AN APPRAISAL OF DICTION IN THE CHORAL PERFORMANCES OF SOME CHURCHES IN THE PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The issue of choral diction in Churches in Port Harcourt has been a great concern to the researcher who has perpetually observed the choirs for some time. The word diction means "saying or speaking." In music it also means correct pronunciation of words. Because these choirs perform in many languages – English and Nigerian languages, it is expedient that their diction, either in English language or any other language be distinct. The choir as a service arm is the engine house of the Church that leads people in service; therefore, it must be at its best when performing its duties. The main thrust for this paper is to establish a rationale for the development of systematic approaches in choral diction methods (English and Vernacular), in the area of this study as well as its importance. The study used direct observation technique to gather data and found out that most of the choirmasters neglect the aspect of diction in their performances. The research concludes that choral diction is the medium through which the message in the music is conveyed to the listener and should be taken seriously by choral directors. It recommends that the choral directors should develop themselves on diction generally by reading literatures and seeking assistance from professionals to be able to teach their choirs aright, pay abrupt attention to the diction of their groups and not be weary in making corrections when/where necessary.

Keywords: Appraisal, Diction, Choir, Performance, Church, Port Harcourt Metropolis

Introduction

Choral diction has been one of the researcher's personal emphases ever since she emerged a choral director; this is because she went through some training in the Church choir during her childhood/teenage years. After joining the choir, it did not take long to develop a fascination with the way lyrics and music interact; from there it was a short step to understanding the importance of making the message of the music clear to the listener. As a matter of fact, she grew up to be a choral diction critic and always strives to provide vital information to her singers on the principles of diction as she perceived them. The choir's function is to communicate the message, even if the minor sacrifice of lessening the stylistic impact is required. The reason for this is found in I Corinthians 14:7-12 which says:

> Even lifeless instruments like the flute or the harp must play the notes clearly, or no one will recognize the melody. And if the bugler doesn't sound a clear call, how will the soldiers know they are being called to battle? It's the same for you. If you speak to people in words they don't understand, how will they know what you are saying? You might as well be talking into empty space. There are many different languages in the world, and every language has meaning. But if I don't understand a language, I will be a foreigner to someone who speaks it, and the one who speaks it will be a foreigner to me. And the same is true for you. Since you are so eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives, seek those that will strengthen the whole church (NLT).

The context in the scripture above is about spiritual gifts, not choir – but the principle of communication for edification is identical. For the informational part of this paper, the

researcher would like to share what she's learned about choral diction. For a start, choral diction is simply the way in which we pronounce our words as we sing. The basis of diction, of course, is found in spoken language which, for the purpose of this paper, will be assumed to be English language and Nigerian languages. The reason for this is that different Nigerian languages have a variety of non-English sounds, for example, the efik/Ibibio languages do not have the sound "t" as in "Itoro" and so this paper is restricted to our initial foray into the subject to the phonemes we use most often. There are two basic parts of speech in choral diction: consonants and vowels. The essential concept in precise diction is that vowels define pitch and consonants define rhythm.

Ekwueme (1993) says that in singing, diction is the art and technique of enunciating words

> so that they are clearly heard and understood by the average listener. For normal speech to be clear, it has to be articulate and the vowels and consonants well enunciated. Sung words are even more difficult to decipher than spoken words, especially when these are run in a melisma with one syllable to numerous musical notes. Consequently, diction in singing has to take on even more exacting demands on the producer for the words to be properly heard. Exaggeration is therefore the standard; the vowels have to be pure and distinct and the consonants must have a much stronger bite than is necessary for normal speech (p. 63).

Marshall (2001, p. 1) says diction means "words." Marshall says there are singers whose words couldn't be understood because they distorted the words beyond recognition. There are some familiar expressions that describe this sort of enunciation: 'He or she sings as if he/she had a hot potato in his/her mouth… as if he had a mouthful of mush… as if his/her mouth were full of marbles.

From the foregoing, the researcher sees diction as "saying or speaking." It could also be seen as the manner of speaking or expression or correct pronunciation of words. As a matter of fact, songs are meaningless when the words are distorted or not distinctly pronounced. The lyrics of most chorales performed by choirs are poetic and written by divinely inspired minds of the great ancient and modern masters. It is therefore imperative to note that when someone sings, he/she is accomplishing one of these three functions – "Praising," "Praying," or "Preaching." However, in each case, the singer is expressly conveying a message, either to God or fellow human beings. A song may be very melodious with beautiful harmony or other variations; but when the words are distorted by non-effective pronunciation, the singer has only achieved a part of the justice to be done to the song. The accomplishment of diction in choral performance therefore, lies in the overall ability of the singers to pronounce the right words distinctly enough and of course to the correct music notes or sounds. Singing is an art; it therefore behooves the singer to be artistic and natural enough in singing in such a way that the average listener hears, understands, and appreciates what is being sung. For example, the hymn AMR 266 – "Thou whose almighty word" is being sung as "Daw uzo mighty word…." by most of the choirs in the area of this study. The "th" and "z" sounds in "Thou" and "whose" are not correctly pronounced by most of these choirs. Again, in the chanting of the Gloria in psalms, the "o" sound in the Glory is pronounced "o" and "without" is pronounced "witout." Many other words like "thanksgiving" is pronounced "tanksgiven," "thanks" is pronounced "tanks," and so on.

In the aspect of Nigerian languages, most words are murdered by the choirs because it is not in a familiar language, and the choirmasters do not bother to seek assistance from someone who speaks and understands the language. Nnamani (2009) says "a good choirmaster who

wishes to perform in an unfamiliar language should always seek assistance from someone who speaks and understands the language" (p. 17).

Ekwueme (1993) says:

> The literature of the various cultures and people about which the choir will be singing is a major subject with which the choir director ought to get acquainted. The literature, art and other cultural traits of the people about which the music to be performed is composed will aid in no small measure to a fair interpretation of the music (p. 51).

From the researcher's point of view, it is very important for choral directors to get themselves acquainted with the culture and language of an unfamiliar musical piece they wish to teach their choirs for performance. Singing is not just about making sounds; it is a medium of communication/appreciation and therefore, the lyrics of songs performed in either English language or vernacular must be distinctly pronounced for the average listener to hear, understand and appreciate.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the principles of good diction and make suggestions and recommendations that can improve choral diction in the Port Harcourt metropolis.

Review of Related Literature

This section reviews the relevant literatures related to this study.

Fisher (1986) says: Diction in choral music simultaneously functions at two different levels.

> It provides the verbal message or text while it also serves as the actual medium for a vocal musical utterance. This twofold operation seems to imply a dichotomy of technique, serving either the freedom, space, and purity necessary for good vocal musical production, or the clearly enunciated vowels and articulated consonants needed in the production of understandable verbal language. While different teaching methods and symbol systems may be employed, the choral profession seems to be in general agreement regarding the importance of diction purity and uniformity (p. 13).

Fisher (1986, p. 14) further says that two of the most pervasive schools of thought with respect to diction that clearly reflect the existing differences can be labeled sung-speech diction and rhythmic diction. Most likely deriving its essence from common speech patterns, sung-speech diction is characterised by the linking of every word in a textual phrase to its succeeding word or syllable in an “unceasing progression and interaction.” In contrast, rhythmic diction emphasises the pronunciation of “every sound in every syllable” as discrete units within the rhythmic structure of the music. Proponents of sung-speech diction suggest that since in spoken language the listener discerns messages from the speaker in acoustical blends of vowels and consonants, technically termed “smear,” it follows that singers should produce such blends to make the texts understandable. Supporters of sung-speech diction state further that this practice preserves the continuity of sound production and the legato phrasing that are vital to effective vocal musical performance. Rhythmic diction practitioner

argue that without an underlying rhythmic application of speech sounds in choral music, vowel purity, vowel uniformity, understanding of the text, musical continuity, and even legato performance may be seriously impoverished. By performing every sound in every syllable within a metered rhythmic structure of music, diction as text and diction as a musical medium are maximised. Neither of these two approaches to diction rely to any extent upon scientific or empirical data specifically addressing choral performance. For this reason, related discussions and debates have been non-conclusive and yield little new insight. Moreover, choral diction practices remain non-standard and are plagued with a lack of consistency.

David-Jones and Nita-Hudson (2002) say: Diction is the single most important aspect of singing whether choral or solo. The old Italian voice teachers used to say, "A good diction is a good tone." As a matter of fact, diction is: "a sound or sounds that express meaning." However, before the meaning of a word can be understood, the sounds of that word must be sounded in a reasonably accurate way. Hauk-Silva and Ramos (2006) say that in choral music, performance choices include aspects related to clarity of text diction, such as the duration and the dynamics of vowels and consonants, which may contribute to performance expressivity. Choral performance involves diction in terms of uniformity of pronunciation and clearness of enunciation, or also in terms of its relationship with choral blend and/or with a legato line.

From the foregoing, it is seen that diction is very important in choral music. Words must be correctly pronounced to convey the correct message to the audience or listeners. Singing is performed to be understood, appreciated, and enjoyed; therefore, words must not be distorted

during choral performances. Clear and distinct pronunciation of words should be taken very seriously by choirmasters/choristers during performances.

Theoretical Framework

The theories guiding this research are: The theory of diction propounded by Abraham Jones Wordsworth (2001), the fixed formant theory by Stephen Cliff Bolster (1983), and the theory of pronunciation by David Sampe (1979). The theory of diction by Wordsworth (2001) states that: "verbal communications that are guided by distinct pronunciation of words are clearly communicated to the listener and well comprehended" (p. 6). The fixed formant theory by Bolster (1983) states that: "diction is the primary aspect of choral music because the message in the music is conveyed through singing" (p. 27). The theory of pronunciation by Sampe (1979) states that: "pronunciation of words is based on a set of universal phonological processes that interact with and convey messages to one another" (p. 42).

From the theories stated above, it can be deduced that using proper diction or properly pronouncing words, is the foundation of a great choral performance. Diction is one of the vital basics of choral singing because it determines whether the audience hears clearly and understands what is being sung. The term diction refers to the kind of words, phrases, sentences, and sometimes figurative language that constitute any work of literature. When it comes to choral singing, the question related to the diction always arises. Diction is considered as primary in choral music because it conveys the message in the music to the audience. Peterson (2002) says:

> Diction refers to how you form the sound of the words or pronounce the words in your song. If you have a good diction, your listeners can easily grasp the lyrics and understand the message of the song. You should also be able to connect with your

> audience through the song. A good diction produces a clear and smooth sound of the words. Such is why having a great singing voice is not enough to please your audience. Being one of the basic components in singing, a good diction can be acquired in several ways, such as constant practice reading and studying the correct pronunciation of vowels and consonants (p. 106).

From the researcher's perspective, in being a good singer or having good choral performances, voice alone will not take you to a successful singing career; it takes that and more. Understanding the basic components of choral diction and mastering them by heart is expedient.

Methodology

This study used direct observation (unobtrusive participants and unobtrusive non-participants) technique to gather information. The choirmasters/choirs in the area under study were critically observed overtime during choir practices, rehearsals and performances.

Research Design

This research employed the observational research method which involves observing situations or individuals in their normal state. Turner and Houle (2019, p. 7) see observational research as the direct observation of individuals in their natural setting; it is the measurement of naturally varying phenomena or behaviours. In this study, the researcher observed and listened to the choirs under study to appraise their diction to collect first hand information.

Population of the Study

The study comprises ten Church choirs in Port Harcourt, Rivers state as follows:

1. Good Shepherd Anglican Church, Rumueme
2. Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, South-South 14, Ozuoba
3. Wesley Methodist Church, Harbour Road
4. St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church, Fimie-Somiari
5. St. Paul's African Church, I. B. Johnson, Port Harcourt Main Township
6. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Bethel Zone, Elelenwo
7. Good Shepherd Anglican Church, Minikpiti, Iwofe
8. St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Woji
9. The Gregorian choir, Corpus Christi Cathedral, D-Line
10. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Praise Chapel Zone, Rumunduru

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size of this study comprises only the choirs that indicated interest to participate in the study. Eighteen choirs in Port Harcourt were contacted for the study but only ten indicated interest to parcticipate, that is, fifty six percent of the total population contacted for the study. As seen above, the sample size of the population is manageable. Therefore, census sampling technique, that is, the entire population of choirs that indicated interest to participate in the study were used.

Instrument for Data Collection

For the sake of clarity, this study made use of observation to gather data. The researcher was physically present at the Churches where she observed the choirs practice and perform.

Method of Data Analysis

The results of the observations are reported and described as they occurred following the outline of the research objective.

Discussion of Findings

This study critically examined the choirs in the area under study and realised that most of the choirmasters are unintelligible in the aspect of choral diction, while some are just negligent about it; attention is not paid to the pronunciation of words by the choirmasters. For example, the use of present tenses, past tenses, future tenses, and so on. Although choirs in the area of this study perform in many languages, English language is more prominent because it is the general spoken language in the world. In this paper, there is insufficient room to discuss all the languages choirs in the area of this study may encounter, English words were considered more during the study. The study also found out that most of the choirmasters are not teachable; even when their choristers call their attention to some mispronounced words, they ignore them and the choir has no choice but to continue singing what their leader tells them to sing. The table below shows some of the words that were observed to be pronounced wrongly and also states the correct pronunciations.

S/No.	Word	Wrong Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
1	Thanksgiving	Thanksgi**ven**, **T**anksgi**ven**	**Th**anksgiv**ing**
2	Lord	Lo**ad**	Lo**rd**
3	Continue	Conti**nuo**	Conti**nue**
4	Think	**T**ink	**Th**ink
5	Thank	**T**ank	**Th**ank
6	Praise	P**ra**se	Pr**ai**se

7	Worketh	Wor**ket**	Wor**keth**
8	Through	**Tr**ough	**Th**rough
9	Obey	Obe	Ob**ey**
10	With	Wi**t**	Wi**th**
11	Without	Without	Wi**th**out

These words were observed to be pronounced in similar ways by the choirs under study, and as such suggestion is made for the choir directors to put in their best and pay attention to diction in their singing, painstakingly teach their choirs the correct pronunciation of words, and make corrections where and when necessary. Lamb (2010) says: "choirs are almost always involved in communicating a text to the audience. Intelligibility of text comes through words that are correctly formed and uniformly pronounced throughout the choir" (p. 163). The message in a piece of music is conveyed to the audience through the words pronounced or sung by the choir, therefore, it is suggested that a choir director should always work on diction no matter what other purpose may also be in his/her mind, otherwise, his/her choir will not develop satisfying and appreciable choral diction or sing for the audience to understand the message that is being conveyed. Therefore, no matter what the concern is or the task at hand, diction is always an important part of choral performance. Words must be correctly identified to be correctly pronounced to convey the message in a piece of music. Having proper diction cannot be overemphasised; it is very paramount while singing. Without it, the words would not be understood, thus an important connection with the music would be lost.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that diction in choral music simultaneously functions as a vehicle for both the musical medium and the textual message. Many of the unconscious, habitual physical shifts that occur in the production of fluent speech often transfer into song. These practices can confound both choral tone and text intelligibility. The study found that most choral directors in the area of this study do not pay attention to and train their singers to eliminate these perturbing speech habits in choral singing. Furthermore, choral diction methods are non-standard and plagued with inconsistency in the area of this study; choral music is better appreciated and understood when the diction is distinct. Diction blending in a choir is key to getting a unified performance and conveying the message in the music. It is all very well when individuals can pronounce words correctly and sing confidently, but if certain words are sticking out, it is not a choir anymore – it is just a group of amateurs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, for choir directors to achieve a good choral diction blend with their choirs, the following recommendations are made:

1. The choral director should first develop himself on diction generally by reading literatures and seeking assistance from professionals to be able to teach his/her choir the right diction.
2. As a director of a choir, it is important to listen out for discrepancies in pronunciation amongst members of the choir, and correct them immediately so that the choristers can unlearn the wrong words and learn the correct ones in time.
3. Practice pronouncing words correctly during warm-up exercises.

4. A choral director who hopes to be outstanding with his/her group in choral diction should be humble and patient enough to listen to members of his/her group when corrections or suggestions are made. Being the director/teacher of a group does not make him/her a master of knowledge. Some members of his/her group may be more knowledgeable and experienced than him in other aspects of life like diction.

5. Choral directors should seek the assistance of someone who speaks and understands a particular language other than English to teach them how to pronounce the words in that language correctly.

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