

Treble Line

Newsletter 2

President: Dr Alan Thurlow

2014 Meeting at Charterhouse, 15 February

1. Retaining ex-trebles in the 'back row'

This round table discussion ject was on a subject identified in the 2012 Meeting as being useful, as such singers are important to the future supply of men. The 2011 survey of Treble Line choirs had showed that most choirs with a boys-only top line had some ex-trebles still at school singing in the 'back row'; of the 29 choirs that gave an answer, 23 had some. The absolute numbers were likely to be 2-3 ex-trebles among choirs with under 16 trebles and 4-5 in choirs with more trebles. Among the largest choirs (with over 20 trebles), one had 9 and another 12 . However, choirs varied in their ability to retain them, and this commonly changed over time.

Among the choir directors present all but one currently had some ex-trebles in their 'back rows'. Discussion centred on what was 'best practice' and what worked in choirs that were retaining their ex-trebles.

(a) **Try to retain everyone?** No choir director had the policy of discarding trebles when their voices changed. Good practice seemed to be to discuss with individuals what they wanted to do and to assess their vocal possibilities and sight-reading ability. Whatever the outcome, a written account of their time in the choir should be provided, which would act both as an official 'thank you' and as a record of their achievements as a chorister that could be useful later as a reference for them.

(b) **A formal training scheme?** No example of a formal scheme was cited, though continuation to Bishop's Award was possible after the voice change. Giving an ex-treble a mentor in the back row was used in some choirs.

(c) **Sing alto first?** An assessment would show whether alto or baritone was the best move. Views differed on whether young voices should try tenor, though there was agreement that forcing the voice should be avoided. It was important to give young singers individual attention and regular time of the choir director to see how things were progressing.

(d) **Special attendance standards?** Universally the view was that the same standards of reliability should continue, such as informing in advance of absences.

Treble Line is an organisation set up for UK parish churches that maintain choirs with top-lines consisting only of boys. While Treble Line recognises that girls-only, ladies or mixed top lines have an important role to play in parish worship, it believes that the all-boy treble section can bring rather special benefits to its members, the churches of which they are part, and wider society. Treble Line is a network created by choir directors to foster choirs of this type. The name was adopted at a meeting of choir directors and other interested individuals held at The Charterhouse, London on 5 February 2011 that followed a preliminary meeting held in Reading in 2010.

The aims of Treble Line are to:

- promote and encourage the singing boy in church and liturgical choirs
- support and encourage the all-male choir
- encourage clergy and organists in the running and establishment of such choirs

Treble Line acknowledges that the RSCM provides a valuable service in providing support for all types of choir. Nevertheless, it may be helpful for choirs with boys-only top lines to exchange experiences, such as what works in recruiting and retaining trebles, how they are treated when the voice changes etc.. Treble Line is a means by which good practice can be spread and, hopefully new choirs established.

Officers

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(e) Separate from trebles? For the sake of the new leaders, ex-trebles should be treated as men rather than boys. Sometimes special activities for them (such as a youth chamber choir) help them to feel 'special'. Some responded well to being given responsibility for tasks such as helping with administration.

(f) Continue to pay them? Most choirs do, but this depends on the pay regime applied to the trebles—some are unpaid.

The most important message to convey was that trebles were **NOT BEING DISCARDED** when their voice changed.

2 Managing relationships with the clergy

Alan Thurlow (our President) introduced a discussion that covered the following:

Change is part of life: Organists and choir directors operate in a dynamic environment where conditions are always changing (social, cultural, educational, liturgical, legal etc.). Decisions have to be made on what to defend as essential and when to adapt to new conditions.

Be open to new things. Change often opens up new possibilities and opportunities that can bring surprising and good results.

Do you have a contract as Director of Music? A particularly testing time may be when a new incumbent arrives. A written contract may be useful in clarifying the division of responsibilities.

Do you get on well with your incumbent? Good communications seem to hold the key to a successful relationship. Regular meeting, perhaps through a Worship Committee, should take place to exchange information and resolve issues before they become sources of dissatisfaction.

How good are you at managing relationships WITHIN the choir? Careful management of relationships within the choir will probably also lead to satisfactory relationships with clergy. Where clergy are unable to provide pastoral care to choir families, it seems that the choir director and the other members are increasingly being called on to perform this ministry. The choir can, and should, perform a role of 'bringing people in'. Often choirs have much to give to their local community, but sometimes undersell themselves.

FULLER MEETING NOTES ARE ON THE WEBSITE

Website

Please visit our website (<http://trebleline.org.uk>), explore its tabs, and give us your comments. The website contains, among other things, an outline of the organization's aims, a list of choirs with boy-only top lines, a link to the 2011 survey's report that give a blue-print for how successful choirs operate, and a place where contribution can be added on key issues.

Why Come to our next meeting on 14 February, 2015, at The Charterhouse, Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6AN, starting at 2pm?

A cordial welcome awaits you.

Treble Line is predominantly a 'virtual' organisation, for which electronic communication is the basis of networking. Nevertheless, it is useful occasionally to meet face-to-face, not least because this makes subsequent e-mails so much more effective.

The Directors of Treble Line choirs are, almost without exception, very busy people with many competing demands on their time. But they are also uniquely experienced in making choirs with boys-only top lines work in a sustainable way. Sharing best-practice drawn from this experience is an important way by which choirs with all-boy top lines can be supported and fostered.

The 2015 meeting on February 14 will have two presentations, but a key element will be the contributions from 'the floor'. The focus will be announced later in 2014, but topics provisionally identified include choir workload (frequency of services and rehearsals), the training system for trebles, and repertory. These build on the issues of recruitment and the characteristics of successful choirs (covered at the 2012 meeting) and retention of ex-trebles and management of the relationship with clergy (covered at the 2014 meeting). Further suggestions would be welcome.