

Partnership music

by Peder Karlsson

I feel very privileged to be part of vocal music of today.

Many things have changed since The Real Group was formed thirty years ago. Singers and leaders have new ideas and new perspectives. It is indeed a very interesting process to follow.

Vocal music leaders and teachers that I meet at conventions, festivals, workshops and so forth, whose work I respect and admire, have a focus on social interactions as well as on the musical factors. This is different from how it was when I studied music in the 1980s, when choir members rarely discussed the social dynamics of groups with their conductor. Maybe the leaders of that time discussed such topics between each other, I don't know.

In this chapter, I will describe an approach to development of collective improvisation of dynamics and flexibility of timbre expressions - in a choir or vocal ensemble - and my experiences of what impact such concrete work in the rehearsal room can have on the social dynamics of the group.

The Real Group - rehearsals and performance styles

For any choir or vocal ensemble, relying on a leader who gives rhythmic impulses that the singers shall follow can often be problematical. Because the music styles require *individual* expression. At the same time, singers need to blend with each other. How combine both of these worlds; individual *and* collective expression? That is a question that I have explored together with the other Real Group members for more than twenty-five years.

The Real Group put down an extensive amount of work into figuring out what we could do to improve the music that came out. What is it that affects our intonation? How many different vowel timbres are possible in this phrase? How come the tempo slows down in bars 22-27 every time we sing this song? And so forth.

We sang a lot and we learned a lot, through a process where any group

member could assume leadership in the rehearsals. Our rehearsal methods were subject to constant development, with the effect that something that we said in a workshop or seminar in 1991 might grow into a quite different perspective presented in a similar session in 1997, for example. We would even argue with each other in front of an auditorium, to give an example of diversity within a group - and creative opportunities that follow from such a tolerant approach.

Over time, the group members developed an ability to relate in a similar manner to musical details as well as to musical overview; form. And the concerts gave us an opportunity to assimilate what we had learned in the rehearsals, until the group phrasing and expressions were communicated between us largely on an intuitive plane. Of course we discussed dynamics and musical details in the rehearsals. But in the concerts we would often interpret a song differently from what had been said in a previous discussion.

Performing with The Real Group meant not only to learn a lot of repertoire that somebody gave to you. It also meant developing our repertoire together; write songs and arrangements. Rehearse the new material with the group. Improve the arrangements based on feedback from the other group members. Plus have an idea about how the music would be presented on stage; positions, movements, and talks between the songs.

With such a large amount of preparatory activities, it soon became impossible to decide on most musical details beforehand. So our performances were improvised to a large extent - not the notes, but a lot of things that provide context to notes; dynamics, phrasing, timbre changes, physical expressions, talks between songs, etcetera.

It often happened in a Real Group concert that I could feel in a certain moment that a phrase was taking an unusual turn, and that all five of us were part of creating a new musical shape. It wasn't until later that I realized that I was part of a rather advanced form of *collective improvisation*. I only knew that I loved it when it happened. You can't decide for something like that to occur. In some concerts I could feel the presence of a very intense group awareness, and in other concerts the feeling was different.

Perpetuum Jazzile - leadership styles

In 2009, I decided to put an end to my singing with The Real Group. In October 2010 I did my last concert with the group.

A couple of months later I was contacted by Perpetuum Jazzile (“PJ”), a choir from Slovenia singing pop music. They were enjoying considerable success with their YouTube version of a song called “Africa”, featuring an imaginative voices-and-body-simulation of rain and thunderstorm.

In February 2011 I met PJ for the first time in a rehearsal session. They sang a couple of songs and I tried out various things with all the singers. I used an 8-bar excerpt from a composition of mine called “Anything Can Happen” as a basis for a series of practises that I call “Floor-Roof improvisations”. I wanted to get a picture of their potential for group improvisation of phrasing, dynamics and timbral changes.

It was a fantastic session. Within that first two-hour rehearsal we reached a point where the singers made perfectly coherent dynamics changes and organic phrasing, without me conducting, even when the lights in the room were turned off. Phenomenal. So I accepted their offer to be the musical director of Perpetuum Jazzile.

Since Perpetuum Jazzile’s audience had grown from national to international, they needed a musical leader with experience of vocal ensemble music on an international professional level. I could see that we had plenty of work to do to keep up with the demands on the group. One of my main concerns was my own lack of experience of choir leadership. My solution was to use whatever ability I might have had, and then improvise. Or ask for help from the group. PJ’s musical co-director at the time was a tremendous help to me. She led the majority of rehearsals and concerts.

While the musical communication in the rehearsal room could be fantastic, I was often disappointed in concerts with Perpetuum Jazzile when they showed a lack of musical flexibility. To me, it seemed to be a matter of security to the singers to have a *fixe* interpretation to relate to in every song.

As I understood it, a part of this need of security was due to cultural habits, such as Slovenian authoritarian group structures, and part of it had to do with monitoring difficulties due to their complex microphones setup. A lot of time was spent in the rehearsals to simply learn the notes, often in a call-and-response fashion. More than half of the PJ singers didn't read musical scores. With PJ's methods of early 2011, it would typically take them a couple of months to learn one arrangement. And towards the end of such a notes-learning process, the phrasing and interpretation of the song would have become etched in stone, so to speak.

I tried many different things to inspire the singers into a more *flexible* approach to phrasing and blending their voice timbres with each other on stage.

For the new arrangements written by me, I provided each section with a video, in which I sang excerpts of their part to give them a picture of the basic shape of the phrases. My thinking was that they could learn the notes and the phrasing at home, so that rehearsal time could be spent on dynamics, phrasing and feeling.

On stage with the group, I would sometimes count off a song, conduct a few bars, and then leave the stage, without any prior information to the group. Then they had to face the audience themselves, without a conductor, and simply deal with the situation as good as possible. This worked out great, over time we reduced the role of the conductor.

I worked quite methodically with PJ on improvement of rhythm, intonation, blending and phrasing as separate areas, and I also spent a lot of time discussing rehearsal methods with the musical co-director, who had a natural talent for leadership, was a fast learner and often came up with solutions when no solutions were provided by the methods I taught her.

Hierarchic or holarchic leadership?

I think Perpetuum Jazzile made very rapid progress. Still, I felt that something was lacking in my teaching style. I didn't know how to clearly

communicate my visions for collective creative processes.

At this point in my life, I had assimilated not only several decades of experiences from my musical career, but also input from psychologists and philosophers - Alice Miller, Julia Cameron, Harville Hendrix, Ken Wilber and others - people who not only have made important contributions to the vast array of theories about the human psyche, soul and spirit, but who also base their writings on *real-life experiences*.

My thinking had undergone significant changes compared to the worldviews that had been communicated to me by my parents, schoolmates, teachers and by my circles of friends. And while working with PJ, my hunger for input led me to explore the work of Riane Eisler, Charles Eisenstein and David Korten, for example.

To understand the way that I want to work with groups, and with PJ, the first thing one needs to understand is the distinction between dominator hierarchies and holarchies - or growth hierarchies.

Involvement and co-leadership

I wanted different group members to be in charge of various projects, without me monitoring each stage of the processes. In the social system within PJ, it was taken for granted that I should have an overview and approve each step in every artistic sub-process within the group activities. This is the default authoritarian system, especially in a post-communist country like Slovenia. But I wanted various types of initiatives to be rotated between singers. All singers are not interested in taking part of these things, and all of them are not qualified to do it, but several of them are.

One of the things I require of myself in groups in which I am assigned a leadership function is that I shall interpret the needs and preferences of the collective, and make appropriate decisions according to that interpretation, also when the decision requires that I put my own personal taste aside.

A reason for me to involve as many PJ members as possible was that my

personal music preferences often were at odds with what I thought was the right thing for PJ. So I would often vote for a repertoire suggestion suggested by someone other than myself. It also happened quite often that I made a repertoire selection decision, for example, without asking anybody else - if my interpretation of the group's needs was that I was right and everybody else was wrong. This was a typical scenario when I wanted to push the artistic boundaries a bit by presenting a new type of song or an arrangement format that the singers were not used to. Anything new can seem a bit scary at first, so it was an expected reaction from the choir members. We talked about these things quite a lot, and the singers allowed me to try out new things with them, even if they may have been sceptical to specific songs.

I'm not sure what such a social system would be called but somehow it worked.

I insisted that we would have a repertoire selection team, and I took a lot of effort to give every singer in the group a chance to provide input in the repertoire processes.

A crucial learning moment for me was when one of the members of PJ's repertoire committee said during a discussion "I don't like this song, "Footloose", but nevertheless I believe that it would be a perfect vehicle for PJ". In saying so, she made a distinction between her personal preference on one hand, and her preference on behalf of the group on the other hand. I recommend any choir director to search for choir members with a capacity to make distinctions between personal and collective taste. That is an ability that I typically find among a very small minority of group members. And when you find such a person - discuss with her which concrete responsibility she would like to assume within a specific area that inspires her.

In my experience, many people confuse what they want to do with what they think the group should do. Such people can often provide disastrous results when they are given artistic responsibilities, no matter how musically competent.

In The Real Group, not only did we rotate responsibilities, we also referred to a collective entity called “the sixth member” or “The Real Group”. The sixth member could not speak, of course, but would sometimes seem to want to do something that none of the members were very keen on doing. For us it was a great help to refer to a collective willpower within the group, with an agenda separate from individual members’ agendas.

In Ken Wilber’s writing, you can find extensive analyses of the mechanisms in holarchies. To give you a quick overview: every holon is a part and a whole at the same time. On a physical level, a person consists of organs, that consist of cells, and so forth down to atoms and quarks. And choirs consist of persons. Several choirs are part of a community, which is part of a society... and so forth all the way up to the whole cosmos.

In a holarchy, the group is an entity in itself that represents a higher level than the individual level. And it is a leader’s responsibility to interpret the needs and wishes of the higher level, as I see it. This includes to be aware of needs and wishes of the individual members.

As soon as a group member assumes a responsibility or takes an initiative for a sub-process in the group, then that member is a leader, with all the responsibilities that follow.

For me, it was indeed a challenge to raise the awareness in PJ about these realities.

Organic choirs

When you realize that a choir has a holarchic organization, and begin to modify your rehearsal methods according to a paradigm change (from patriarchal dominator hierarchy to holarchy), then you have what I call an “organic choir”. And that’s the kind of group that I prefer working with. Within such a group, diversity of talents would be encouraged. Initiative can be rotated.

“Organic choir” music intends to put an emphasis on the collective space created between people who interact musically, and the musical relations between them, rather than on a "master" imposing his willpower on the group through one-sided musical interpretation, often at the expense of collective creativity.

Partnership music

Another way to put it could be to call it “partnership music”. A shift to such music-making in choirs would reflect a step forward in human development, I think, that has already begun to be taken in many social disciplines other than vocal music, as humans make progress from domination by the few over the many towards the creation of whole new social paradigms based on tolerance, acceptance, sharing, love and co-operation.

Blending and timbre changes exercises with PJ

We had a rehearsal weekend with PJ in the beginning of 2013, when I had divided the choir into six sub-groups, consisting of six, seven or eight singers. One of the singers in each group had been assigned a leadership function. Prior to the sessions, I had a discussion with these leaders, based on a paper with clear instructions for the procedures of the exercises.

I had to make some compromises in order to write that paper. When I lead a session like this myself, then I do it a bit differently each time, depending of the characteristics of the vocal ensemble. The exercises are based on rehearsal methods that we developed over many years in The Real Group, so I had acquired this knowledge in a very organic fashion, through lots of trial-and-error.

But this time, it was important that each sub-group was given identical instructions, otherwise the outcome of these sessions had been very difficult to evaluate.

To make a long story a bit shorter, the results were fantastic. In the evaluations made afterwards, singers said that this weekend marked a revolution in how the singers saw vocal music, and how they saw each other. Shy members and very extrovert people had an equal opportunity to be the “guide singer”. And these sessions gave the singers a chance to get to know the shy people too. There were many tears, very intense emotions during these sessions, this is a very beautiful memory for me.

“Floor-Roof improvisations” - intro

In vocal groups and choirs, all singers need to feel that they are important for the development of the group’s music. This is necessary for an organic process where each singer assumes individual responsibility.

“Listen to each other!” is a phrase I’ve often heard conductors say to their choir. However, what to listen for or whom to listen to is rarely specified.

The “Floor-Roof” improvisations put the finger on precisely that. Group members take turns being a guide singer to listen for, and each improvisation specifies a parameter to use as the current target for improvisation; dynamics, timbre, vowel colours, amount of vibrato, manner of articulation, amount of breathiness, etcetera.

Singers who do these improvisations will learn not only to make distinctions between various parameters of musical expression, they will also learn many things about each other - by non-verbal communication.

When all members of the group has been the guide singer, then leadership has been rotated between all singers. This is typically a very refreshing experience, perhaps especially for some of the choir singers who may feel a little shy.

They see themselves, each other, and the choir in a new light.

I have done these improvisations with hundreds of different groups in all sizes up to eighty singers, maybe. You can use any standard choir arrangement that has a homophonic verse or chorus; SSA, SATB or whatever.

In some of these occasions, the choir conductor has also been present. After doing the improvisations, a typical response from the conductor is “why don’t they listen so well to each other when I conduct?”

Then I don’t say “because you constantly tell them a story that goes like this: *your hands are the center of the world in this group, and the singers are of lower importance*” – even if I would perceive that to be the truth. Instead I might say:

“why don’t you try and conduct this piece *now*”.

At this point, several singers have been the leader, if only for a few moments.

So the conductor is (temporarily) seen as “one of us”.

And then the singers typically follow the conductor’s intentions. Win-win situation. Happy happy.

When I do a workshop where the participants come from different groups and don’t know an arrangement that all of them can sing, then I ask them to suggest a song, any song that all of them can sing a couple of bars of. And then we sing in unison or in octaves. That’s also an arrangement.

And it works.

Perhaps the coolest thing about using a standard arrangement or melody as a basis for improvisation is that it gives you an opportunity to say a word less problematical than “improvisation” to describe what you do.

I usually say:

Let’s do something called “Floor-Roof exercises!”.

After doing the improvisations, when singers feel comfortable about themselves and about each other, then the coast is clear, usually, and you can say the dangerous phrase: - We improvise!

In the case of a large choir, you can divide the group into “sub-choirs” of 5-8 people and do these improvisations.

Over time, the sub-choirs will typically develop a sense of collective emotional security.

How you take the experience made in the smaller groups and transfer to the whole choir I cannot say. That would depend on the cultural patterns of your choir.

“Floor-Roof improvisations” - step-by-step description

Goal: for each person to be able to imitate any other singer’s timbre, while singing simultaneously.

A typical scenario is to pick a homophonic section of an arrangement; 8-16 bars, and then sing the same piece in several different ways.

Yes the notes are written, but the sounds and phrase shapes are improvised.

Purposes:

- get to know the other group members’ voices
 - to leave the comfort zone, in a structured way
 - introduce the singers to the concept of a guide singer
- the guide singer will get a chance to experience how it feels when the other singers pay attention and follow. This is very good for self-esteem. Rotated leadership!

Most important things

- Copy and clone whatever sound that comes out of the guide singers
- Be non-judgmental about individual voices
- The guide singer is always perfect, by definition
- Make sure that all singers in the group are guide singers at some point during the course of the improvisation session.
- It's often a good idea to rotate the order of improvisations.

First steps

- Sing through the homophonic example once or twice.
- Check that notes and note releases are correct and simultaneous, to avoid confusion later.

Shadowing

This is a term sometimes used to describe when one singer, or a section of singers, improvise guide phrase curves and the other singers "copy and paste" the phrases by imitation.

This is a popular method to give a specific singer responsibility for the

musical expression, and to increase awareness of several musical parameters, such as tempo, dynamics, timbre, vowel colors, inflections, vibrato, breathiness and amount of articulation.

Experience has shown that it helps the singers to first distinguish basic parameters separately. How to do this is described in the next pages; step by step.

After doing the Floor-Roof improvisations, the singers are usually ready to move on to "collectively improvised phrasing", without a conductor.

Sometimes "shadowing" is referred to as a method to provide a chorus effect in concerts.

If one person is the guide singer, and two other singers "shadow" the guide singer, for example, while singing slightly more quiet, then the guide singer will come across as a soloist dubbed by two other voices.

Cloning

But what I refer to here is something else - one guide singer's voice being "cloned" by other singers; imitation in real time while singing oneself, with the same dynamics. Not easy, perhaps, if you feel that you must hear the guide singer clearly. To look at each other helps a lot.

In my experience, however, cloning works great – even if you stand a bit apart and turn off the lights in the room. I guess because of this thing called intuition.

Intuition has been a very important component in the performance style of The Real Group for decades. Or maybe you prefer to call it "extra-sensory perception".

I know it works. I may not be able to define or prove how, in scientific terms. But me or other Real Group or Perpetuum Jazzile singers can show you how.

1. QUIET / LOUD

- a. Sing as quiet as possible
- b. Sing even more quiet
- c. Sing so quiet that you cannot even produce a note sometimes.
- d. Add a little bit of support so you get into the "room".
- e. Sing as loud as possible. FOCUS: how does this feel physically? We don't

want destroyed voices.

f. Stretch and sing even louder.

Focus (again): how does this feel physically?

g. Assign one guide singer who makes continuous changes between quiet and loud.

- Explain that the exercise is mainly for the group – to follow the guide singer
- Anything the guide singer does is "right"
- Let the guide singer sing twice.

h. ask the guide singer how it felt.

i. validate the guide singer's feelings (mirror)

2. BRIGHT / DARK

Sing as bright and nasal as possible

b. Sing even brighter and more nasal (repeat this until it sounds Really Ugly)

c. Sing as dark as possible

d. Sing even darker (if singers add an "over-classical" vibrato, ask them to sing with a normal but dark voice)

e. Assign a guide singer who makes continuous changes between bright and dark.

f. ask the guide singer how it felt.

g. validate the guide singer's feelings (mirror)

h. Assign another guide singer

Purposes:

- have Fun
- pay attention to timbre differences
- to distinguish between timbre differences

When everyone sings bright, they usually sing with their own idea of what bright is. But when they imitate a guide singer, they will naturally adapt to this person's type of "bright" and "dark".

3. INFLECTIONS

- a. Maximum vibrato on every note / no vibrato
- b. Scoop every note / sing straight on every pitch (same procedure as with 3 a-d)
- c. Ask a guide singer to add vibrato or scoop by intuition, and all others to follow
- d. Same as c, except that you ask the bass singer to sing with straight pitch on all notes.

4. BREATHY / NON-BREATHY

(same general procedure as with inflections)

5. MINIMUM / MAXIMUM ARTICULATION

(in this exercise: small / big mouth)

- a. Sing with minimum articulation: open your mouth by 1 millimeter.
- b. Sing with maximum articulation: open your mouths as much as possible.
- c. assign a guide singer who makes continuous changes between minimum and maximum articulation, but without doing crescendo / diminuendo.

6. CLONE EACH OTHER'S NATURAL SOUND

After doing the Floor-Roof improvisations above, the singers are usually ready to open up to imitating the natural voice sounds provided by each other.

"Clone each other's sound" is when the guide singers do nothing in particular... except sing with their natural voice, while providing a phrase that comes natural to the moment. Again - improvised phrasing.

This may sound simple, but in fact, this type of focus touches something essential in music, I think - to learn from each other by simply "being oneself". And when the whole choir follows natural phrases of the guide singer – then magic can happen.

From an outside listener's point of view, hearing a choir sing like this can give a unique musical experience.

For the focus singers, a huge boost to self-esteem may happen when they feel the attention of the other group members – to hear ones phrases being "cloned" by other singers.

For me, this improvisation is very close to the real thing. And when it begins to get really interesting.

Usually a few Floor-Roof improvisations need to be done first, in the same session, before the attention of the singers are fine-tuned to make "cloning" described here possible.

a. Assign a focus person who sings with his/her natural voice, and does whatever phrasing or sound he/she feels like doing.

(As a session leader, I recommend you to pay attention to whether the focus singer needs to be provided with a form for the improvisation in order to feel emotionally secure. If you find that to be the case, you could ask her/him to change between loud/quiet, bright/dark, with inflection/no inflection, etcetera. Then chances are high that the focus singer's voice timbre will change gradually – in which case the group is provided with musically interesting source material.)

b. Ask the focus person how this feels

c. validate

d. Assign a new focus person, until everyone's voice has been heard.

When I lead this type of session, I usually recommend singers to pay attention to the specific vowel colors of the focus singer.

To me, that is a parameter slightly distinct from voice timbre.

Voice timbre is the same thing as overtone spectrum, basically.

Voice color, on the other hand, is the individual pronunciation of vowels.

Different people typically have slightly different articulation and pronunciation of vowels. An "aa" can be slightly more dark in one singer's voice, compared to another, for example.

When the whole choir gets the vowel colors synchronized, then you have a chance to achieve a fantastic blend.

7. NO CONDUCTOR, NO GUIDE SINGER

A musical phrase can have an infinite amount of shapes.

As one phrase follows another, the shape of the phrase curve extends over the gap between the phrases.

Imagine yourself drawing a curve on a paper; the curve representing the shape of the musical phrase. When several singers overlay several "curves" on top of each other, the resulting summation of the sounds will make musical sense, even if the individual curves are not identical.

The goal with this improvisation is to have nobody or everybody in the group being the focus person/ leader, depending on how you see it.

Before your group tries out this improvisation, I recommend that you do the "Floor-Roof" improvisations.

In my experience, the group needs to be tuned in to improvising changes in the phrasing by following one focus person, before you move on to having no specific guide singer at all.

To me, that is the real thing!

Again, you sing a homophonic passage from a song in the group's repertoire that everyone knows very well.

But how can you phrase, without any specific leader?

As soon as you hear that something happens with the phrase, or with the articulation, timbre, vibrato, etcetera, follow what you hear and emphasize it. "Skate to where the puck is going", not to where the puck is at the current moment.

You need to exaggerate the phrasing quite a lot at first, until you get a hang of it. That way, the whole group will phrase as if they were one organism.

When you incorporate this phrasing style into your concerts, each

performance will be slightly different from the other. And the phrases will feel natural.

/Peder Karlsson, Aug 19, 2014

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