska Sång- och Musikförbund.
- Edlund, Lars (1983). *Körstudier*. Klockrike: AB Nordiska Musikförlaget/Edition Wilhelm Hansen Stockholm.
- Hölzl, Peter (1987). *Ein Weg zum Singen nach Noten*. Wien: Ludwig Doblinger KG.
- Jaakkola, Soila (2012). *Polkuja kuorosäveltäpailuun. Kuorosäveltäpailukirjat aikuisen kuorolaulajan nuotinluku- ja säveltäpailutaidon kehittäjinä*. [Pathways to choral aural training. Choral aural training textbooks and the development of the music literacy and aural training skills of adult choral singers.] Sibelius Academy. Faculty of Music Education, Jazz and Folk Music. Studia Musica 51. Doctoral dissertation.
- Körprisma för blandad kör* (1993). Adolf Fredriks Sångbok. Stockholm: Gehrman's Musikförlag.
- Nyström, Jonas (1996a). *Prima vista. Att sjunga efter noter - från grunden. Teori*. SKS Musikböcker Nr 9. Stockholm: AB Carl Gehrman's Musikförlag.
- Nyström, Jonas (1996b). *Prima vista. Att sjunga efter noter - från grunden. Övningar*. SKS Musikböcker Nr 10. Stockholm: AB Carl Gehrman's Musikförlag.

⁸ See the references and appendixes of my dissertation on the webpage <http://ethesis.siba.fi/files/nbnfife2012120410132.pdf>, 227–243.

- Reitan, Inger Elise (1998). *Finn tonen – hold takten. Lærebok i melodilesning og musikkteori for korsangere*. Oslo: Norsk Musikforlag A/S.
- Telfer, Nancy (1992). *Successful Sight-Singing. A Creative, Step by Step Approach. Vocal Edition Book 1*. San Diego, California: Neil A. Kjos Music Company.
- Telfer, Nancy (1993). *Successful Sight-Singing. A Creative, Step by Step Approach. Vocal Edition Book 2*. San Diego, California: Neil A. Kjos Music Company.