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The Changing Voices of Male Choristers: An Enigma . . . To Them

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Abstract

This paper reports a study designed to identify the understandings and perceptions of boys enrolled at the London Oratory School about the male adolescent voice change, singing, and choral pedagogy. The study took place on the twentieth anniversary of researcher John Cooksey's 1992—1994 study concerning the vocal development of boys at the London Oratory School. A secondary goal of the study was to determine any long-term impact of Cooksey's work at the school itself. Twelve boys aged 12-18, representing continuous and non-continuous singers, participated in individual interviews. Interviews focused on boys' knowledge of their changing voices, the perceived effects of the voice change on singing and musical (vocal) self-efficacy, attitudes toward vocal rest during the voice change, and recommendations for teachers and conductors. Analysis revealed that even experienced choristers sense a loss of control and autonomy during the voice change process. Results indicate a negligible ongoing influence of Cooksey's work.

KEYWORDS:

Adolescence

Boys

Voice Change

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Patrick K. Freer

A recent article by Martin Ashley (2011a) identified an ‘angel enigma’ with regard to how experienced boy singers relate to their impending voice change. The term is seductive, for it simultaneously conjures descriptive (angelic) elements of a boy’s singing voice, his voice as embodiment (angel), and his transition from childhood to adolescent singing (enigma). Ashley has elsewhere used the term ‘enigma’ to refer to ‘the 11-14 year old boy and his voice’ when developing identity studies (2011b). Is the changing voice truly an enigma?

The Collins English Dictionary defines ‘enigma’ as ‘a person, thing, or situation that is mysterious, puzzling, or ambiguous.’ Ashley wrote that most pre-adolescent and adolescent male singers ‘flounder vocally without support to develop the resilience necessary to cope with an unpredictable and changing voice’ (2011a, p. 344). Ashley’s research articulates the psychological sense of loss that boys can experience with the onset of voice change. This has since been supported by similar studies with an additional finding that boys who are most likely to perceive themselves as unsuccessful singers might be more willing to continue singing when provided with information about the voice change, its process, and its effects (Author, in press). Ashley’s study (2011a) was of boys’ perceptual understanding of the changing voice. He wrote, ‘Boys are seldom consulted about this . . . vocal pedagogy for 11-14 year-olds might be improved if account were taken of boys’ understandings and opinions’ (2011a, p. 344). To wit, the majority of boys in Ashley’s many studies have been largely unable to describe the process of voice change or its effect on vocal quality beyond the most basic of adjectives and descriptors (e.g. Ashley 2013a, 2013b, 2010, 2009, 2008; Ashley and Mecke 2013). The changing voice is indeed an enigma to these boys.

The adolescent male changing voice is not an enigma to those aware of related research published in the past four decades. An excellent, historical summary of the research can be found in Ashley and Mecke (2013). John Cooksey's 1977 series of three articles detailed a meta-analytic review of existing research and literature to arrive at a series of hypotheses about the adolescent male changing voice. These hypotheses collectively formed Cooksey's 'contemporary, eclectic theory' of the male changing voice and its pedagogical implications (Cooksey 1977a, 1977b, 1977c). Over the next quarter century, Cooksey's own empirical research proceeded to refine, verify, or reject the various hypotheses (Thurman, 2012). The longitudinal result of Cooksey's research was that his original eclectic theory was largely upheld, though with important nuances and modifications to the stated vocal ranges, tessituras, and typical singing experiences of boys during the change process (Cooksey, 2000a, 2000b). The theory had moved the enigma toward established science.

Even so, there are questions about Cooksey's work as applied to particular choirs and institutions and to individual singers (see Ashley 2011a; Killian and Wayman 2010; Willis and Kenny 2008). Questions about the validity of Cooksey's research have arisen from time to time, often when the corresponding authors have relied on early, outdated, or inaccurate representations of Cooksey's work (see, for example, Ashley 2011a, 2013a; Leck 2009).¹ Cooksey's research made clear that though the process of change is fundamentally the same for all boys, the rate and experience of change vary from boy to boy (Cooksey 2000b). Some of this variation is biological, but much results from a boy's singing activity before and during the

¹ Leck (2009) based his critique on Cooksey's earliest theoretical models rather than the models refined by Cooksey's subsequent research (see Freer 2010a for details). Ashley (2011a) contains two misrepresentations of Cooksey's research: a chart on p. 345 is not cited, and it represents neither Cooksey's 1979 theory nor his 2000 research-based work; the chart also contains errors in 'Stage 4' where the tessitura is higher than the range. Ashley (2013a) includes a non-cited table on page 313 that appears to draw from Cooksey's 1992 distillation of his research. Cooksey modified that material in 2000 based on research that addressed some of the concerns later raised in Ashley's article.

change process. Boys with greater singing facility during childhood will often experience a smoother process of change and retain access to higher portions of the tessitura simply because of enhanced vocal-muscular conditioning (Cooksey 2000b). This effect figures prominently in the recent pedagogical work of American conductor Henry Leck (2009) and British singer-researcher Jenevora Williams (2012, 2013).

The singing transition from boyhood into adolescence has been the focus of a number of studies within the English cathedral choir setting, including the previously mentioned works by Ashley and Williams (see also Ashley 2006, 2002; Welch and Howard 2002; Williams, Welch and Howard 2005). Other researchers have used narrative approaches to explore the psychological, physiological and sociological implications of the adolescent changing voice on boys' perceptions of musical self-efficacy and persistence (e.g. Abrahams 2012; Bennetts 2013; Collins 2012; Elorriaga 2011; Freer 2012, 2010b, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2006; Harrison 2010; Harrison and Welch 2012; Legg 2012; Lucas 2011; Sweet 2010).

A defining characteristic of Cooksey's work was that he shared information with boys about their voice change process using familiar terminologies and analogies in combination with more technical, anatomical descriptions (Cooksey 1992). Cooksey commented about this, saying:

If you educate the boys about voice change and take it out of the unknown, then they know it is going to happen . . . [if there is an] atmosphere where the boys are going to trust you, they're going to trust each other. That is a healthy thing. (Hook 1998, p. 23)

Cooksey was chiefly concerned with empowering boys to sing through adolescence, in contrast to the prevailing British choral practice of having boys withdraw from singing at the onset of vocal change. Cooksey felt it imperative that teacher-conductors create collaborative musical

environments where boys learn developmentally appropriate vocal technique while informing their teachers of progress in their own voice change (Cooksey 1992; Hale 2009).

Background and Purpose of the Present Study

One of Cooksey's frequently cited research studies took place in 1992—1994 when he visited the London Oratory School, arguably England's most highly regarded cathedral school and home of a distinguished boy choir programme. The present study was designed to revisit the London Oratory School twenty years later in order to: 1) gather the perspectives of current choristers about singing, choral music, choral pedagogy, and the male adolescent changing voice, and to 2) determine if Cooksey's work had any lasting effect.

References to Cooksey's London Oratory School study appear in most literature reviews concerning Cooksey and the male changing voice. Nearly all of these references cite an article in *Voice*, a former publication of the British Voice Association (Cooksey 1993). This particular article proved exceedingly difficult to access. It was only made available to the author by hiring an Association employee to search and find the single archived copy of the journal issue, and then to manually scan each page of the article. The text of the article proved to be nearly identical to several other writings by Cooksey including, but not limited to, portions of his 1977 article series and his later book chapters (2000a, 2000b).² The 1993 Cooksey article does not mention any research project at the London Oratory School, despite references to that effect from authors including Thurman (2012) who cited the *Voice* article when stating: 'Cooksey spent a sabbatical year from 1992 to 1993 in the United Kingdom, hosted by renowned child-voice researcher Graham Welch. A one-year study of boy singers in the London Oratory School and Primary School was undertaken and the results were published. Again, the validity and

² The similar portions were 'used by permission' (Cooksey, 2000a, p. 718).

reliability of the Cooksey guidelines were confirmed' (p. 17). In fact, the present author has been unable to locate any detailed results of the London Oratory School study.

What is known of the London Oratory School study can be found in two sources. The first is an article co-authored by Cooksey and Welch (1998) about the National Curriculum for Music in England. The London Oratory School study is described on pp. 107-108. The study involved approximately 60 pupils who were assessed each month for the academic year through a variety of means to determine acoustical and physiological changes across time. The results are summarised broadly: 'In general, the London comparative study subjects followed the same sequence of voice stages that had been established in the American study, and pitch ranges and tessiture were remarkably similar . . .' (p. 108). The report then briefly describes the specific cases of two boys in the study. A note on page 116 states, 'Assessment and evaluation continues on the substantial amount of data collected, and results of the London Study will be published in more detail in the future (Cooksey and White, forthcoming).' It appears that this publication did not occur.³

The second source is found on the concluding page of a book chapter by Cooksey (2000b) in a section subtitled, 'The London Oratory School Study: Cross-Cultural Perspectives (1992—1994).' The five paragraphs summarise the earlier material by Cooksey and Welch (1998) and conclude with the sentence, 'Analysis of the study's data continues' (p. 733).

Though it appears the study's full findings were not published, the available resources indicate that the project did take place from 1992 to 1994 in two phases. The majority of empirical data collection occurred during the 1992—1993 academic year. Cooksey returned to London in the summer of 1994 to gather additional, longitudinal data from several participating boys (Hale, 2009). With approximately 60 participants and individual monthly sessions

³ Confirmed in a personal email communication with Graham Welch, March 29, 2012.

involving ‘their performance of a variety of singing and speech activities, with the assessments recorded for subsequent musical, acoustic, and laryngographic analysis’ (Cooksey and Welch 1998, p. 108), the total number of assessments would have reached approximately 540 (60 boys x 9 monthly individual sessions). The study’s implementation was likely a significant event in the academic life of the school.

The London Oratory School Choral Program

The London Oratory School choral programme is stronger today than it was during Cooksey’s visits in 1992—1994. The School was founded in 1852 to further the work of the Fathers of the London Oratory in Brompton, Knightsbridge. The School is located in central London, about 3 km from the Brompton (London) Oratory. Two major changes in the latter half of the 1990s positioned the Oratory School choirs to become leading ensembles in the field of choral music. First, the 50-voice London Oratory Schola Cantorum (more commonly known as the ‘Schola’) was established in 1996, two years after Cooksey’s time at the school. The Schola sings liturgical repertoire at the Oratory’s Mass every Saturday evening, tours regularly, and performs in London’s most prestigious halls and with many of its professional instrumental ensembles. Second, the Oratory School’s Junior House opened in 1996, concurrent with the Schola’s founding. Twenty boys are admitted annually to the Junior House where they engage in a rigorously focused music education programme designed to prepare for participation in the Schola. Some of the boys are admitted to the Schola when they initially enroll in the Junior House at the age of 7, but this is rare.

The total enrollment of today's London Oratory School and its Junior House is approximately 1,350 students.⁴ The Oratory School admits girls for the sixth form. There are five choirs: the highly-selective, boys-only Schola Cantorum; a Chamber Choir of boys and girls; a Girls' Choir; the 80-voice non-auditioned School Choir; and an intergenerational Choral Society open to pupils, parents and school employees. The London Oratory School employs multiple faculty to teach all facets of vocal and instrumental music, theory, and history. A succession of four faculty members has headed the School's choral music programme in the twenty years since Cooksey's research project.

The Current Study's Design

This study involved formal on-site interviews with twelve boy singers enrolled at the London Oratory School and its Junior House. Informal conversations with various school faculty and administrators supplied ancillary information. The researcher corresponded with the Director of the London Oratory School's Schola Cantorum to initiate the project. The study design and ethical procedures were approved by the researcher's university and by the School's headmaster. Twelve individual boys (aged 12 to 18) were selected by the Schola Director, in consultation with the School's music faculty, to equally represent three groups at four members each: consistent and current singers, those who had withdrawn from school singing, and those who had never sung in school or a choir.

The researcher conducted all interviews in person and on site. Interviews ranged in

⁴ On July 15, 2014, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator ruled that the 2014 and 2015 admissions policies of the London Oratory School were both racially and socio-economically discriminatory. A portion of the ruling questioned the musical requirements for admission to the Junior House. School officials signaled that they would appeal the decision. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/330614/ADA2410_The_London_Oratory_School.pdf

duration from 18 to 36 minutes and followed the active interview approach of Holstein and Gubrium (1995) in which an initial series of questions promotes the natural flow of conversation. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the desired topics are addressed during the conversation. Four participating boys elected to review their interview transcripts, with three making corrections through email consultation with the researcher in the weeks following data collection.

HyperTRANSCRIBE™ and HyperRESEARCH™ software facilitated transcription, coding and analysis of all interview data. Analysis utilised a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser 2002; Charmaz 2006), beginning with open coding, then selective coding, and subsequent theoretical sampling and theoretical coding (Glaser 1978). Two graduate students at the researcher's home institution replicated the open coding. The Kappa coefficient (where values between .61 and .80 indicate substantial agreement) for interrater reliability at this stage was $\kappa = .74$ (Cohen 1960). The researcher independently conducted the selective and theoretical coding.

Other data from this research project is included within a report of similar studies with boys from four European countries (Author, in press). The material presented in this paper uniquely focuses on discussions specific to singing within the British boy choir tradition; it extends beyond the scope of the other report. There is no duplication of quoted material in the two reports. The accounts employ different sets of participant pseudonyms in order to further assure anonymity.

Boys' Knowledge and Perceptions of the Changing Voice

The boys in this study offered comments about the changing voice that could be grouped into four broad categories as presented below: personal knowledge of the voice change process,

effect of the voice change on singing and musical (vocal) self-efficacy; attitudes toward vocal rest during the voice change, and boys' recommendations for teachers and conductors about working with male adolescents and their changing voices. Information about the boys is contained in Table 1.

Table 1
Study Participants

Name	Age	Status
Bain	15	Former Choral Singer
Christopher	15	Never Sang in Choir
Darius	14	Former Choral Singer
Dell	13	Continuous Choral Singer
Evan	18	Continuous Choral Singer
Fagan	14	Former Choral Singer
Gerald	12	Never Sang in Choir
Kenneth	16	Continuous Choral Singer
Lawrence	14	Former Choral Singer
Mark	16	Never Sang in Choir
Roderick	15	Continuous Choral Singer
Timothy	16	Never Sang in Choir

Personal Knowledge of the Voice Change Process

The boys were asked what they knew about their changing voices. Not one boy, even amongst the most successful singers, could describe the process beyond its most basic elements.

Dell offered, 'Your Adam's Apple gets yellowish or something? Isn't it your vocal cord developing? All I know is that it happens around age 13 or 14.' Gerald figured it was

Something about puberty and, well, voices break when you go through puberty. Uh, that you start getting greasy hair, you grow more hair in certain places, your vocal cords break because your voice box gets bigger and pushes them out of your throat.

Some of the boys described their voice change as a gradual, even imperceptible process.

Bain recalled,

I didn't really notice, really. I just woke up one morning, went out, and spoke as normal. I had become accustomed to it. It was not until my mum said, 'What's happened to your

voice?’ and then I talked to a friend and he didn't recognise my voice at all. But, my singing ability was hindered. I obviously got the voice cracks.

Roderick concurred, and his voice cracked several times as he spoke this sentence:

‘Sometimes it just switches from low, relatively, to briefly high. It's like I just squeal or something halfway through a note . . . like just now!’ Christopher also noticed his voice ‘squeaking a lot,’ being asked by teachers to try and sing bass and tenor lines, but being confused by having to read the unfamiliar bass clef. He said, ‘I just didn't know how to reach the new notes of my voice. I felt like I was trying to drive a car with manual transmission and all I knew was how to drive an automatic!’

The lack of personal knowledge about their changing voices caused some of the boys to be insecure about its long-term effects. Timothy was told by his teacher that ‘you can spoil the voice if you try to sing the high notes while your voice is changing. But, I'm not entirely sure that's true.’ Conversely, Darius asked, ‘How can I keep my voice from staying high? I don't know any of that information.’ Mark offered that boys with broken voices are ‘just not as good at controlling our voices.’ This can lead boys to become frustrated when they disappoint their teachers. Dell related,

We feel quite a bit of pressure from the conductor when he's like kind of annoyed when you get it wrong. They want you to know how important it is to sing well, and that's hard when you don't know what sound is going to come out of your mouth.

However, Bain revelled in the chance to sing the new notes afforded to him:

I always fancied myself a tenor because tenor is quite a nice part to sing, it's quite adventurous. It's just more of a challenge. When I was singing alto, it was boring because it was only about four notes, well, maybe more than that, but I didn't like it. The tenor part is hard to sing because it's always a harmony part. I like that.

Effect of the Voice Change on Singing and Musical (Vocal) Self-Efficacy

Darius was like many of the younger boys in this study who wanted their voices to change. He said, 'I hope it doesn't stay the same. I want it to get deeper.' Others expressed sadness that the changing voice meant their treble voices would be lost. Lawrence offered,

I listen to myself sing. I know that I have quite a good voice now even though it's not valued much by choir directors anymore. Everybody liked my voice when I was younger. I can still share my voice and music with other people, like I can sing to my parents. I don't really sing to friends, generally, because that's quite embarrassing. But, I sing to my parents because my mum thinks I have a good voice.

Dell responded to similar disappointment by gravitating to sports, hinting that the changing voice may yet prompt his withdrawal from choral singing:

Actually, right now, I really prefer rugby to singing, because singing is getting tiring and worse as I get older, and rugby, I'm getting better as I get older. I'm kind at the end of my singing life. At least for treble, I am. I almost feel like I don't have time to get any better because my voice is about to change.

Dell indicated that many boys drop out of choir because they liked their treble voices and don't like their new range. Kenneth concurred, observing that once their voices change, 'Only the good ones, the ones with good voices, come back. Plus, if they didn't like the singing experience before the change they won't like it after the change. It happens quite a lot.'

Gerald, age 12, was the youngest boy interviewed in this study. He spoke earnestly about how he had liked singing as young boy but now felt that he didn't fit into the culture and standards of his new school. Gerald said,

It's a bit annoying because in primary school I was considered an all right singer but here if you compare me to some of the boys, I probably couldn't even be a match to them because they're so good. I can't even think of joining choir here.

An exchange with Gerald highlighted his frustration with his voice at the beginning stages of change ['R' indicates 'researcher']:

Gerald: I can't really sing that good anymore.

R: So tell me about that.

Gerald: Some of the boys in the Schola sing deeper. Younger boys sing the high notes,

but the older boys are the ones with the really fantastic notes. I'm in the middle now. Not high, not low.

R: Before your voice changed you had an amazing voice, right?

Gerald: Well, not really amazing. But, I did get solos all the time in music class. Last week we had a singing test in our music class at this school. The mark was out of ten and I didn't do very well, and I only got a five.

R: What were the reasons that you didn't get 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10?

Gerald: Because I couldn't reach the high notes.

R: And you lost points for that?

Gerald: Yeah, and the long notes. They're hard for me to sing, too. I couldn't really hold on to them. I feel like everything is changing and nobody is helping me anymore.

Mark was approximately halfway through his voice change process. He remarked that his voice was 'a little better than it was a few months ago, because I have some control and the right pitch comes out when I want it to.' Timothy described how his falsetto has begun to emerge:

Recently it's gotten pretty good, actually. I'm starting to get the higher notes that I didn't have before. I'd like to sing them loudly, but I can only sing them light. I thought my voice was finally starting to settle down but it's still hard to control the upper notes.

Some boys looked forward to the social advantages they envisioned as accompanying their newly changed voices. Dell noted that the older boys with deeper voices provide the 'discipline in the school. Everybody pays attention when you speak with a deep, manly voice.'

Bain agreed:

In terms of singing, back in the day, it was good to sing high notes, but now it's good to sing a low register because it feels more natural at this age. And more masculine. [laughs] Definitely. Singing low notes is a masculine thing. It's just good.

Darius put it more simply when he said he wished he could make his voice 'a bit deeper.' He paused, then said, 'I want to fit in.'

Attitudes toward Vocal Rest During the Voice Change

The Schola follows the longstanding British boy choir tradition requiring that nearly all boys withdraw from the ensemble at the onset of voice change. Boys are offered the opportunity

to enroll in the school's other ensembles during this period, though most stop singing completely. Once their voices change and if their vocal quality is deemed sufficient, some boys are invited to rejoin the Schola. These returning members are known as 'Choral Scholars' who sing the lower parts and provide mentorship to younger boys. The policy is stated in numerous materials offered by the London Oratory School:

When their voices change and the time comes for choristers to step down as trebles, although they devote more time to their instrumental music, their interest in singing is kept alive until their voices have developed sufficiently to enable them, where appropriate, to return to the Schola as choral scholars, providing the alto, tenor, and bass voices . . . All of the [Schola] choristers also have individual voice training each week.

Boys spoke about this practice of having boys leave the Schola at the onset of vocal change. Lawrence stated,

If I could still sing treble, then I would. I miss being in Schola. I was just getting to the peak of my voice, I was started to get picked for solos and things, and then it just suddenly stopped. I didn't have a gradual change, like quite a few of the boys have. It just went straight away. I had to stop singing when I was 12. Most people stop when they're 13. It's an accepted rule.

Bain was one of the students who withdrew from the Schola at age 13. He commented, 'You just leave at the end of year 8 because your voice starts to break. My voice changed a bit early, so I did sing as alto at one point, but then I just left altogether. I won't come back.' Dell knew of some boys who had a very gradual voice change and were allowed to continue without pause. He felt this was unfair because 'they get all the solos. I think either everyone should stop singing or nobody should be forced to stop singing.' But, he agreed that singing during the change would 'strain and ruin your voice. You should stop so that you keep your vocal cords intact.' Fagan, Dell, and Lawrence all indicated that they hoped to rejoin the choir when they turned 16 and their voices had settled.

Evan is now a Choral Scholar, a title afforded boys whose voices have changed. He recalled,

When I was younger, I sort of saw Choral Scholars as role models. They seemed like they were having such a good time, they joked around a lot, and it just looked like a good way to be a singer and have buddies. So, I decided I wanted that, too.

Evan was one of those boys whose voice change was very gradual, and he never took a pause from singing. He noted, 'I haven't got a massively wide range, so I can't sing tenor. I'm a bass.' Regarding his ability to sing through the change, he owes it to the fact that he 'sang with good vocal technique all of the time.' Evan commented,

I think it's helpful in the way that you sort of figure out more how to use your voice if you're continually using it rather than stopping for two years while it settles and so having to learn all over again. I was singing all the while so that helped bridge the gap.

Roderick was the other boy in this project who had sung without withdrawing during the voice change. Roderick said that he thinks his motivation and determination helped him navigate the voice change. He said, 'I want to be a professional singer when I leave school. Not really sure what type of singer, but I'm sure I really want to be a singer.'

Boys who have to withdraw from the Schola because of the voice change can sing in the school's other choirs. Many boys, especially those who had sung in the Schola, expressed concerns about the issues of musical quality and performance standards. Bain indicated that all of the school's other choirs were at a 'low standard.' Darius similarly said:

I only want to sing with other singers who are very good . . . they have to have things in common with me both socially and in musical ability. I like high standards. Only the Schola has standards high enough for me.

Kenneth commented on the strategy of having boys sing in the other school choirs during the period of voice change:

I know that some of the guys like me, when their voices start to change, they'll go into the school choir and sing bass or tenor. I can see pros and cons, I guess. It's not the same

standard as the Schola, just because it's more to do with people that aren't that vocally talented or capable during that transition period. You can sort of get disillusioned and fall away from singing.

Fagan put it more simply: 'I was used to such a high calibre choir. I couldn't stand to sing with a lower choir, so I stopped singing. It would have annoyed and irritated me because it wouldn't be as good.'

Fagan also wished that teachers understood how boys felt during the voice change. He wanted teacher to know that,

Your voice takes time to fully settle, so throwing us out is obviously terrible because it's going to settle, so I wish they could keep us in the choir—it's not appreciated by us boys who get thrown out. Don't say, 'no, you can't do it any more, you can go.' It would be better to find a way to keep us close.

Boys' Recommendations for Teachers and Conductors

The Schola choristers rehearse for an hour each weekday morning before school, during lunch break, and frequently after school. They also rehearse for an hour prior to weekly Saturday Mass. Members of the other school choirs rehearse largely during school hours. Every boy interviewed for this study commented on the pressure of having multiple extracurricular activities, including choir. Lawrence said,

I'm finding it really difficult because you have can have concerts and tournaments at the same time, and the school doesn't seem to have worked out a good balance, and it always seems to be that the music and sports departments are clashing. They have not settled it. A lot of the boys are doing both, so it would make sense to find a solution.

Roderick agreed that,

It's kind of a problem because I do sports that practise when there are choir rehearsals, so there's always been a clash between sport and music with me, because I like sport and I'm relatively good at it. It's going to be harder as I get older, with more commitment for more things.

Each of the study's four boys who had withdrawn from singing in school choirs said that

a primary reason was conflicts with sporting activities. Christopher, a boy who had not sung in school choirs, perceived it as a problem:

There's boys who play sports, and then the musical boys, and then the academic boys. You don't really see sport and music going together. The good sports guys don't do music, and the good music guys don't do sports. I guess you have to focus on one thing in order to get better.

Another frequent recommendation was that boys be given more information and instruction about the voice change. Bain suggested that boys with changing voices might sing in a group voice class or a non-performing choir:

Well, it's quite difficult to sing when you're in that stage. But, I don't think it would be advised to take a non-singing break, just to let your voice settle. It would be better to keep them in the choir officially but don't force them to sing when they can't. Then, reintroduce them to it slowly through lessons, just get their vocal ability retrained.

Dell concurred:

I don't want to worry about learning songs, I want to work on my voice. I want to learn how to make my voice better. An easy way to do that is to sing current songs that you don't need to 'learn' because we already know them. You can focus on the voice instead of on the notes and rhythms.

Kenneth offered that, 'The individual lessons are mainly about singing and technique.

Choir rehearsals are just generalised; conductors just want something to happen now. There's no teaching, just fixing.' He continued,

If the choir director used the same terminology as the private lesson teacher, then it would be more consistent and might help boys understand their voices. I used to be frustrated in the transition period because I thought, 'why can't I just sing?' But, I had a voice teacher and he told me that it's a progression. With voice lessons you understand more about your voice as a singularity instead of collectively or anonymously in a large choir.

All boys in this study indicated interest in understanding the anatomy and physiology of the changing voice. Roderick responded, 'I think it would help if singers got to know which muscles they use when they use their vocal instrument to sing. I think that would help a lot,

because you would understand what you were doing when you did it.’ Lawrence thought that more specific vocal instruction would help prepare boys for the coming voice change.

Otherwise, he said that the voice change is ‘like a dreaded day that is going to come at some point. I was told that my voice would break eventually, but I didn't really understand anything about the stages or the range or anything like that.’

Mark linked vocal knowledge with musical success:

I never learned anything about my changing voice. Not a word. Maybe if I'd learned more, maybe I could have improved and joined one of the much better choirs. I'd like to be one of the school's leading vocalists. I'd enjoy that, but I'm not.

Discussion and Conclusions

Conversations with the school’s music teachers, its Headmaster, and the Schola Director revealed no awareness of John Cooksey’s 1992—1994 research study at the London Oratory School. The boys’ remarks indicated that their instructional experience did not reflect Cooksey’s teachings or research findings. If Cooksey’s recommendations were in effect, a more structured vocal/choral programme would have been in place for boys experiencing vocal change, and the boys would have been conversant about fundamental aspects of the change, its physiology, and its musical effects. Instead, the comments of these boys were like those of boys reported in most choral settings—they neither understood the changing voice nor welcomed its distinctive musical capabilities (e.g. Abrahams 2012; Ashley 2011a; Author, in press). They only spoke of musical limitations. The period of voice change was something to endure, ignore, or bemoan. The changing voice was an enigma—mysterious, puzzling and ambiguous—for these boys.

Four of the themes found in this study notably relate to previous research. First, boys with changing voices often perceive a loss of control, or as Mark stated, ‘we’re just not as good at controlling our voices.’ In other studies, adolescent boy singers have expressed a need to feel

that they are in control of both their learning and their moment-to-moment vocal contributions in the choral rehearsal (Freer 2009a). This is congruent with Csikszentmihaly's 'flow theory' (1990), holding that individuals are likely to experience higher satisfaction when involved in activities where they perceive themselves to be in control and functioning autonomously. This theme—the need for control—appears repeatedly in many chapters of the research compendium *Perspectives on Males and Singing* (Harrison, Welch and Adler 2012).

Second, boys indicated an increased pressure to join extracurricular activities concurrent with the onset of vocal change and in the period of exclusion from high-level choral singing. Roderick reflected on the predicament: 'It's going to be harder as I get older, with more commitment for more things.' Studies suggest that this problem is common amongst adolescent boys for several reasons. The onset of vocal change occurs because of growth processes tied to pubertal development. This growth includes an increase in size and strength—two qualities that enable adolescent boys to seek and experience success in athletic endeavours at the same moment in which they experience a lack of control and/or success in the choral setting (Freer 2011). Research also indicates that adolescent boys are able to optimally focus on only two or three extracurricular activities (Fredricks 2012). As in other studies (see Freer 2012), these London Oratory School boys perceived choral music to be an extracurricular activity because of the rehearsals and performances that occurred outside school hours. It appears that the forced withdrawal of boys from singing during the voice change contributes to their attrition from choral singing rather than enhances the likelihood that they will reengage at a later point. This study produced no evidence that boys disengaged because they disliked singing. They had simply filled the experiential void created by their departure from choral activity.

Third, a related theme was that boys spoke of their ability to excel in a limited number of ways. They perceived boys as being good at athletics, academics, or music. Though there were exceptions, most boys indicated that they chose their intended area of expertise and focused their attention energy within that area. For example, Christopher remarked, 'I guess you have to focus on one thing in order to get better.' Some boys at the school chose athletics. Many of the boys in this study chose singing, which formed a central part of their self-identity until confronted with the changing voice. This theme is congruent with findings related to attribution theory, holding that boys most often attribute success to their inherent ability rather than to any effort they might expend (Legette 1998). It also underlies the boys' comments about their desire to only participate in choral ensembles holding high standards for learning and performance. Other research findings similarly indicate that adolescent boys choose a limited number of endeavours on which to focus their attention (Bowker 2006; Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille and Ranieri 2007). Boys then build their identities around these areas of success, with implication that choral music teachers need to provide support for boys who may equate their adolescent voice change with the loss of a prized childhood treble voice or who may have few areas of interest beyond singing.

Fourth, these boys voiced universal interest in acquiring knowledge about the male adolescent voice, the process of change, and vocal techniques specific to helping them navigate their experience of singing during the period of change. For these boys, this desire for information was not about the art form of singing as much as it was about the process of self-awareness and the development of self-knowledge. Kenneth related this as a longing to understand his voice 'as a singularity instead of collectively or anonymously in a large choir.' The appeal was for individual knowledge and personal skill development that boys could then contribute to singing and choral activity as they desired. However, Williams's research with boy

choristers indicated that issues of vocal technique and instruction may be central to boys' perceptions of their personal skills. For instance, Williams (2012) found that boy choristers such as those interviewed for the present study sing with relatively healthy vocal technique. Even so, vocal loading (activity during and time spent on singing) tends to result in continual yet slight vocal fatigue. Williams also found that experienced boy choristers tend to use sub-optimal vocal technique at the onset of voice change. This is likely due to the changing, unfamiliar physical and aural sensations of singing. On an interesting side note, Cooksey's collaborator for the original London Oratory study, Peta Sjölander (formerly known by the surname "White"), has continued to conduct research and write about vocal issues during childhood and the transition to adult singing (e.g. McAllister and Sjölander 2013). Sjölander's research echoes the findings of Williams about the need for voice training specifically oriented toward the unique qualities of the adolescent male changing voice.

The goal of helping adolescent boys to understand their developing voices and healthfully sing through the period of change was central to John Cooksey's work. The comments of the boys in this study affirm Cooksey's impression that boys are fascinated by their changing voices and are interested in learning techniques to enable their continuous singing through adolescence.

Coda

Evan was an 18-year-old boy nearing completion of his schooling at the London Oratory School and of his singing in the Schola Cantorum. He had sung continuously before and during his process of voice change. Evan concluded his interview with this statement summarising the potential experience of boys who are permitted to sing continuously through the voice change:

This conversation made me think about how much of choral music, although it does not seem like a very big thing, how much it shapes your life, like singing all the Saturdays

has given me commitment. It's given me social and analytical skills. I am finding that it's a quite noble idea. When you're starting, you have to stick it out while in choir. But, you reap the benefits once your voice has gone through the change. I'm so glad that my parents put me into this school, started me singing as a boy, and encouraged me to keep singing even when I thought the voice change should make me stop. Singing all the way through was a very good thing for me. I can see that now.

John Cooksey's research work at the London Oratory School is now two decades in the past. If his recommendations had been followed and his research findings implemented, Evan's comments would have been typical of boys at the School—rather than the exception.

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