



Cantus in Choro

A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

Colouring sound

Stephen Layton explains to *Malcolm Bruno* how his group Polyphony is geared for high precision impact



Meeting Stephen Layton could be confused with walking into a film-set world of the Dickensian barrister. In his role as director of music at Temple Church in London, one has the pleasure of finding him ensconced in the alluring surroundings of the Temple. It was there I met him to ask what it is that positions his group Polyphony at the cutting edge of London's high-flying choral scene.

'In the last four decades the British cathedral tradition, and London in particular, has enjoyed a supremacy in the world of elite choral, or consort, singing. Starting with Roger Norrington's pioneering Schütz Choir in the 60s and then Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir a few years later and then Parrott's Taverner Consort in the early 70s, London's singers have been in the centre,' he begins. 'And over the last 20 years Harry Christopher's Sixteen and the Gabrieli Consort proudly lead with both first-rate polyphonic and major Baroque repertory. I wanted to do something different.'

Polyphony isn't specifically an early-music ensemble but began in 1986 as an extension of Layton's activities as the then organ scholar at King's College, Cambridge. 'In 1994 I had a major opportunity to make my first recording for Hyperion. No, it wasn't Pärt, it wasn't Palestrina, but part-songs of Percy Grainger, and my choice, too!

'These are wonderful songs. From there more contemporary music followed, including in 1994 James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words* – though this particular recording was actually for BMG. It was originally commissioned by BBC2 in 1992–3 and its recent disappearance from the BMG catalogue has

prompted me a decade later to re-record it, this time for Hyperion. It is without doubt one of his most significant works.'

Having had a preview of the incredible finesse and music making of this autumn's release of the MacMillan, along with a further peek into the next album for early 2006 (of the complete vocal music of the American composer Eric Whitacre), I find myself in a privileged position to pry into the *raison d'être* of Polyphony. 'You must realise that Polyphony isn't my only enterprise of this kind; I'm also chief guest conductor at the Danish National Choir and of the Netherlands Chamber Choir in Amsterdam. But the point about the hand-picked two-dozen singers in Polyphony is not only their voices, not only their sense of musicianship – whether early polyphony, Bach or contemporary English repertory – but what we distinctively achieve together. After all, these same singers are also working as soloists and consort singers in many of the other major British and European vocal ensembles.

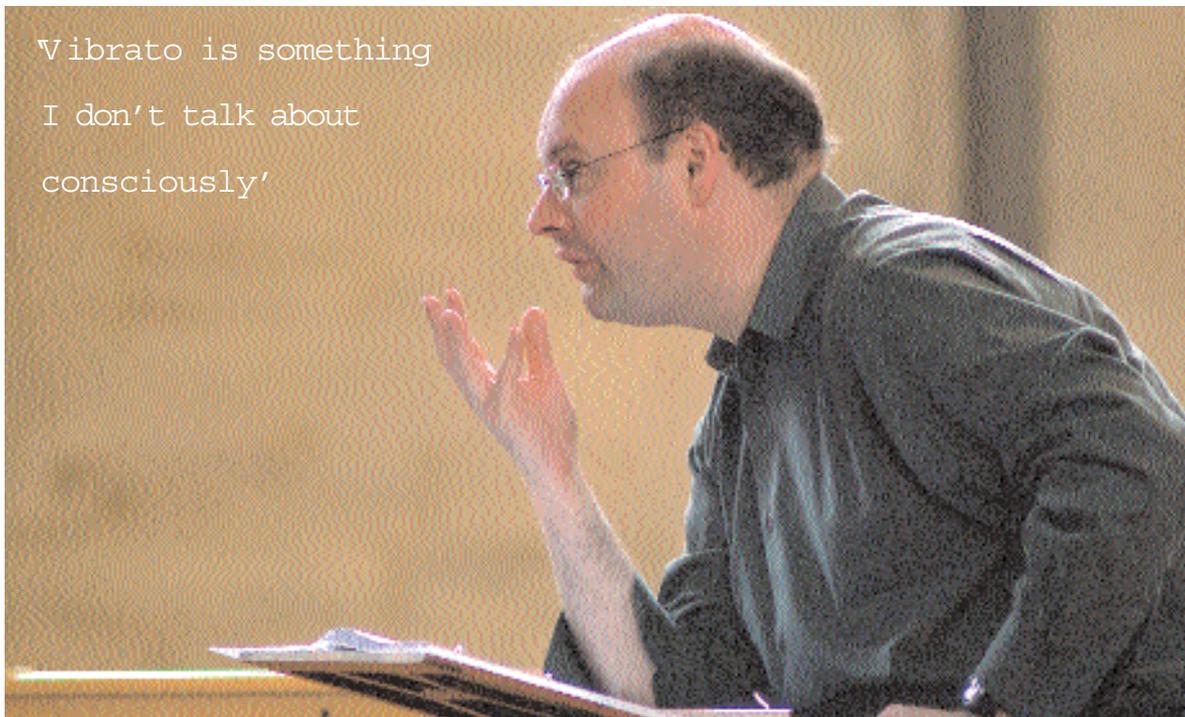
'Distinction begins with the fact that among the many competing facets of music performance – sound, melody, harmony, rhythm, emotion, structure – every musician has one driving force, one passion above all others.' As we speak I think of Rattle's rhythmic vitality or Herreweghe's continual sense of poetry. 'Mine', he continues, 'is sound – its beauty, colour, purity, flexibility, expressivity. Sound is for me the basis on which all possible emotional expression can emerge, giving music its voice.' The medium to realise sound is the singer. 'Those in the professional British choral scene are

the beneficiaries of the Oxbridge heritage: excellent sight-reading, intonation and ensemble, and an overall sense of balance “not getting in the way”.

‘That is only the starting point. Their sound in particular is determined by the properties of acoustics. In tonal music this means that the bass line is the foundation on which everything else rests, the 16ft of the orchestra or organ. Therefore I begin my ensemble from the bottom up. I find two-dozen singers a practical size; and yes, having an extra soprano gives the melody just a bit of predominance. But unlike fairly conventional practice, I would have seven basses as well and two of them would be real basses, not baritones busking down low. The surety of the resulting bass line means that the tenors can really sing out, and I quite often place them just a bit further back to let them have a healthy freedom to produce a core 8ft sound.’

In listening to the new edit of the MacMillan *Seven Last Words* it’s not only a matter of sensing a balletic aplomb in the choral balance; one is also struck by the amazing colours and textures of the sound. In the third movement there is a passage where

‘Vocal sound is about a number of things. Vibrato is something I don’t talk about consciously. As a phenomenon it is synonymous with texture and can range from a very wide, slow pulsation – an operatic “wobble” – down to a tiny flutter. A purely white “straight” sound can also be useful, but not continually: no one texture is musically meaningful continually.’ If the previous example in the MacMillan illustrates the tiny vibrato high up, then the opening of the second movement ‘Woman, behold thy Son!’ gives a perfect example of a balanced but almost laser-like focused sound. The first three-bar exclamation of the text comes to rest on a G major chord. But the second, intimating the pain of crucifixion, comes to rest on an F sharp major/minor triad. ‘How does one increase the pain? Not by intensity of volume, not by shouting, but by making the false relation unbearably harsh. A pure third with no vibrato is still. To increase the adjacent A and A sharp to the level of anguishing contradiction, they must remain utterly distinct and equal. Any trace of a vibrato would take out the knife-edge of the semitone.’



high-tessitura divisi sopranos are doubled by violins. The colour is like nothing I’ve heard before – not simply a soprano singing without wide vibrato, because in fact there is vibrato. But the sound is curiously instrumental and entirely unanimous: if one heard the passage out of context, it would seem totally instrumental, only a violin, with perhaps an esoteric reed invisibly stirred in, yet there is a voice because out of the sound, a consonant, a word, appears!

The same passage also reveals another key feature of the unique Polyphony sound. ‘For me,’ Layton continues, ‘choral sound isn’t necessarily about making a pleasant blend; nor is it necessarily about making an appealing contrast (a reedy voice paired with a flute-like sound). It’s about purity and unity of sound, something that makes the string sections of great orchestras world-class ensembles. With singers this means putting attention on vowels.



'So many church musicians are obsessed with diction, by which they mean *feroce* consonants'



So many church musicians are obsessed with diction, by which they mean *feroce* consonants.' It is an interesting thought: the continuity of vocal sound, the strings and winds of the vocal orchestra, is the vowels. 'The continual anxiety over consonants, to continue the orchestral analogy, would be like a conductor with an undefined string and wind sound only asking for clarification by the percussion playing louder!

"Woman, behold thy Son!" has another great challenge: the words "Woman" and "Son". There is first the colour of the "uh" in "Son". It could be light and forward, it could be dark and covered, but yet the same sound. The placement of sound in this semibreve is everything.' Yet for me, even more than the delivery of 'Son' is the exclamatory word 'Woman' that makes Layton's delivery so powerful.

'English is full of diphthongs, vowels mutating without an intermittent consonant, and the received wisdom is that the first vowel sound should be elongated in favour of the second, which

in effect snips it off. But this stylised habit takes all the colour, sensitivity, emotion – all the inflection – out of a singing voice delivering not only a sound but a text.' Interestingly, I note, this convention does not obtain in pop or folk music.

'For me the "oo-uh" diphthong (of "Woman") is in this case only musically viable with the tiniest taste of the first vowel exploding into the second. If it were a slow love song, sung dolce, we'd probably want equal proportions. Too often in English we get the completely flat, posh elision of the diphthong, so a word like "tower" with three wonderfully distinct sounds ("ah-oo-uh") gets dulled into "taaah". It is, of course, easier to unify one sound rather than three, and to co-ordinate the melting of one into another into another, with only a tiny dip into the second vowel. But if you haven't got beautiful vowels – unanimous, focused, with the same texture, same placement and mutating at the same time – you can't get the most beautiful sound and song imaginable.' As I find myself immersed in



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Layton's intense interest in the production of vocal sound, I think more and more of the French ear from Debussy's impeccable sense of orchestration to Messiaen's organ registration, or indeed to Pierre Boulez's orchestral writing, so full of minute exquisite colour in every bar. 'And now with Polyphony,' Layton agrees, 'I am aspiring to achieve the same phenomenon in the sphere of voices.'

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, there is ample for listeners to sample in these two very different forthcoming exquisite releases. MacMillan's *Seven Last Words* is full of so much personal commitment from the composer and the performers to the text itself. Not really music for amateur choir, it presents an amazing textile, uniting myriad forces: one can sense Vaughan Williams and Tippett and much more. Yet it is not so much eclectic as empirical, a gathering of different media to portray his cause. Eric Whitacre's music, by contrast, could not be more ground in the world of platonic ideas. Each piece is a single

canvas, like a large spread by Marc Rothko, and the more one becomes absorbed in it, the more colours emerge. There are many beautiful settings that are not really at all like Pärt, but emotionally more open, as if Barber or Bernstein had lived to explore the minimalist medium, reaching, for me, a peak in a setting of David's remorse over the death of Absalom.

And the future of Polyphony? 'Like so many other British groups,' Layton explains, 'we've been entirely dependent on fine recording, not only financially, but much more so from a marketing point of view. Recordings reach far beyond concerts and concert touring. Hyperion is why we are known. For us as for many the recent judgment against Hyperion is a worrying blow to serious music, because it is now only the quality labels like Hyperion that have any interest in the future of music itself, and not just lavishing themselves on glitzy stars. They must find ways to survive and flourish!' □

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