

RE-CREATING PERFORMING ENVIRONMENT FOR POLY-CHORAL MUSIC

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1 INTRODUCTION

The poly-choral style featured the music of the Venetian School in the 16th century, and evolved the concerto style instrumental music in the Baroque period. It's inspired by the spacious and resonant interior of St. Mark's Basilica with its two choir lofts facing each other. As the organists and principal composers of St. Mark's Basilica, Adriano Willaert and his predecessors deliberately exploit sonority particular sound quality for the poly-choral works. The present-day choral conductor would face some challenges in interpreting the poly-choral music written in Renaissance and Baroque periods when presenting them on contemporary stage without the special acoustical and geometrical characteristics. In order to help the performers interpreting the music faithfully, this paper studies on the historical development of poly-choral music about the use of voices and instruments, the arrangement of singers, and the relationship between interior of St. Mark's cathedral and the stereo choral effects. The issues about performance practice are discussed on this paper as well which include the choir setting, the use of voices, and the interpretation of musical pieces.

2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF POLY-CHORAL TRADITION

2.1 Definition

A poly-choral work was defined by Renaissance Italian music theorist and composer Gioseffo Zarlino "one in which the ensemble is consistently split into two or more groups, each retaining its own identity, which sing separately and together within a through-composed framework in which antiphony is a fundamental compositional resource; in tutti passages all voice parts should normally remain independent, with the possible exception of the bass parts" (Carver, 1980). The term *cori sepezzati* is also used to describe poly-choral singing. It is defined as "broken choirs" according to the New Grove dictionary. The singers were divided into distinct groups, sometimes placed in different parts of a building, with special technique of the music composed for them.

2.2 Origin of poly-choral music

The practice of *cori sepezzati* goes back to Jewish and early Christian liturgical music, but its significance for the historian undoubtedly begins in the last few years of the fifteenth century. *Cori sepezzati* appeared in two fifteenth-century manuscripts from Modena, containing mostly works by Franco-Flemish composers (Ulrich, 1973). The custom of using *cori sepezzati* was most popular in northern Italy. The wedding celebrations of Costanzo sforza and Camilla of Aragon at Pesaro in 1475 were graced by a performance of double-choir music. The confraternity of the most Blessed Sacrament at Treviso remembered its past members with Vesper psalms sung by two choirs from very early in the sixteenth century (Arnold, 1959).

From before the time of Adriano Willaert, composers in the Venetian region had often written for double chorus. Poly-choral works of the Venetian School and contemporaries were most often composed for a major event such as the singing of a treaty, naval victory, prince's visit, or end of plague. One set of five *laudate* psalms was sung for First Vespers in this split-choir technique at many feasts during the year (Grout & Palisca, 1996). The fashion of divided choirs encourages homophonic choral writing and rhythmic organization.

2.3 Inspiration of St. Mark's Basilica

St. Mark's Basilica is considered the living heritage of Roman, Byzantine and Venetian culture. The interior of St. Mark's Basilica is based on a Greek cross, with each arm divided in three naves and emphasized by a dome of its own. The longitudinal nave of Greek cross plan is characterized by basilica architectural motifs where the vertical arm of the cross is greater than those of the transepts and the altar is in the apse area. Above the cross are five cupolas, according to the eastern model, as a symbol of God's presence.

The acoustical and physical properties of St. Mark's which was structured with two opposing choirs lofts and with many alcoves and balconies, were conducive to *cori spezzati* (Stalba, 1990). The interior of the building with its multiple choir lofts was the inspiration for the development of a Venetian poly-choral style among the composers appointed *maestro di cappella* at St Mark's. The style was first developed by a foreigner Adrian Willaert and was continued by Italian organists and composers such as Andrea Gabrieli, Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi. In order to exploit the grandeur and spaciousness of St. Mark's Cathedral, divided opposing choirs and instruments were employed to create brilliant antiphonal effects by the composers of Venetian School. The choirs or ensembles were placed sometimes in different parts of the cathedral to create echo effects by Giovanni Gabrieli who was appointed organist at St. Mark's Basilica in 1584, and served there until his death in 1612. In the hands of Giovanni Gabrieli, the performance forces were expanded to two, three, four, even five choruses. Each chorus was with a different combination of high and low voices, and intermingled with instruments of diverse timbres, answering one another antiphonally, alternating with solo voices, and joining for massive sonorous climaxes (Grout & Palisca, 1996).

2.4 Original setting

In the double-choir music introduced by Adriano Willaert the choirs were not as yet spatially separated, but rather sang from a *pulpitum* at the front of the nave (Bryant, 1981). The juxtaposing of a solo quartet against a *ripieno* choir goes back to at least 1564 (Fenlon, 1993).

An engraving in Philipus Gallaeus' *Enconium Musices*, published in Antwerp in 1595, shows two groups of singers and instrumentalists, including cornettists and trombonists, performing from two large music stands. One appears to be beside the high altar, the other towards the nave end of the choir (Carver, 1980).

The two or more groups of voices or instruments that performed the works of Willaert and the Gabrieli were placed in separate galleries that insured the clarity of the double chorus polyphony. Each group had its own conductor who served as the continuo player in most cases. The distance between the two choirs enhanced the effect and produced a distinctive timbre in this reverberant building (Robinson & Winold, 1976).

Documents of 1607 show that two conductors directed the vocal soloists; instrumentalist, if required, were positioned in the organ lofts. Choir one, the solo choir (4 or 5 voices), stood by the main organ. Choir two, the *ripieno* choir (about 16 voices), may have been positioned by the second organ, or else was stationed on the main floor, either in the *pulpitum* or before the altar. Choir three (higher singers and instruments) and four (lower musicians), when present, had to remain in the view of the main conductor. By 1612, St. Mark's could boast over 30 adult singers, supplemented by an unspecified number of boys. A large number of voices were added after about 1600, the high parts being shared by castratos, boys, and falsettists. Added to the singers were about 20 instrumentalists, plus further players for special occasions. Altogether a ceremony could require the services of as many as 100 musicians (Jackson, 2005).

2.5 Influence of Venetian School

Poly-choral music was also performed in most places without the dramatic spatial separation presumed by Gabrieli and Praetorius. Palestrina's incomparable "*Stabat Mater*" was written for

double choir and sung in the tiny Sistine Chapel choir loft where there would have been no spatial separation, the contrast coming from the vocal quality in the two choirs. The taste for the Venetian tradition of multiple choirs lasted much longer in Germany and Austria than in Italy. Heinrich Schütz, J. S. Bach, and others followed the strong tradition to produce splendid masterworks with polychoral techniques.

3 REPRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL POLYCHORAL MUSIC ON PRESENT-DAY STAGE

3.1 General acoustical consideration for choir

Room acoustics plays an important role in live music performance. However, little information about the acoustics for choral music has appeared in the acoustical literature while much can be found for instrumental music. Guidelines about locating the choir and organ in church for best acoustics have been summarized by Klepper in 1983 (1983). Best location for the organ and choir is behind the altar, on the front wall or upstage chancel wall, facing the congregation, or in a reasonably high rear balcony or gallery. The organ and choir should face down the main axis of the church and the choir should be in one group, if possible, immediately below the organ pipes or electronic organ loudspeakers. Other guidelines can be borrowed from general design principles for concert hall design. The performing group including the organ should be confined within a limited area to avoid serious time delay and strength difference among individual parts of the group. Ceiling heights in the 6 to 8m range are best in mixing choir voices, directing them to the congregation, and provide early reflections for good choir communication. The latter requirements can be fulfilled by nearby wall reflections in spaces with higher ceiling.

3.2 The settings for polychoral music

A double-choir in the 16th century is thought to be spaced from each other although choirs might not have to be divided into both sides. Choirs were only placed on the discrete sides to perform in large cathedrals and important ceremonies. In order to produce the stereo effect, choirs could be placed from each other in certain distance.

It has been found that beyond a distance of 8 meters the delay of the direct sound becomes large enough to reduce the ease of ensemble playing (Gade, 1989). A very wide stage makes it difficult for the conductor to hold the sections of the choir or orchestra in good ensemble. In addition, the difference in time may be great enough to affect the blend.

In fact, the methods of setting choirs are, however, limitless. With the twin lofts of St. Mark's elevated on either side of the chancel (1), its choir behind the altar (2), its elevated steps on the ground floor in front of the altar (3), and its rear balcony containing a second organ (4), the imaginative conductor could place his singers and instrumentalists in many different locations for a stimulating effect (see Figure 1) (Robinson & Winold, 1976).

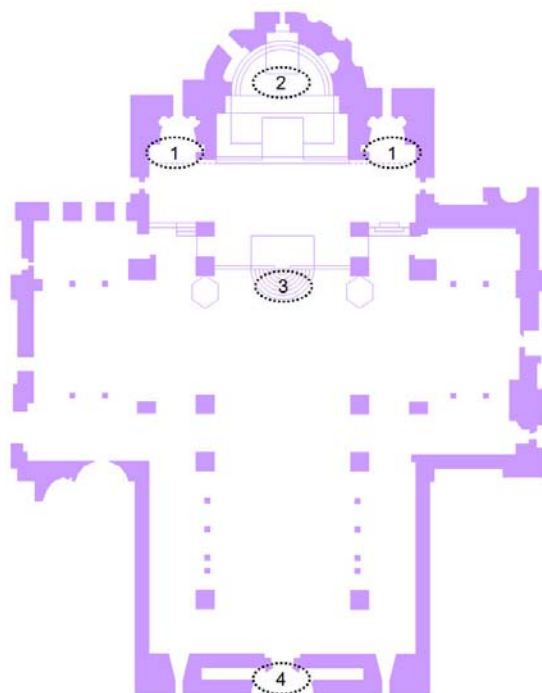


Figure 1. The possible plan for musicians in St. Mark's Basilica

The Pro Arte Chorale directed by John Nelson specializes the polychoral literature. Some of its concerts were presented in interesting settings. When the Pro Arte Chorale performs Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in a concert hall like Carnegie Hall (New York), it would be positioned in a simple double-choir setting (see Figure 2). When performing an unaccompanied motet like Bach's *Singet dem Herrn* in a church or European cathedral with a split chancel, the choir would be divided equally and placed on either side of the chancel in front of the altar (see Figure 3). Nelson has ever successfully performed Heinrich Schütz's *Warum toben die Heiden* by placing the four choirs in a formation which surrounded the audience on all four sides, the individuality of the choirs was preserved and heard with utmost clarity (see Figure 4)(Robinson & Winold, 1976).

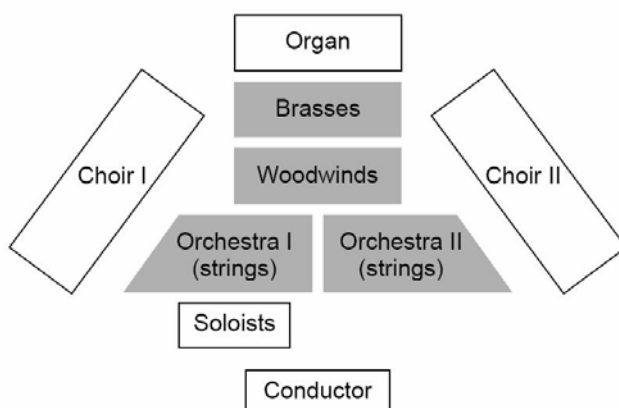


Figure 2. The formation of the Pro Arte Chorale for Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

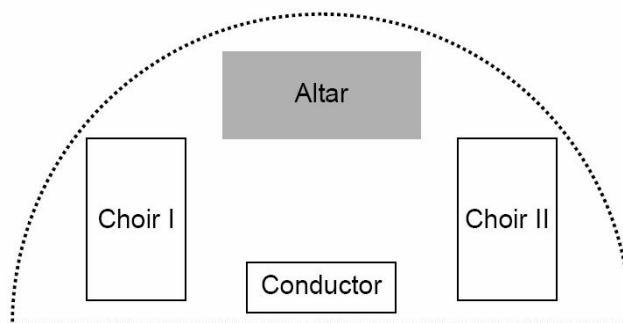


Figure 3. The formation of the Pro Arte Chorale for Bach's *Singet dem Herrn*

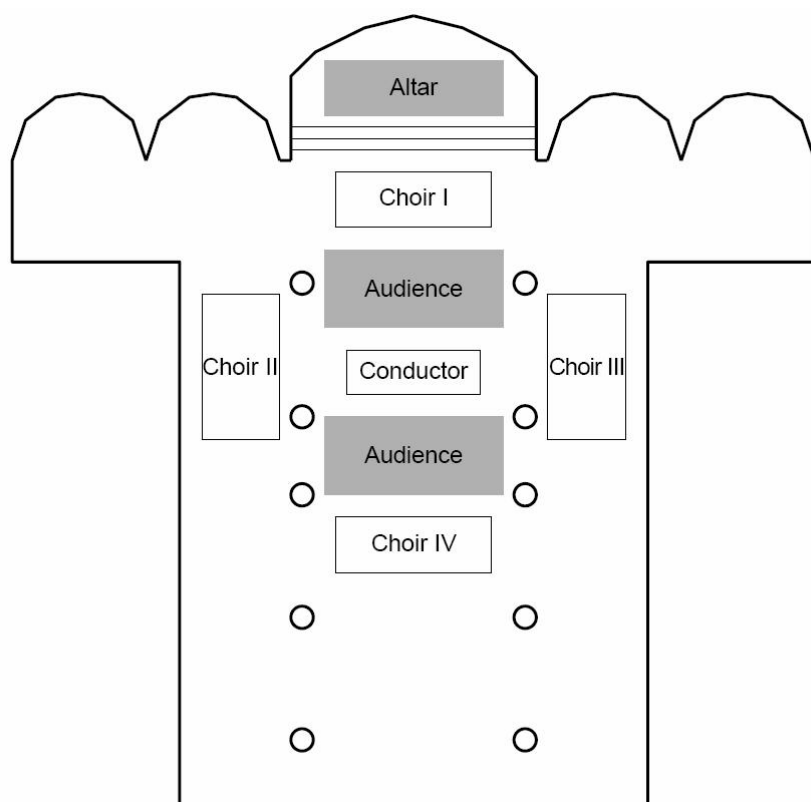


Figure 4. The formation of the Pro Arte Chorale for Schütz's *Warum toben die Heiden*

3.3 Use of voices and instruments

In the 16th century, there were two or three adult voices to each part in bass, tenor and alto registers, the last possibly performed falsetto, and a large number of falsettists and boys on the soprano parts for polychoral works (Carver, 1980). However, some vocal colors of the sixteenth century have completely disappeared. The male castratos do not exist today. The closest comparable quality is countertenor, but countertenors are very rare. Present-day performances of the 16th century music could use female voices for the soprano part which was sung by choir boys, and alto part which was sung by male altos. Dart (1963) recommends little vibrato in the performance of complex polyphonic choral works so that the individual lines can be heard with the utmost clarity. Robinson and Winold

(1976) suggest to perform a double-choir work with the choral group singing as one choir with brass, recorders or strings as the other.

3.4 Musical expression

Many poly-choral works in the early period of Venetian School were written in antiphonal style where the divided groups perform either alternately as separate groups or in unison. Taking two choirs that are usually equal weighted for example, it's common that the second group starts before the end of the first group when two groups sing melody alternately. Voices of two groups seldom sing interlaced. A conductor might integrate music by tight connection between or among divided groups, and keeping the linear melody lines flowing among them.

In the later period of Venetian School, composers often took certain steps with overlaps between the choirs as well as restricting the independence of the bass lines so that those separate choirs could make harmonic sense. However, sometimes imitative textures involving all the voices make it meaningless to examine the relationship between the bass parts. A conductor might emphasize the contrast of texture and tone quality between or among groups instead of the balance among them.

The distribution of voices of multiple choirs is usually made by the range of voices where the highest voices are placed in the first choir, and the lowest voices are placed in the third or fourth choir. When performing the musical works by three or four choirs, a conductor could highlight the highest and lowest sections to increase the stereo effect; in the meanwhile he should maintain the independence of the middle choirs. In addition, the conductor has to be cautious about the tempo unity among groups, the lucidness and accuracy of every entrance, the reinforcement of the key notes, and the tight interaction and coordination among groups.

3.5 Interpretation of musical literature

Giovanni Gabrieli's *Jubilate Deo* composed for two choirs (SSAA/TTBB) in 1597 is a sacred symphony. When rehearsing this concerto-like work, a conductor should rarely concern with contrasting or echoing two equally balanced choirs, but rather with the far more complicated strategy of playing off against each other choirs of unequal and varying weight. Charles Theodore Pachelbel's *Magnificat* composed for a double-choir (SATB/SATB) is written for the most part antiphonally, but the voices of corresponding range unite to present the end of the Doxology in four-part polyphonic style. This work was intended for a small group of voices. But, for modern performance, often presented by larger groups, a conductor should emphasize the antiphonal aspect of the composition. The two choruses may be placed on separate choir lofts, but the Peter-edition score editor Hans T. David (1959) suggests that it will be better to keep the singers together, with sopranos and basses on the outside, and altos and tenors on the inside (see Figure 5).

Bass I	Tenor I	Tenor II	Bass II
Soprano I	Alto I	Alto II	Soprano II

Figure 5. Double-choir formation for Pachelbel's *Magnificat*

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to the experiences of choral conductors, there exist many possibilities of choir formations that could serve the poly-choral repertoire. Nevertheless, current acoustical knowledge about how to locate the performers has apparently been challenged by the many possibilities of formations including the ones for music written for specific cathedrals. Continuing research has been initiated regarding field investigations into the physical conditions and subjective responses of

various arrangements. In addition, the researches to analyze musical features and performance setting for contemporary poly-choral repertoire could be further developed.

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