

Choralities

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How is one to speak of the strange and powerful plural-singular that is the choral voice? Though there is a rich literature within musical history concerning the aesthetics and pedagogy of choral singing, there has been little study of collective voicing, as such and in its own terms yet across the broad range of its manifestations. *Chorality* is the name I propose for such acts of joint vocalisation. Examples include prayer, children's games, formalised learning processes and statements of fealty ('I pledge allegiance to the flag'), along with the chants of protest, demand or celebration found in political and sporting circumstances. Such acts may be divided into voluntary and involuntary forms. It may appear that the collective utterances of crowds and choirs are both in their way agential. Yet it may as persuasively appear that the murmurs of pubs, crowds and cocktail parties are a kind of semi-willed choric quasi-choation. There is scarcely any critical literature on chorality as I have defined it, in this most general. Even Fred Cummins, who has done more than most to investigate the phenomenon, focusses most of his attention on what he calls 'joint speech', and thereby sets aside many of the forms of chorality, either above the threshold of joint speech, in the direction of music, or below it, in the direction of hubbub, murmur and buzz.

After six years thinking about ventriloquism and voices without assignable sources, I had to decide that there is no disembodied voice. That is, there can be no voice that does not imply and require the possibility of somebody and more particularly some body, to utter it. There can be unassigned voices, but no unassigned ones. There are many different kinds of voice-body and more voice-bodies than one in any voice, or in any body (Connor 2000, 35-43). In the choralised voice, this many-in-one becomes a kind of one-from-many.

The sublimated forms of the choric voice lift humans up into an angelic condition, but its less organised forms bring us close to the condition of the animal. The idea of the choric has often been focussed on aggregated animal sounds, especially of insects and birds, where the sound may be much more apparent than the creatures making it. William James saw, or heard, what he saw as a law of fusion, in which *any number of impressions, from any number of sensory sources, falling simultaneously on a mind WHICH HAS NOT YET EXPERIENCED THEM SEPARATELY, will fuse into a single undivided object for that mind*. The law is that all things fuse that *can* fuse, and nothing separates except what must' (James 1890, I.488). This means that the plurality of impressions experienced in the 'great blooming, buzzing confusion' of the infant assailed by different sense impressions (James 1890, I.488) will be experienced as a kind of unitary confusion. Animal choruses may instance the application of that law of fusion. Many animals have a strong impulsion to join their voices in what is known as 'chorusing', examples being the howling of wolves, the hooting of primates (Fedurek et. al. 2013), the grunting of frogs (Jones et. Al. 2014), the swarming of bees, the singing of birds and cicadas, and even the sounds of certain larvae (Kokarek 2009)). Bernie Krause (2012) has seen the origin of human music in the sounds of animal choruses. Collective words for birds sometimes focus on their sound, especially in some of the words introduced by

Dame Juliana Berners in the listing of ‘the companyes of beestes and fowle’ to be found in her *Boke of Saint Albans*, such as a ‘gagyll of gees’, an ‘exalting of larkes’ (‘exaltation’ means elevation, but we may hear in it the note of exulting) , a ‘clatherynge of choughes’, a ‘dule of turtylles’ [turtledoves] and a ‘murmuracyon of stares’ (Berners 1547, sig H4^v), the last most famously and successfully revived by W.H. Auden in his plea to love to ‘make [man’s] thought/Alive like patterns a murmuration of starlings/Rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave’ (Auden 1986, 118). Berners also proposed a ‘dissymulacyon of byrdes’ (Berners 1547, sig H4^v), perhaps hinting at their visual elusiveness, as well as a ‘boste of souldyours’, a ‘laughter of ostlers’ ((Berners 1547, sig H4^v)), a ‘melody of harpers’ (Berners 1547, sig I1^r) and an ‘eloquence of lawyers’ (Berners 1547, sig I1^r).

There is no doubt that chorality can suggest that nourishing experience of the ‘sonorous envelope’ of which Didier Anzieu has written, which, for Anzieu, is modelled on the maternal voice, but, because of the uterine space in which that voice is first heard, is present in those spaces of ‘rumblings, echoes and resonances’ (Anzieu 1989, 171), where sound provides a kind of matrix in which the subject may paradoxically be both suspended and supported, aqueously dissolved and contained. The poetry of Wordsworth and Keats are both strongly attuned to these choric sound-spaces, and Angela Leighton has evoked the cavernous ‘hum’ which murmurs through Tennyson’s poetry, in the ‘sounds, noises, rhythms, the murmurs and boomings which become Tennyson’s special subject matter and music’ (Leighton 2010, 325). In ‘The Crowd of Birds and Children’, W.S. Graham evokes a kind of aerial ocean of sound compounded of a child’s memory of climbing the birdsong-crowded branches of trees, the poem’s own internal assonances giving it choric density it evokes:

Beginning to be very still
 I know the country puffed green through the glens.
 I see the tree’s folly appleing into angels
 Dress up the sun as my brother
 And climb slow branches and religious miracles.
 On the deck of the doved woods
 Upward unhappy and holy breaks voice of the crowd
 That has in my body built shape and its enemy.
 Through each harmonic orchard onewhere bloody
 With all that my choice chooses in Genesis
 The overhead rooks laugh up in a dark borough
 With fury making fear to the daybreaking mavis...

And a sunk sea noise in the roosting forest house.
 Every flying thing the sky gives to a child
 To feed his wild crowd and to share his deed
 (Graham 2005, 48, 49)

Choric voices may be regarded as a form of ventriloquism. It is not that the source of the sound is unknown or even exactly hidden from view, for it is often perfectly plain who is doing the singing or chanting in an instance of chorality. Rather, it is that the choric voice gives rise to the fantasy of a collective voice-body that is not to be identified with any of the individuals who compose it. So, in being neither concealed nor yet ever fully in view, present without being situated, the choric voice may be

regarded as a particular instance of what Michel Chion has called the *acousmètre* in cinema, a voice which is on the scene but not visible – the voice of the Invisible Man, for example (Chion 129-30). This may account for the strange impression that one has when seeing somebody singing or chanting as part of a crowd that they are miming to the sound to which they are in fact contributing. Indeed, this may be part of the power of the choric, that it is at once so powerfully unifying and yet invisible. It seems to be intrinsic to every choir that it be the kind of ‘choir invisible’ evoked by George Eliot, which allows one to ‘Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,/And in diffusion ever more intense’ (Eliot 1989, 50). It is the sonorous actualising of the otherwise abstract or merely attributive idea of a collectivity.

Plato defines the art of *choreia* as the combination of singing plus dancing (Plato 1961, 654B; 92-3). One of the confirmations of the choric voice-body is the choreography that always seem to be pressing in the choral. Fred Cummins observes the subtle and dynamic entanglements of eyes, lips, fingers and brows involved in actions of collective utterance, which imply, either that voice is only ever one component of collective speech situations, or, better perhaps, that what we think of as ‘voice’ might be best thought of as a convocation of different physical actions in interlocking modalities. It is certainly true that many acts of joint utterance involve or provoke a scripting of movement. The football team I find myself having to support, Arsenal, has a particularly vicious chant, ‘Stand Up, if you hate Tottenham’, which requires not just a surging stress to be applied to the word ‘up’, but also requires you, assisted by little lift of the major sixth and the two-beat metrical intermission after the word ‘up’, to prove your devotion to the comminatory cause by actually rising to your feet and occupying as much vertical space as is possible with the noble ascension of your hatred. Many choric locutions display a similarly imperative or enjoining force. Hymns in particular are given to the utterance of what their utterance is meant to be enacting: ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’: ‘I Vow to Thee My Country’; ‘Ave Maria’; ‘Shout the glad tidings, exultingly sing’. Prayer is frequently accompanied by bodily gestures, and so is chanting – as, for example, in the finger-stabbing towards opposing fans with the chant ‘Who ARE yer?’, or following the scoring of a goal and silencing of the opposing supporters, with the singing, to the tune of ‘Bread of Heaven’, of the triumphantly self-attesting ‘You’re not singing any more’. Even where there are no specifically prescribed movements, the patterning of choric utterance seems to aim at entraining the uttering body into a kind of synchronicity, its binding of time exerting a regulating effect on shared physical space, through clapping, foot-tapping, swaying, etc. Solo singers need not move, or may display highly individuated movements; but backing singers nearly always move, as we say, in concert. Just as choric utterance is a giving of a body to the event of speech, so it aims to draw its constituent speakers into identity with this voice-body; in giving a body to utterance, it draws utterance into the body.

Choric utterance is almost always concerned with the establishment of solidarity. This may be what joins prayer and protest, which otherwise may seem, as Fred Cummins has observed ‘odd bedfellows’ (Cummins 2014, 73). If humble imploring seems to be at the opposite extreme from hortative demand, the two have in common the need for a bracing intensification of common purpose, one which can both enlarge the uttering collectivity and solidify it, sealing in all the variations of belief and feeling which might allow the diffusion of common purpose. We may suspect nevertheless that chorality is more closely allied to anger than to petition, precisely because anger is the *ne plus ultra* means of bringing our action and our belief into

consonance, and forcing ourselves to be of one mind. If anger is a concentration of purpose in the interest of a discharge of energy, in fight or flight, we might think of an angry crowd as a special example of what Peter Sloterdijk has called an anger bank, or ‘elevation (*Aufhebung*) of local anger resources and dispersed projects of hatred into an overarching instance’, the task of which ‘as for every authentic bank, consists in serving as a collection point and recycling agency for investments’ (Sloterdijk 2010, 62). A chanting crowd has the capacity not just to act as a ‘storehouse of rage’ (Sloterdijk 2010, 62), but as a thymotic accumulator, in that the crowd’s discharge of energy in utterance seems to be a way of recharging rather than depleting the anger. Chorality provides the channel along which this feedback of anger can be conveyed.

Chorality need not require language, and where it does not, it may seem to be more than usually choreographic, or impregnated with space and gesture. Sports crowds in particular rely as much upon cheers, hoots, whistles and hisses as upon verbal formulae, and it can seem as though the point of the chant is actually to thicken vocal sign into bodily or gestural thing. Often, words are deliberately distorted into choric gesture, where choric implies the compounding of sound and space – for example in the cry of ‘Ooooooo-SPINA!’ recently developed among Arsenal supporters to accompany goal kicks taken by the goalkeeper David Ospina. In this, the slow, climbing glissando of the elongated first syllable builds to the climactic discharge of the ‘spina’, in a sort of phonomemic magic aimed at giving the ball more punch and launch into its soaring parabola.

Not only is chorality most commonly expressed in collective song, the choric is always subject to the sirenic solicitation of song. For where I chant, whether it is in saying the seven times tables or the Nicaean creed, my voice seems to be lyrically tugged, as the word ‘chant’ suggests, towards sung melody. Fred Cummins has hypothesised a continuum that runs from silent speech to monologue, then conversation, then, occupying the median position between speech and song, chant (Cummins 2013, 21). The governing principle of this speech-music continuum is that at each stage there is an increase in redundancy, as unpredictability gives way to greater regularity. The movement from voice to song increases redundancy by smoothing out all the variations in pitch, attack and pace of individual speech. The crowd drawn into the condition of chorus submits to an equivalent increase in redundancy, literally the ‘flowing back’ of contingency on itself to allow intelligible messages to emerge from indeterminate noise. However, we may also note that the kind of musicalised collective vocality we call ‘chant’ is pulled not just toward the increased redundancy of pitch and rhythm characteristic of song, but also back towards the more frayed and irregular prosody of speech. Collective vocality actually strives to preserve this equilibrium. This is perhaps because it needs to keep on dipping back into the reservoir of unbound noise of which it is formed in order to keep itself tensely energised. Voice is the opposite of noise, for voice always emerges from and stands out against noise, while noise always assaults voice. But choric vocality yields a voice that is compounded of, rather than subtracted from noise: it is a background that starts forth from, while never fully departing from, itself.

I don’t do very much in the way of collective praying, but I do sometimes find myself, at weddings, funerals or a formal dinner table where grace is said, called upon to give some kind of polite and audible assent to the act of prayer that is being performed by saying ‘Amen’. I can’t really be said to say this word, which is anyway something other less than a word, bring the sound of an affirmative sealing of vocality rather

than any outright kind of saying, the voice opened in *a* being instantly crimped between the two nasals, *m* and *n*. And even those nasals are more implied than uttered in the sound I make, since the sound I actually make is a kind of gravelly growl, more an ‘errm’ than anything else. In making this sound, I am making the adjustment that must always be made in a choral sound between my volume and the likely volume of the utterance, to which I wish to contribute without standing audibly clear from it. In fact, the indistinct rattle I emit is also an imitation of the blurring that all vocal sound undergoes when it is blent in joint voice. I merge my voice to the rumble of affirming by imitating it in my own. This kind of anticipatory assimilation is also to be heard in the boxing announcer who allows his vowels to be stretched and bent like those of the watching spectators, or the child playing alone who imitates the fuzzy, frayed sound of the crowd’s acclamation. It is there too in the lone football supporter’s efforts to get the booming sea-surge of the terrace into his voice, by hollowing the vowels and damping the consonants. Writers of hymns have sometimes harnessed and turned to account the profane noisiness of the hymn, doubled by the bronchial boom of the organ with all the stops, as we say, pulled out. One of Charles Wesley’s hymns forces its singers to imitate the bacchanal their hymn nevertheless is meant to redeem

But ah! what means this frantic noise!
Do these, good God, to Thee rejoice,
Whose echoing shouts we hear!
A beastly bacchanalian crowd!
Whose oaths profane, and curses loud,
Torment the sober ear?

With foul and riotous excess,
With surfeiting and drunkenness,
They *magnify* Thy name;
With vauntings proud, and impious jest,
(The horrors of *Belshazzar’s* feast,)
They glory in their shame.

The rich to Thy dread courts repair,
And offering up their formal prayer
As incense to the skies,
With sports they close the hallow’d day,
Their promised vows to Satan pay,
An hellish sacrifice! (Wesley 1868, 165-6)

There are many other ways in which the individual voice might seek to incorporate this kind of noisy amplitude. One of these is the practice of *xöömii*, or ‘overtone singing’, also known as ‘biphonic singing’ or ‘throat singing’, in regions of Central Asia and also among the Khosa people of Southern Africa. In this kind of singing or chanting, a low drone is typically produced at the same time as harmonics of that fundamental tone are amplified, giving the impression that two or more tones are being sung at once. One account of the meaning of overtone singing in Mongolia relates it to the reverberant qualities of the landscape, in which mountains and lakes are said to speak to each other (Pegg 1992, 38). The magical powers attributed to this kind of singing seem to have a great deal to do with the fact that in it the voice is both taken up by and takes into itself the variousness of the outside world, in much the

same way as ventriloquial utterance in different parts of the world have been seen as an opening of the voice to external influences, demonic and otherwise. Karlheinz Stockhausen incorporated overtone singing into his *Stimmung* (1968), and explains that the title is meant to encompass a kind of pluralising of the voice. *Stimmung* means tuning, but could be translated with other words,

Stimmung incorporates the meanings of the tuning of a piano, the tuning of the voice, the tuning of a group of people, the tuning of the soul. This is all in the German word. Also, when you say: We're in a good *Stimmung*, you mean a good psychological tuning, being well tuned together. (quoted Cott 1973, 162)

Voice is in fact unexpectedly full of these crowdings, or swellings toward multitude, approximating the grandeur of the 'voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder' heard in Revelation ((Revelation 14.2). As I have suggested, song may itself be seen as pushing the individual voice in the direction of the collective; and in fact any distension or lengthening out of the voice may simultaneously tend to the univocity of the choric: 'Wooww!'; 'JEEsus Christ'; 'Oh NOOoooh!'; 'Oh my GOOOd!' Swearing is perhaps the most potent example of this becoming-general of the voice, since swear words and swearing expressions combine unbound vehemence and binding formula in a way that recapitulates the two principal features of crowd utterance.

Chorality is derived from Greek *choros* (χορός), dance, rather than *chora* (χώρα) space, or region, but there is nevertheless a kind of chorology (the study of spatial distribution and limit) in every chorality. Michel Serres has proposed that the principal purpose of many exercises of the collective voice is to occupy space:

To take a place or to give up a place, that is the whole question. There are those who take places, there are those who give them up. Those who take places take places always and everywhere, and those who give up places always do so. There are places taken, there are no unoccupied places. Space consists of, and is saturated with places taken, arid in them swarm restless, almost motionless, the takers. The restlessness comes from the struggle for place. All space is noisy, clamorous, it is a cloud, a chaos, under the martial and stable law of noise and combat. It may at a moment be order under the law of the strongest. But one must make more noise than the others in order for one's shout of no more noise to be heard and for the others to obey. (Serres 1995, 74)

Serres has also written illuminatingly of the way in which soiling an environment, whether in scent-marking, graffiti, or auditory pollution, may be regarded as a way of appropriating it; power involves the power to make a noise, while making a noise is the assertion and performance of power (Serres 2008, 48). Volume is voluminous, as everybody knows who has been in a pub populated by loud and space-consuming football supporters, or on the top deck of a bus crammed with shrieking schoolgirls. To chant is to spread the individual voice out into a kind of imaginary amplitude which corresponds to the spreading of sound to occupy space. Many forms of ecclesiastical chanting take place in locations which seem designed to smear or spread out the sound, making its location indefinite and compounding sound with its milieu. Here the architecture gives the vocality back to itself, in the process imparting to that vocality a kind of architectural density. Elias Canetti writes of the crowd that '[a]s soon as it exists at all, it wants to consist of *more* people: the urge to grow is the

first and supreme attribute of the crowd. It wants to seize everyone within reach; anything shaped like a human being can join it' (Canetti 2000, 16). We may attribute a similarly agglomerative impulse to the crowd sound, which seeks to assimilate not only the voices of those who compose it, but also the space it occupies. Football supporters develop an ear for spaces near stadia that are particularly hospitable to their chants: Arsenal supporters know for example that the bridge which connects the Emirates stadium to Gillespie Road provides an ideal space for amplifying and condensing their chanting. As the supporters descend the steps, the overlapping cries of 'Red ARMy' bounce around erratically as in some Fingal's Cave. Echoing within walls or vaults or cloisters, chorality seeks both to command and to occupy space, both to be and to absorb it. Chorality is space filled with sound, and also sound maximally impregnated with the sense of space. It is sound expanding to contain what contains it.

Architectural forms are most commonly employed to provide reverberation, of course, and echo has a particularly important role in the sonic solidification of space that serves to enact forms of social solidarity. Echo serves to fill in the slack intervals between articulations (pauses for breath, for example), making of the sound a kind of saturated condensate, with as few enfeebling fissures or remissions as possible. The use of call and response structures which is so common in liturgical, sporting and political chanting serves a similar purpose of filling in any gaps in the utterance, symbolically folding it over on itself. In call and response, the crowd becomes its own audience and interlocutor, thereby cancelling the possibility of any external dialogic point of view. We should see the characteristic deepening and solemn hollowing of the voice brought about by reverberation and related techniques such as double-tracking as another instance of the choralising of the individual voice alluded to earlier.

The choral voice has two opposing dimensions: that of power, and that of sensitivity. The more power I muster in my voice, the less sensitivity and precision I can register in it. The extension of the voice into space depends on a kind of spreading out that is accomplished through pitch. But it also requires a narrowing and disciplining of the voice in time, to prevent the fraying at the edges that will reveal the plural nature of the voice. The choral voice must simultaneously be broadened to a roar and thinned to the merest hiss or tiniest dental tick. These two dimensions may be mapped approximately on to the vowels and the consonants. Because the choric voice is open and expansive, it tends to overflow the containment and punctuation provided by the consonants. One of the biggest challenge for any choir-leader is to give his choir the definition that the consonants supply, allowing the choral voice to combine supra-individual force with individual form. The most sublime forms of choral music – the Kyrie of Mozart's *Requiem*, for example – will often seek the simultaneous intensification of these two dimensions, of the massive and the precisely articulated.

Every exercise of the voice is a work of fantasy, even and especially where it is simple and straightforward reality. Even where I simply employ my voice, to ask for a ticket or tell somebody the time, I am confirming the capacity of my voice to make the world in sound. The voice is the physical confirmation of my fantasy – that is no less a fantasy for being the plain truth – that I can bring about effects in the world simply by using my voice. The choral voice is an amplification of this fantasy into the fantasy of amplification itself. 'The voice is the body's greatest power of emanation', Guy Rosolato writes (Rosolato 1974, 76; my translation). But chorality is that emanation

raised to the second power; if my voice is that which goes beyond me, then the choral voice is the voice that goes beyond itself. It is the voice as pure amplitude, having the power both to adhere to other voices and to swell excitably like a kind of inflammation. It is not just the body's power of emanation, it is emanation's power to grow into a kind of hyper-body.

Fred Cummins focusses his work on what he calls the 'deep puzzle' (Cummins 2013, 29) of how it is that human beings speaking in groups are able to synchronise their speech so precisely. He argues that joint speech 'may be a rich and productive domain for scientists to investigate who wish to go beyond or around the limitations of Cartesian and purely individualistic approaches to mind' (Cummins 2013, 24) and therefore maintains that that it requires an understanding of 'collective intentionality' (Cummins 2014, 73) rather than the Cartesian subject that is linked to the investigation of inner speech. But this collective intentionality must be regarded as a projected rather than a substantial presence. We are not justified in seeing chorality as any kind of 'expression' of collective intentionality', because that intentionality is a kind of projection or fantasy. The collectivity cannot be thought of as held in readiness, waiting for the opportunity to put its feelings into utterance, since it must actually be regarded as produced by the utterance itself. It is a quasi-subject, or subject-in-the-making, a mixture of what I have called distributive and attributive collectivity (Connor 2013), rather than anything that could meaningfully be regarded as any kind of collective subject capable of having collective feelings or giving expression to them. Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the voice is so closely associated with the individual subject, the choral voice is one of the most potent carriers of the fantasy of the collective subject. I think there are compelling reasons to doubt the existence of such collective subjects which might be able to feel, deliberate and communicate on their own account. There is in fact no *vox populi* that is capable of sounding upon the ear, however irresistibly it may seem to claim the condition of voice and clamour for hearing in the urgent yet hallucinatory voice-body of chorality. Chorality is the means whereby we allow ourselves the collective hallucination of collectivity. The point of trying to understand the power we allow ourselves to exercise over ourselves in the fantasies of chorality is to be able to refuse and as necessary rescind its demands.

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