

The Adjudicator - written October 2008

I sing in a choir. Sixty mature males, some technically sound, many not. Formed in a public house fifteen years ago following an overture to a retired opera singer by a Friday night regular who thought he could sing. Whilst the maestro got it going, it needed a committee. Good men in tune with the detail and in harmony with the bank manager. But the maestro eventually stretched beyond what was feasible and affordable and the resulting dissonance was intolerable.

His replacement more than filled his shoes. A mature lady with a musical staff for a backbone. Change through consent. Improvement through pleasure and fellowship. Then one day someone wondered how good the choir was. What were the ways to measure progress?

Invitations were still coming in, though we rarely had a full house. Not a popular choir in the sense of a regular following. A rock band has thousands of fans and they can't wait to hear the same songs over and over again. With a male voice choir you're praying they'll sing something different, something you know perhaps. Even singing the same thing differently would be a welcome change.

We entered a competition once under the maestro, came last and had no wish to repeat the experience. So we employed an adjudicator instead.

He was well known and respected around the town. A popular conductor with his own choir and a regular adjudicator at competitions. He sat in for one rehearsal and returned two weeks later to deliver judgement. A panning. The acid test was singing quietly, which the choir couldn't. And singing normally was too harsh. He delivered bad news skillfully by smiling and chuckling with each broadside.

He then turned into a trainer. He sang everyone's notes and demonstrated how he did it with a series of exercises which we copied. He was mustard keen and we lapped him up, and his banter.

'You're flat tenors, see if you can ruin this?'

'Are you joining in this time basses? Try and keep up.'

'That was quite nice baritones. Now sing it.'

For his finale he told us we were quite capable of making a good sound. I left the rehearsal with a sore mouth, chest pain and a buzzing somewhere behind my nose. I'd discovered palate and tongue shapes and cranial cavities I didn't know I had.

We've had other voice coaches. Good in their way but not followed by sustained change as few of us took personal responsibility to maintain improvement or develop skills further. 'And why should we?' asked a fellow baritone. 'Its a hobby after all. Not easy to learn new stuff when you are knocking on. What if we can't keep up, will we be asked to leave? Will real singers be drafted in? What about auditions, mandatory lessons, competitions, reviews in The Telegraph? There's no telling where it might go.'

Keeping the core stuff good or improving it, learning new stuff, measuring, coaching, testing. Everybody's doing it.