

# A Model For an Effective Note Teaching and Learning Strategy For Community Choirs, Incorporating Malay Folk and Childrens' Song Material Exemplars

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## **Abstract**

*This paper identifies the difficulties encountered by choir directors, particularly directors of community choirs, which is the use of a clear pedagogy for the teaching of notes and development of musical literacy. In amateur, community choirs this issue has pertinence to the choristers' perception of the success of their conductor, amongst other measures. The role of the choir director includes many 'music teaching' elements, and teaching to a wide variety of musical skill and knowledge, while encouraging creativity from the choir. Through several research tools and experience, suggestions are offered for the development of pedagogies. The final decision and design of such pedagogies remain the provenance of the choir director, who best understands the most appropriate approaches and content for their group. Some ways of encouraging choristers' creativity and ownership of music and performances are suggested, using Malay folk-song material. From this rich, regional repertoire, two exemplars have been selected and their possible performance arrangements are provided.*

**Keywords** *Choir, choir director, community, pedagogy, musical literacy*

*That, to be internalised, musical learning must begin with the child's own natural instrument—the voice. — Zoltan Kodály*

This paper is an extension of a recent university-funded research project which explored the lack of, and need to develop, an effective teaching and learning strategy for community choir groups. Though drawing much empirical information through the research project, which included a survey of international choir directors, much of the exploration occurred as part of the author's work creating a local 'Community Choir' based in the university town of Tanjong Malim, on the border of Perak and Selangor in Central Peninsular Malaysia. Further detail of this research project is published as proceedings in *Proceedings of the Second Music and Performing Arts (MusPa) Research Colloquium* (ed. Chan & Rahman, 2013, pp.1-12). A significant outcome of the findings is the effectiveness of Kodaly-based choral training methods for primary choirs. In relation to adult community choirs, the study and survey highlighted the effectiveness of this approach in developing both musical literacy and note teaching for choristers of all ages. Additionally, there is a large body of Malay folk material categorised for Malay schools and music teaching, and the author suggests a variety of ways to arrange some examples of this material for performance, while providing

learning opportunities for choirs. The suggestions that are offered are based around the Kodaly approach as suggested in Choksy (1974, pp.16-23).

An intention of this research has been to identify and clarify the note-teaching methodologies used by practising choral conductors, not only of amateur community choirs, but other choir types as well. It is focused on the point before which any choir is able to 'perform the segment in its entirety'. Two questions that arose at this stage were:

1. What pedagogical approaches are most successful in adult community choirs of mixed musical skill levels?
2. What are the different approaches community choir directors adopt when introducing and teaching new works to their choir?

In planning this study, it was anticipated that each conductor would have their own personal and preferred style of note teaching, to produce the required outcome for their choir. What the survey uncovered, however, is that too often, community choir directors have a fuzzy, or unclear understanding of what they do at this early stage of the rehearsal process, frequently leaving the responsibility of the learning task entirely to the singers themselves. Results from the survey conducted, anecdotal and other comments, indicate that it is an area that is ripe for further research.

Two exemplar folk songs used towards the end of the paper are 'Malaysian Childrens' Folk Songs' drawn from *Lagu Kanak-Kanak Melayu Tradisional* compiled by ethnomusicologist Mohd. Hassan bin Abdullah, with the collaborations of Nor Adman bin Mohd. Ramli, Mahayuddin bin Abd. Rahim and Mohd. Nizam bin Nasrifan of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. The songs are listed and tonally categorised at the end of this paper, with suggestions on how to create a performing version for a young choir, using whatever resources are available. The chronological age of the choir here is of lesser significance than their collective choral experience. It is hoped that, though the songs provided are classified as 'children's songs', their quality and musical, cultural and artistic interest is of sufficient merit to have interest for older choristers. There is an inevitable bias towards discussing the choral situation in Malaysia, though this should not distract international readers from applying the approaches of this paper. As Kodály stressed over and over in his advocacy of the use of folk material, 'only music of unquestioned quality – both folk and composed – should be used' (Chocksy, 1981, p.8).

It is suggested that the details of the pedagogical programme recommended in this paper is left to the choir director. They can create a pedagogy that is appropriate to the members of their choir, ensuring age and educationally relevant material and arrangements of songs. Pedagogies for note teaching will be based on the knowledge of the choir director – knowledge of the current skills and strengths of the group, the current pedagogical and performance needs of the group, the age of its members, facilities, and the resources available to the choir. As an adjunct, it is hoped that this collection of resources and suggestions will assist choir directors everywhere to avail themselves (and their choirs) of the rich heritage of Malay childrens' folksongs.

## **Background and Context**

Choral singing is an important musical and social activity with, in many societies, an increasing participation rate amongst all age and demographic levels. Throughout the world there are many community choral groups – choirs whose thousands of members are amateur singers, meeting weekly and performing all styles of music – contemporary, classical, oratorio, popular, show and, of course, folk and national music. As Helen Pietsch, in a SWOT analysis of choral music conducted on behalf of the Australian National Choral Association writes:

The numbers of people involved in choirs throughout Australia has increased dramatically over the past decade and is possibly the fastest growing and largest sector (involving the highest number of active participants) within the music community (Pietsch, 2008, para 8).

The range of musical skills possessed by choristers within such community choral groups, and indeed within the same choir, is very wide – from singers who can hardly read and may eschew music notation, to those who can sing and read complex music (almost) at sight (see chart and comment responses to Survey Q.17). Managing this range of skills is a challenge facing every such choir director, from many types (e.g. school, church, university) and encountered at every rehearsal. The success of rehearsals and continuing motivation and enjoyment of amateur choristers is but one (important) measure of the successful choir director. Because of its impact on the success of the choir and its director in the eyes of the choristers, the importance of this skill set on the director's role and effectiveness should not be underestimated.

Choir members judge the success or otherwise of their conductor in leading the choir, through the perceived (high) standard of the performances. Exactly what constitutes a 'high standard' performance appears to vary from choir to choir, and is dependent on the nature and purpose of an individual choir. It became evident through the survey which was conducted for this study, and through the writings of others including Tamusauskaite (2012), that a primary musical function of the director is as a pedagogue who is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the choristers are able to sing the notes of selected music with accuracy, so that musical developments and musical expressiveness might be developed as preparation for a performance.

The choir director organises the learning, plans the programme and the goals;- during rehearsals 'matures' the choristers, voice groups and the entire choir for harmonious performance of a music piece; when performing as choirmaster, [the choir director] directly influences individual learning of the choristers and the learning by observing. The influence of the choirmaster upon the learning processes is diverse and changes subject to the context of a music piece, the pedagogical competence of the choir director; when performing as developer, [the choir director] directly influences the learning by observing; creates the learning environments, which help the choristers to open, self-express, and the most important – to form the need to create (Tamusauskaite, 2012, p.16).

A further benefit of identifying effective methodologies for note teaching is to provide choir directors with knowledge to develop a variety of teaching tools pertinent

to their choir, and increase their skill and effectiveness in the rehearsal context. This is a major benefit for Malaysian choirs for, as Susanna Saw points out

... choirs in Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) consist of many amateur members from various tribes. Music is a way of life for most of these tribal people; as a result, they are inherently very musical despite little or no proper vocal training. They sing with an emphasis on enthusiasm and soul, rather than technicalities (Saw, 2008, para 8).

In addition to the reasons and need for an explicit pedagogy for note teaching given, the implications of not having an effective teaching methodology on new choral music are considerable: it restricts the range of new music being performed and commissioned by non-professional groups, for whom the learning of notes is too hard and time consuming if learned haphazardly. To assist learning standard choral works, there are now organisations (often community choirs themselves) who provide ‘practice tapes’ and MIDI files and such sales assist their fundraising. By using commercial part-learning products, as it would seem some directors of community choirs are wont to do, repertoire choices which are available to such choirs are limited to those works which are in such catalogues. It therefore follows that the works that will appear in commercial catalogues of this nature will be historical choral ‘standards’, limiting the growth of new music and compositions for choir. The impact of this on choral singing as an art form in many cultures should not be discounted, as restricting one’s repertoire to the standards and ‘museum pieces’ is not an outcome of vibrant lively musical culture.

In selecting potential teaching strategies for note learning, a number of the approaches advocated below were also trialled in the rehearsals of a community choir in Tanjung Malim, which operated on a weekly basis for the first half of 2012. It consisted of students, staff and local teachers from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, and was characterised by the range of music skill levels of reading and singing noted earlier. At the same time, and serendipitously, the author was asked to train a local teachers’ choir for a special Teachers Day function (Pejabat Pelajaran Daerah Batang Padang Teachers’ Day Choir, 2012). This ran concurrently with the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris Community Choir between March and May, 2012. It broadened the personal knowledge base and experience of the author regarding the local Malaysian context. Further, it provided a deepening understanding of the effectiveness of a variety of methodologies and other issues that arise in teaching notes to such amateur groups. These experiences are discussed and reflected upon later in this article.

## Literature Review

From personal discussions and email contacts it is apparent there has been little research directed to the pedagogy of note teaching in community choirs. In informal discussion with other choral directors, on explaining the issue and topic, there has been a kind of “a-ha” moment that this is an area in which they work intuitively, and immediately understand the need for the research. It was suggested by several that this is an area of personal practice that is not clearly understood, in either its operation or methodology.

In the US, many universities offer choral directing as a major study focus. The courses include many subject areas focused on topics such as conducting technique, repertoire, vocal development and training, aural training, score reading, and, for the primary or secondary choral educators, curriculum materials and courses. The choral conducting course at Ryder University – Westminster Choir College<sup>1</sup> is one example: there are many subject offerings addressing skills such as conducting technique, singing technique, general musicianship, and repertoire; none address the question of choral pedagogy for the choir conductor of an amateur choir. The curriculum at Florida State University<sup>2</sup> is similar. In the United Kingdom, courses at University of Birmingham include a conducting course module in which...

[the] module introduces you to the techniques and methods of choral conducting, working with consorts, chamber groups and large symphonic choirs, including singing skills and vocal warm up techniques. (Retrieved from <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/students/courses/postgraduate/taught/music/choral-conducting.aspx#CourseDetailsTab>)

There are choral methods which link to the band methods that dominate much Malaysian and US instrumental teaching, such as a set of texts by Emily Crocker and John Leavitt (1995). These three progressive volumes cover skills including ‘voice, theory, sight reading and performance’ (p.1), but again do not address the basic note teaching issue. A number of logic or teacher-centered approaches are present in some of the lessons – teaching rhythm starting with the semibreve, for example, or the structure of major and minor scales – but no coherent and consistent approach to teaching inner hearing and musical literacy is evident.

Lois Choksy, an American educator and author, has written a number of texts regarding the introduction and application of the Kodály education approach in school choirs<sup>3</sup>. In accordance with Kodaly’s philosophy, she focuses on the students’ acquisition of musical literacy – developing a conscious knowledge of the elements and notation of music, and ability to internally hear what they read on the page without the aid or use of instruments (audiation). This is an ideal aim of every choir of all ages. Choksy writes, “One of the most important tasks facing music educators is that of making students musically independent – giving them the tools with which to discover music for themselves. Some part of every [rehearsal] should be spent to this end” (Choksy, 1981, p.108-9).

The specific educational approach to teaching choristers advocated by Choksy has turned out to be of significance to this study. Though written about 40 years ago, the approach she articulates is the use of solfege. This approach is replicated by the few choral director respondents who were able to explain their personal pedagogical approach in choral teaching. Amongst the musical skills these choral directors seek in their choir, or must find a way of instilling, is ‘true musical literacy’.

Many assumptions are made about the skills singers bring to a choral environment. In a professional choir, these are (rightly) assumed, but the skills every chorister in a community choir brings cannot be taken for granted. A hallmark of good choral singing is the ability of each singer to sing like every other member of the choir without artifice or mannerism; the role of the choral director is to establish how every piece is to be sung – pitching, phrasing, musical shape, dynamic and diction – and ensure that

this occurs throughout the whole ensemble. Having a programme of warm-ups that is introduced to the choir over time, without necessarily telling them of your plan, is one way of doing this. It means a steady supply of warm-ups and vocalises that change with sufficient regularity to prevent boredom or staleness setting in. A range of progressive exercises can be found in the Crocker and Leavitt texts already referred to, although for adult and younger adult groups, various texts by Nancy Telfer (Telfer, 1996) are informative, effective and interesting to choristers.

## **The Heart of Rehearsal**

It has been pointed out that in preparing performances, conductors of community choirs have a multitude of teaching tasks, often occurring simultaneously. In addition to learning the notes and preparing a choir for performance, directors are also managing issues of vocal training and production for both individual singers, and the group. For many choristers, this is the only vocal training they receive.<sup>4</sup> While many texts regarding vocal training and other choral techniques are readily available,<sup>5</sup> there are few that focus on the basic task of teaching notes to a group of multi-level skilled singers who are there for the enjoyment and enrichment that choir singing brings (see Pietsch, Saw, Morton and others for this discussion). It follows therefore, that identifying a variety of techniques and teaching methodologies that are appropriate and effective is important, as, despite the limited rehearsal time, amateur singers need to feel a sense of progress and success in their chosen 'leisure' activity. The respondents of the survey confirmed the initial assertion that there is little knowledge of this element of choral pedagogy.<sup>6</sup>

In a report to the International Federation of Choral Musicians, Malaysian Choir Director, Susanna Saw, outlined the issues she identified as holding Malaysian choral music development back. Briefly, they include:

1. Lack of properly trained teachers. There are many trained musicians in Malaysia, but not many of them are trained in choral conducting.
2. Lack of music.
3. Lack of time or lack of knowledge to searching for music scores online.
4. Inability to choose suitable music for the choir.
5. Lack of local music arranged for choirs - folksongs are not widely revived by musicians yet.
6. Insufficient training in the field of choral arrangement.
7. Composers in Malaysia focus more on orchestral works. (Saw, 2008. p. 2)

This article seeks to address the two elements: first, to suggest ways to develop the range of skills the choir director has in their pedagogic 'toolbox'. The second point, to develop the music reading and literacy skills of choristers in community choirs, will be addressed by some exemplar Malay folk songs, and suggestions of some possible arrangement possibilities which draw on Malaysian folk music styles and traditions, yet provide opportunities for the choristers to perform artistically satisfying music which they have arranged themselves. From these ideas, it is hoped that community choir directors worldwide, and their members will be the musical beneficiaries. Using

a Kodaly based philosophy in preparing folk-material, directors and choristers will develop skills that are applicable across the wider spectrum of choral repertoire, and by developing the skill of the choristers, directors then have more time to spend on important choral techniques, including tone, tuning, ensemble and musicality.

### **Methodology: Practice Led Research**

Much of the content of this paper is reflective of a personal journey of discovery and reflections on the personal practice of the author, supported and further informed by a survey, discussions and reflections with other choral directors.

A recurrent sub-theme in this research has been the determination of what constitutes a good and effective rehearsal technique and style, modelling it and testing the effectiveness for both the singers and the conductor. It is a clear intention of this study to make the rehearsal process more effective, time efficient and rewarding for choristers and directors. In exploring this theme, the Barrett study “The Researcher as Instrument: Learning to Conduct Qualitative Research Through Analysing and Interpreting a Choral Rehearsal” (Barrett, 2007, pp.417-433) seemed relevant. It investigates the “process of conducting qualitative research [which] depends upon a series of transformations” (Barrett, 2007, p.417). This is also a concise description of the rehearsal process, and transferring rehearsal process and practice to research. This connection is well established by Penny (2009) who writes of

processes of discovery in rehearsal, the substance of a work, of learning and memorizing physical and mental elements, of developing interpretational choices and expression, of negotiations with instrument/s, equipment and scores, and of creating the performance actuality (Penny, 2009, p.30).

The process of research undertaken in this study is, like much practice-led research, somewhat idiosyncratic is its approach. However, the idiosyncrasy should not be confused with a lack of rigour in either methodology, reflection or conclusions. The nature of the main research question had been germinating in my mind for a long time – in fact before leaving Australia to come to Malaysia. I had been working with an adult choir which was ageing and had quite a number of issues – not the least being that although they had reached high levels of performance in the past, their more recent history had not been so glorious. The group of choristers I inherited had a very wide range of musical literacy, and attitudes to performance that ranged from striving for the highest artistic endeavour to “well I just want to have fun and a social time with a bit of singing as well”. It was a major challenge as conductor to find a common high-level performance goal (which was mandated by the choir’s organising committee and quickly precluded the continuation of the more social attitude). The next challenge was to find a way, as conductor, to have every member become sufficiently skilled in singing and performance at a rate that maintained the interest of all. My own training in choral conducting was typical of many of my colleagues in Australia, emphasising conducting and singing skills (all of which are vital) but never discussing the process of learning.

It was as a teacher that the need for understanding the pedagogy of this part of choir training became evident, and I found myself with the skill, first to frame the questions, and then to find some ways to answer them through reflection, and action. Some years later in Malaysia, the opportunity to explore this was given first through the research programme under which this project has occurred, and secondly through the range of opportunities that were both presented to me, and which I was able to create.

Having met with several local choir directors and colleagues at the university and others, I began the project by establishing a community choir with members drawn from the general student body, and some local people from within the town of Tanjong Malim. It was a completely inexperienced vocal group, with a reasonable balance between men and women (about three women for every two men), typical or a little more evenly balanced than many of the choir gender balances reported in the survey. This choir's formation and the knowledge gained through preparing and working with its members were invaluable to the overall content and understanding of the study.

Serendipitously, some of the community members of the UPSI community choir were local school teachers involved in the preparations for the 2012 National Teachers Day Celebration. A choir had been created, and because of my work with the community choir, I was asked to prepare this choir. This I was happy to do, as it allowed a focused preparation and development of some simple pieces. The songs had some simple part writing, so, in another context, I was able to teach this choir. The vast majority of the choir were teachers of subjects other than music, and the level of music literacy was very low overall. In discussion with the organising teachers (local music teachers who were also members of the community choir) we decided to adopt a rote teaching process. With just six weeks to learn (memorise) three songs, this was the only viable alternative we could see. It was further complicated by the fact that the rehearsal time coincided with other school duties and meetings, so the group was rarely consistent.

## **Pedagogical Underpinnings and Approaches**

Underpinning the whole of the choral training approach in this article is an application of the Kodaly philosophy and pedagogical approach in choral training and developing musical literacy in particular.

The pentatonic [folk songs] are particularly suited to the kindergarten. It is through them that children can achieve correct intonation soonest, for they do not have to bother with semitones. Even for children of eight-nine years of age, semitones and the diatonic scale are difficult, not to mention the chromatic semitones. This latter is difficult even at the secondary school. (Kodály, (1940) *Music in Kindergarten*)

Nobody wants to stop at pentatonic. But, indeed, the beginnings must be made there; on the one hand, in this way the child's biogenetical development is natural and, on the other, this is what is demanded by a rational pedagogical sequence. (Kodály – cited in Choksy, 1981, p.8)

Having the choristers themselves suggest ways of arranging simple folk material, utilising the resources available to each choir and strengthening the aural and music skills of the choristers has many benefits for the choir as a whole. Apart from the

musical benefits, there is the encouragement of individual and group creativity. Having ideas spring from the group – say if a member suggests singing a section or song in canon – allows choristers to achieve a sense of ‘ownership’ of the arrangement of a song. It is not advocated as a process for all of the choir’s performances, but within a skill development process will provide personal satisfaction to the choristers in their participation, as well as musical and vocal skill development.

### **Practice, Processes, Musings and Understandings**

The creation of a community choir at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris was one way of discovering first hand, some of the issues that confront the choir director in this area, and (personally) discovering some processes for effective teaching, measured by how well all choristers were able to sing (perform) a piece of music. Another measure was the interest that could be maintained by all choir members, especially those who brought relatively greater levels of choral experience and skill.

In January 2012, an email advertisement and poster was circulated within the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris academic and general community. Posters were also placed around the town of Tanjong Malim. In the first couple of weeks, 56 people joined the choir. Inevitably, there was rarely a full attendance of all choristers (some more members joined after the initial intake, and there were a few who dropped out) with other commitments and holidays impacting. Chorister numbers eventually stabilised to around 50 and one could always assume that around 40-45 people could be expected to attend each rehearsal. Being an open entry group, no audition requirements were imposed, though questions relating to the individuals’ musical and choral experience were asked.

### **Repertoire**

Appropriate repertoire was carefully selected as there were several conditions it had to fulfill. It included:

1. Rounds and canons - vocal techniques and warm-ups, tuning, develop choristers’ individual part singing and independence.
2. *Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head* (3 part *a capella*)
3. Swedish Folk Song (3 part *a capella* and unison sections) - tuning
4. *Di Tanjong Katong* (Malay folk song) 4 part accompanied with cantabile vocal lines to strengthen part singing in Malay, the native language of the choir.
5. *Evening Song* (Kodaly) – *a capella* singing using just intonation, solfege
6. *Bunga Raya* - Malay Jazz arrangement

The intention behind the development of this choir was to test a variety of learning styles of interest to this research. In addition to the principal researcher conducting the choir, a Master of Music (Vocal Performance) candidate was also encouraged to conduct the choir. The candidate had some experience conducting a local school and community choir, and was encouraged to identify his teaching practices in these

other contexts, and apply them in the UPSI Community Choir rehearsal. In particular, focus was placed on the use of rote teaching as a possible effective technique for choir teaching.

Rote teaching, or teaching ‘by ear’, is a technique used by many community choirs in various countries. In this study, the rote teaching – often called ‘oral tradition’ – was considered as there had been anecdotal suggestions by some Malay musicologists (for example, Dr Hassan in informal discussion with the author) that as this is the way that traditional Malay songs and culture are passed between generations, it would be a successful and specifically ‘Malaysian’ way to teach in choirs. In the teaching of traditional drumming (24 Jie Ling Gu) Chan (2006) records that “... Jie Ling Gu teams prefer to use rote learning to teach the more adult drummers ... as they seem to find the task of reading music notation a bother” (Chan, 2006, p.102). Chan further notes that in traditional Malaysian contexts, rote learning is also aided by the use of mnemonics.

In contextualising the research, informal discussions were held with quite a number of the choristers of the UPSI Community Choir. It quickly became evident that the main reason for joining the choir was substantially social, coupled with a desire to improve musical skills, which the choristers themselves perceived as undeveloped. For example, in several choristers, there was a desire to learn basic vocal production and how to sing in the choir, then apply this knowledge in their preferred musical context elsewhere (a rock band). It was a similar range of attitudes to those that I had encountered in Australia. There were some members who wished to achieve a high standard. These members were either local school teachers who wished to join a choir and sing at a high standard, as well as learn choral training through observation, or Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (non music students) who had sung with church and school choirs, and already had some basic choral and vocal skills. Managing these differing expectations and intentions for singing is always a definite challenge for me as conductor. In this situation the solution to maintaining an interest for these more experienced and chorally ambitious members came about partly through serendipity through being asked to conduct a ‘Teachers’ Choir’ that would perform at the 2012 National Teachers’ Day Celebrations, and then the establishment of an auditioned choir at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

The Teachers’ Choir had a specific and immediate performance outcome – to sing a number of specially composed pop style songs for the 2012 National Teachers’ Day Celebration to be held at Slim River in June, 2012. The rehearsal period was short and singers had very little experience. However, what they may have lacked in finesse and technical achievement, was fully counterbalanced by their enthusiasm. There were six rehearsals scheduled, but I was also told that some of the singers could only make some of the rehearsals due to other school commitments. Using a rote learning approach, short focused sectional practices were held in the first couple of rehearsals to teach the notes. The footnote below links to webpages which show some of the rehearsals, some short video excerpts from the rehearsals and prepared tape parts.



**Figure 1** Teachers' Choir in Rehearsal at UPSI May 2012

A significant benefit of the task of training the Teachers' Day choir was that the advantages and shortcomings of rote teaching were made clear. For a temporary choral group whose members brought neither musical background, or developed singing technique the approach taken was to drill them with the techniques they would require. It was of further interest as I questioned and talked with the members, that although they understood and supported the approach being taken, they wished for the knowledge to read and be able to audiate the music. Although, if in a similar position again, I would follow the same procedure, the limitations of rote teaching were also apparent. I noted some of these at the time:

Unless the note teaching is repeated time and time again, until choristers have had the sounds and way of singing drilled into them, this is incredibly slow. ... All responsibility is mine to have them know the notes and words. In spite of the parts and lyrics being available online, few seem to be using them. Some of the singers know everything well and carry the others who are slowly catching up. Too often it seems I am repeating myself, (which I am) but to a different group of people who weren't here last week. (Blackburn, A., 2012, Private Journal notes)

During a personal visit to Melbourne, Australia in September 2012 the author held loosely structured discussions with two significant Australian conductors of community choirs – Dr Douglas Heywood (University of Melbourne) and Ms Alexandra Cameron (Director of Tudor Choristers Melbourne). Each took a different approach to the question of note teaching/learning in their choirs. Dr Heywood leaves much of the process and responsibility to the individual choristers – a typical approach in many groups, particularly where the choir's repertoire is drawn from the 'standard' choral repertoire (for Heywood's choir the repertoire is mostly drawn from major nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although Handel oratorios and the Bach Passions also feature). The way of knowing of many of the choristers in such choirs is a form of memory – notes, sounds and embodied physical performance knowledge. It succeeds with long rehearsal periods (several months for each concert) and with repertoire that has often been previously performed by the same choristers with limited change of personnel. There are also commercial tapes of each voice part available, and using mp3 or similar technology, choristers can listen their part either singly or in context. Of the choir directors who responded to the question (15 of 41), about half (46%) use

rehearsal tapes, or similar technology, as an aid. These aids are commercially available from various enterprises, including some community choir organisations themselves who have created these files, using their sale as a fund-raising facility.<sup>7</sup>

For a choir such as the one Heywood conducts, this is a time efficient way of operating. It does mean that the repertoire choices available to the choir are somewhat limited because many of the choristers have to be able to access these tapes, or arrange sectional rehearsals outside the main rehearsal structure. Although some time is spent in rehearsal going through the parts – to teach by rote – the responsibility is on the singers to come to know their lines (memorise?) as fast as possible.

### **A Survey of International Choral Directors**

Although conducted concurrently with the UPSI community choir, the next phase of research involved asking as many choir directors, especially of community choirs, how they approached teaching notes of unknown or new material to their group. The questionnaire was conducted online, and requests for respondents were circulated amongst various choral forums. There were 41 choir directors who responded, and there were many generous suggestions and ideas canvassed. Some of these are incorporated in the findings below.

Within the survey results, a number of points stand out quite strongly. Though not possible to identify from where the respondents are mostly drawn, I suspect that most are working in the US. This is a limitation to the survey, and with more time and local assistance, it would be advantageous to obtain responses from Asian and other choral conductors. In the US, where a mature and developed choral education programme is in place, often emulated in other countries including Malaysia, it is reasonable to extrapolate the issues identified and other results to Malaysian choirs and their directors.

A finding that was unexpected was the relative time between director's musical preparation of scores and music, and the amount of time spent in face-to-face rehearsal. In the list and time allocation of the main duties of a choral director, the average amount of time spent on personal musical preparation was about 25% of the time spent in face-to-face contact with the choir in rehearsal. There are several possible reasons for this: a number of the respondents train several choirs each week in their school, church or tertiary context. It may be that they are using the same material for several choirs. Another possible answer is maybe that they are repeating repertoire either from year to year (in school/tertiary/church environments) or that the repertoire is substantially made up of works which are standard and already known by the director (and choir).

Many of the other results were (in a Western context) predictable and confirmed by the responses:

- a. Reported gender balance of choristers is about 63% female to 37% male;
- b. Repertoire sung by the choirs includes a high percentage of religious music (80% of respondents reported including religious music in their repertoire), folk music (78%), contemporary art music (58%), show tunes (55%) were the next most popular repertoire selections, while experimental choral music was included by the smallest number of choirs (3%). It suggests that, within the repertoire choices of

responding conductors there is a range of pieces that perhaps is considered more orthodox.

This accords with my personal experience, from a whole range for choirs in Australia – from children’s choirs to young adult, to the longest extant choir in the Southern Hemisphere (Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society – which the author conducted for several years). Although choir committees and choristers pay lip-service to the need to commission and occasionally perform new works, there appears to be a substantial disconnect between the choristers of community choirs and new music, which, in groups which have a wide range of reading and general musicianship skills, makes it extremely difficult to motivate them to make the effort to learn the notes of new works. A personal anecdote highlights the effect of this disconnect.

The Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society has, during the course of its 150 year history, presented the first Australian performance of many new works, often within a year or two of their composition. Works that are now choral standards, including major choral works by Giuseppe Verdi, Antonin Dvorak, as well as works by Edward Elgar, Benjamin Britten and William Walton were all premiered by this group in Australia. In the latter twentieth century and twenty-first century, programming choices, like so many similar groups, remains in this nineteenth and early to mid twentieth century paradigm. For such amateur groups, learning new music is a significant issue for the choristers who learn their part ‘by rote’, using practice tapes and memory. It is made more difficult, as the survey demonstrates, when there is little application by their directors of a systematic process that would make note learning and music reading amongst such choristers less of a challenge. So, it is understandable therefore that such choirs, and their directors who need to maintain the participation and involvement of as many choristers as possible, choose to perform music that is already known by most of the group, and perhaps more easily sold to the audiences that support them.

However, there are systems and pedagogical methods, amply demonstrated by some of the respondents who discuss mature and effective learning systems, which have been put in place within their amateur and other choirs. As one of the respondents writes:

I have tended to take many of Robert Shaw’s approaches to learning pieces; remove the text and learn the rhythms (first) and notes (second) and then add the text back in.

And another:

Rehearsals begin with a brief sight-singing and theory “lesson” included in the warm-up section (less than 5 min). They attempt to sing through, and/or listen to piano or a recording, as only a couple of the members can sight sing at all at this time. After singing the scale in the key of the piece, I use a snippet of melody to practice solfege. Also, use that snippet or another to work on breathing, tone etc. Sing that section together, then in parts, then together again. I try to have them learn at least some of the melody without piano, but resort to it if there are too many problems. Use a snippet of rhythm to chant or sing to numbers. Then apply this to the section where it applies. I find that modelling the phrase works really well and quickly. We work in short sections at a time, and note where these are repeated in the piece. I encourage score marking, including solfege.

This latter quote is from the conductor of a community choir and the director seems to have a clear and thought out approach to this issue. The section of the survey covering this information was answered by 26 out of 41 respondents. About one third of respondents chose not to answer this section of the survey (Q.9–15), seemingly confirming the anecdotal evidence, from which one may conclude it is an area that is not as clearly understood as others in the choir conductor's toolkit. For at least one of the conductors who answered, the note teaching process is "rote learning".

Inserting specific programmes within the rehearsal process, as indicated in the previous quote, will have a longer-term impact on the enjoyment and knowledge of all choristers. Those who benefit the most will feel that they are improving and those who have begun with greater levels of skill will also find satisfaction as the overall musical literacy of the group develops. That this can give enormous satisfaction to the whole group is something that I have personally experienced. As one conductor wrote of rewards of working with their community choir: "... However, the pleasure it gives the choristers to achieve what they thought was impossible, is worth it."

### **Taking Ownership of the Repertoire – Two Exemplars**

Some ways and approaches to developing a repertoire which belongs to a choir is covered in this section. This process further opens the door to the choir director developing aural and reading skills within their group. How this can be done will differ with each choir, its demographic, skills, resources and the approach of the director.

What follows are two Malay Children's Folk Songs, and some suggestions for having a choir develop their own arrangements of the pieces. It is hoped that in developing and rehearsing the pieces, the director will encourage the creativity of the choristers, though they may not be used to expressing this. With very simple tone-sets (up to d, r, m, s, l) both work if treated canonically, or with an ostinato. Accompaniments, if used, could be body or instrumental percussion, traditional instruments - whatever is available to the choir, or piano or other instruments. In both the figures and examples below, suggestions, though notated simultaneously in the score, would probably work better musically, if separated and individually explored before perhaps combining some or all together. It is up to the director and choristers. It is also strongly recommended that directors obtain suggestions and ideas from the choristers themselves. Singing in canon - two parts - is a very effective way of developing and strengthening independent part singing - and can be used in the song from Kedah, *Tom Tom Bak* (see Figure 2). It could further be accompanied by tuned gongs on doh and soh in half notes. If a more elaborate accompaniment is desired, in addition to the ostinato as mentioned, the tune could be played simultaneously in augmentation and diminution, while the choir sings the melody, perhaps in unison, and then in canon.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Tom Tom Bak'. It consists of three systems of music. The first system has three staves: a vocal line with lyrics 'm r d r m d d d d m r r', a vocal line with lyrics 'Tom tom bak mak-yong de dek, Pe-cah se-bi - ji ting -', and a bass line. The second system starts at measure 11 and has three staves: a vocal line with lyrics 'm d d d', a vocal line with lyrics 'gai se-rang kap.s', and a bass line. The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one flat.

Figure 2 Tom Tom Bak Lagu Paermainan Kanak-kanak, Negeri Kedah  
(Childrens' song and game from Kedah)

Adding either a vocal or instrumental descant to *Oh Bulan* (Kedah) is effective, and the song might be effective in performance with an ostinato. The descant which is given is highly tonal but it could be made far more interesting and adventurous by the choristers themselves – ask for their suggestions!

Other possibilities for this piece (or any others being arranged by the choir and director) include: adding an instrumental obbligato (maybe begin with an instrumental play through of the melody), add an ostinato – melodic or rhythmic – then with instrument(s) playing melody, add the descant in soprano or tenor, before adding lower voices (even in canon at the third below (start the canon on e, from bar 3 beat 3)).

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Oh Bulan'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has two staves: a vocal line with lyrics 'Oh bu - lan ma-na bin - tang a-tas pu - cuk ka-yu a -' and a bass line. The second system starts at measure 5 and has two staves: a vocal line with lyrics 'ra. Oh tu - an ma-na hi - lang Da-lam da - pur a-tas pa - ra.' and a bass line. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp.

Figure 3 Oh Bulan Lagu Negeri Kedah (descant Andrew Blackburn)

The possibilities for these pieces go well beyond what is given here, but it is hoped that the ideas offered will stimulate choir directors to consider the potential for both pedagogy and performance contained within the pieces. The pedagogy is strengthened by the philosophical approach advocated by Kodaly, and quoted above. The effectiveness of the teaching and skill development is within the process, which is the domain of the choir director with their intimate knowledge of the groups' strengths, weaknesses and needs. The folk songs themselves are beautiful little songs and, with the addition of several more, could make a wonderful little segment for inclusion in a concert comprising a variety of pieces.

## Conclusions

In this article the author's wide experience in choral work, both in Australia and more recently in Malaysia, have informed and underpinned the research discussed. In particular, the experience of observing a haphazard pedagogy amongst some choral community conductors (and conductors of other types of choirs) as they go about teaching the notes of new works to their choristers. As informed by the survey of choral directors, there is a considerable dearth of method and process for this essential element of the conductor's tasks. To address and develop this skill for the conductor, some suggestions are made about ways to raise the musical skill of community choir choristers, and create little works for which the choristers themselves can take some ownership.

The intention in selecting Malay children's folk song material is three-fold: to provide artistic folk material that is (in accordance with the Kodaly precept of using only the best folk material) to develop aural and reading skills which are applicable to other repertoire; to present ideas that develop a creative freedom of interpretation which makes the arrangement unique to each choir, motivating choristers to develop their musical skill; and to provide a wide dissemination of this remarkable musical resource and heritage that can be performed by choirs of all ages and from all around the world. For Malaysian choir leaders, the realisation that this material is of cultural importance, accessible, and musically excellent is something that they can celebrate in performance with their choristers. Using this material, it is assumed that the choir director will create an appropriate learning and skill sequence, appropriate for the age and context of their choristers. Some of the texts that provide suggestions to which the creative director can refer have been discussed above, and are referenced in the bibliography. Finally in highlighting this issue – as a problem with some solutions, it is the intention of the author to share some techniques gleaned personally and from other experienced choir directors, which may be a useful tool for all choral practitioners and leaders to examine and develop in their practice.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.rider.edu/wcc/graduate-programs/choral-conducting](http://www.rider.edu/wcc/graduate-programs/choral-conducting)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.music.fsu.edu/Areas-of-Study/Conducting/Choral-Conducting>

<sup>3</sup> Choksy, L. (1974). *The Kodály Method: Comprehensive music education from infant to adult*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc. Choksy, L. (1981) *The Kodály Context: Creating an environment for musical learning*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

- <sup>4</sup> The personal experience of the author, in training choirs of this nature in Australia and Malaysia strongly supports this assertion.
- <sup>5</sup> See Chapter 2
- <sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 for detailed discussion of this
- <sup>7</sup> Some sites that offer these are found at: <http://www.learnchoralmusic.co.uk> ; <http://www.singingpractice.co.uk> (a page offered by the Southhampton Choral Society); <http://www.saffronchoralprompt.co.uk> ; and many other alternatives are listed at [http://www.cipoo.net/choral\\_1.html](http://www.cipoo.net/choral_1.html)

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## Biography

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