

AN APPROACH TO CHORAL PRACTICES IN FRANCE

1999-2004

(Summary)

An initial national survey

"An Approach to Choral Practices in France" is a collation of surveys carried out in about fifteen regions by the "Missions Voix en Région". To reach this result, these structures, which have in-depth knowledge of their local territories, worked together to collect and pool information, in liaison with the Ministry of Culture and Communication (Music, Dance, Theatre and Performance Department¹ and the French Institute of Choral Art).

For the first time, a collective approach and a homogeneous viewpoint give an overall picture of choral practices in France, at national level.

Scope

The data used in this study come from a national compilation of the data collected between 1999 and 2004 in a joint questionnaire implemented by the Missions Voix en Région (MVR) in 15 of France's 22 metropolitan regions.²

By agreement, strictly liturgical choirs (choirs set up specifically to sing during church services), which are often poorly identified, and choirs with an educational purpose, in specialised music schools or the general school system, fall outside the scope of the study.

Of the 5,451 choirs which were sent the questionnaire, a total of 2,541 choirs and 2,112 conductors form the corpus of this study (a response rate of 47%).

By extrapolation:

On the basis the results of this survey, the population in France for the kind of choral practices studied here can be estimated at **10,000 choirs**, i.e., at national level, **one choir for nearly 6,000 people**.

Within the scope of this survey, it can therefore be considered that there are about **400,000 choral singers** in France and that altogether the choirs give **between 30,000 and 40,000 concerts of choral music** a year.

I-THE CHOIRS

A – General profile

Choral singing in France is found in all regions, in both urban and rural areas, and involves all age groups in varying proportions (the 15-40 age group is underrepresented).

Three quarters of the choirs in this study are adult choirs. Their distribution matches the population distribution: 77% of choirs are in urban areas and 23% in rural areas.

¹ The surveys were collated and analysed by Laurent Babé at the bureau for the observation of policies on live performance in the Music, Dance, Theatre and Performance Department of the Ministry of Culture.

² Note that for Ile-de-France, the survey covers only Paris and Val-de-Marne, and for the Rhône-Alpes region, does not include the Rhône (département).

Children's choirs are heavily concentrated in urban areas (over 80%). Conversely, choirs mixing children and adults are proportionately more often found in rural areas (a third of rural choirs, compared with 23% of the total).

Although, on average, choirs have 40 members, three quarters of the choirs have fewer than 50 singers and 40% have from 20 to 40 members.

Choral singing developed strongly in the 1980s, particularly among young people, students and senior citizens.

The choirs active at the time of the survey are relatively recent: nearly half (48%) were formed after 1990 and more than three quarters (78%) after 1980.

There has been an upsurge in choir formation since the 1980s. Indeed nearly 30% of the choirs which responded to the survey (and are therefore still in activity) were formed between 1980 and 1989, marking a sudden increase compared with the previous decades. This dynamism in the formation of new choirs has continued, since nearly half the choirs studied were formed after 1990 and 30% after 1995.

However, there are regions with long-standing choral traditions (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and to a lesser extent, Bourgogne, Ile-de-France and Midi-Pyrénées) and others in which this development is more recent (Poitou-Charentes, for example).

The highest proportion of recent choirs is found among students: 59% of student choirs were formed after 1990, compared with 44% for all choirs. The proportion is also high for children's choirs (53%). The peak in choir creation in the decade of the 1980s is particularly apparent among choirs for young people and senior citizens.

Choirs are traditionally run by associations.

However, since the 1980s, many choirs have been set up by schools or leisure centres.

Federations, which were quite important in the past, have a declining membership.

▪ **Legal status/link with other structures**

Nearly three quarters of the choirs say they have independent legal status (non-profit making associations formed under the 1901 Act, the equivalent of non-governmental organisations at international level). This rate is lower for recent choirs (85% for choirs formed before 1960 and 1980, 50% for those formed after 2000). That may be a sign of the development of choral singing through the school system, specialised music schools and leisure centres.

When a choir does not have an independent legal status, it is usually attached to a music school (more than a third of these choirs and 17% of all choirs).

▪ **Affiliation**

A quarter of the choirs say they are affiliated to a federation. The more recent a choir is the less it tends to be affiliated: 40% of choirs formed before 1980 are affiliated, and only 20% of the choirs created after that date.

B – Cultural activities and operation

Important changes in the way choirs operate and the artistic choices they make have led to more diversity in choral practices.

The styles of repertoire are also diversifying and choirs are more inclined to specialise in one or two repertoires.

More than half of the choirs say they sing a varied repertoire, without any particular preference. A fifth said they have a preference for one or several repertoires.

The commonest form of repertoire is songs (including harmonised songs). Nearly half of the choirs (47%) state that they usually or often sing this type of repertoire.

Classical, traditional and folk music is frequently sung by a quarter of the choirs. Baroque, romantic and Renaissance music is sung by one choir in five. All the other genres are sung by preference or often by fewer than 15% of the choirs.

It is above all the small choirs which prefer a particular repertoire.

The choral conductor plays a dominant role in the choice of repertoire, deciding alone in half the cases (less often if the main repertoire is songs). In 42% of the cases, the conductor decides after consulting the singers. In 6% of choirs, the choral singers are the decision-makers in this field.

Choirs mostly sing in French, but repertoires in foreign languages are often used.

The repertoire in French is the most widespread, particularly because of the predominance of songs. This practice is nonetheless far from being exclusive. Indeed, although 82% of choirs say they sing only or often in French, only 12% sing exclusively in French. A third of the choirs sing only or often in Latin, 18% in English, 13% in German and 10% in Italian.

▪ New works and commissions

Commissions and new works are developing.

A quarter of the choirs say they have created or participated with others in the creation of new works. This proportion increases for those who are attached to music schools, universities, orchestras and operas, youth clubs (MJC - Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture) or junior high schools.

10% of the choirs say they have commissioned work from composers (20% in Ile-de-France or in Poitou-Charentes).

▪ Concerts

The choirs give an average of six concerts a year, mainly locally, but many participate in larger gatherings and sing with other choirs in joint projects, with instrumental ensembles.

Half of the choirs give four concerts or fewer; three quarters give ten or fewer. These concerts usually take place in the choir's immediate neighbourhood, since two thirds say they give their concerts only or often in their home county (commune).

The older the choir, the greater the number of annual concerts it gives. The size of the choir also seems to have an impact on the number of concerts: the very small choirs (fewer than ten members) and the very large ones (over seventy members) give the most concerts each year (eight concerts on average).

The concerts are frequently held in places of worship: 58% of the choirs say they sing exclusively or often in churches and chapels, whereas 38% sing solely or often in concert halls.

Nearly half the choirs say they participate in local events.

More than half the choirs develop projects with other choirs.

One choir in five declares it sings only a cappella, and two out of three only or often in this manner. Conversely, over 40% say they sing only or often accompanied by a musical instrument, over 10% with small instrumental ensembles.

▪ The frequency of choir practice

Although most choirs rehearse once a week, this is not the only model. Different work patterns are appearing in the new choirs.

Nine out of ten choirs say they have one full choir practice a week, and half of them hold further rehearsals.

The most recent choirs have a slight tendency to move away from this model: 17% of the choirs formed after 2000, 13% of the choirs formed between 1995 and 2000, and fewer than 10% of those created earlier do not hold a weekly choir practice. Those who sing a specific repertoire also tend to develop different rehearsal patterns.

Many choral singers receive voice training, usually within their choirs.

42% of choirs offer their singers some kind of training, usually voice training.

▪ **Recruitment**

New musical requirements are appearing and more choirs now have a selection process for new members.

For two thirds of the choirs, recruitment is open to everybody, whereas a third now holds auditions or preliminary interviews. Auditions are more frequent in urban choirs, in choirs which do not have a weekly choir practice and those which offer some kind of training.

▪ **Financial resources and public aids**

Choral singers contribute financially to their choirs. The counties (communes) provide strong support for local choirs.

87% of the choirs ask their members to pay an annual subscription.

65% of the choirs say they have received aid in kind (mostly the use of premises) over the last three years, mainly from the local council.

60% of the choirs say they have received public subsidies. In nine out of ten cases, this means financing by the county. There seems to be a correlation between the subsidies and the size of the choir; the smaller the choir, the less likely it is to receive subsidies; the larger the choir, the more likely it is to receive subsidies.

Long-standing choirs are more likely to receive aid in kind or subsidies.

There is, therefore, a very lively "traditional" form of choral singing, particularly in rural areas: choirs characterised by a mix of generations, a general repertoire, no preliminary selection and a strong local attachment. But at the same time, new choral practices are developing in urban areas: smaller groups, which call themselves 'choirs' rather than 'chorales', hold auditions to select entrants, require a higher standard of training, have a more specialised repertoire and are more diversified in their rehearsal and concert patterns.

II – THE CONDUCTORS

2,112 choral conductors were studied. It can be estimated that there are currently about 8,500 choral conductors in France, for the type of choir studied.

A – General profile of choral conductors

Three trends emerge in the population of choral conductors: feminization, rejuvenation and an improvement in qualification.

▪ **The conductors' personal status**

There are almost equal numbers of men and women working as choral conductors, but the number of women seems to be growing.

Among the conductors of the choirs studied, there are 52% men and 48% women, with an average age of 48. However the proportion of women is higher among the younger conductors (under 40).

They have been leading their choirs for an average of 15 years. On average they began at 33. But many conductors were young when they started: more than a third (35%) were under 25 and more than half were under 30.

▪ **The work of conducting a choir**

Most conductors are unpaid. However, it is becoming more frequent for conductors to direct several choirs in addition to their work as music teachers. These conductors are more often paid for their conducting work.

42% of the conductors say they direct several choirs, (63% direct two choirs, a quarter direct three choirs, 10% direct four or five choirs and 3% direct more than five). The conductors who direct several choirs are on average younger than the others: 45 compared with 50 for those who conduct only a single choir. Three quarters of the conductors who direct children's, youth or student choirs direct several choirs.

▪ **Compensation**

Four conductors in ten say they receive payment for this activity. For three quarters of them it is secondary income, for 17% their primary income and for 9% their sole income. The conductors who direct several choirs are much more often paid than the others: nearly 60% of this group receives payment, which is three times as many as those conducting a single choir.

▪ **The conductors' main occupation**

More than half the conductors have (or have retired from) an occupation related to music. This proportion is even higher among the conductors who are still active (22% are retired). The most commonly given occupation is teaching in a music school, followed by a music and choral singing teaching in a junior high school or high school.

Teaching is also the commonest occupation among conductors who do not exercise an occupation related to music, 30% being teachers (other than music teachers).

▪ **Musical background**

Almost all (nearly 90%) of the conductors sang in a choir before directing one. A similar proportion played a musical instrument.

55% say they still sing (occasionally or regularly) in a choir other than the one that they conduct.

B – Training of conductors

Choral conductors are more often trained than before. Half of the conductors have a degree in music or music teaching.

Two thirds of the conductors say they have taken singing lessons in the past. This rate diminishes steadily as the age of the conductor rises. Those with a profession related to music are more likely to have taken singing lessons (80%).

Over three quarters of conductors under 40 have a degree; this proportion drops markedly after that age. The proportion of qualified conductors is higher in children's, youth and student choirs (between 70% and 80%), while it is only 40% for choirs for senior citizens. The proportion of conductors with a degree in music or music teaching rises to 57%.

Two thirds of the conductors say they received training in choral conducting in the past. Slightly more women than men benefited from such training.

Training was dispensed by:

- a Mission Voix (31%)
- a university (26%)
- a federation (25%)
- a music school (14%)

13% of the conductors say they are currently being trained in choral conducting.

This training is dispensed by:

- a music school (26%)
- a Mission Voix /polyphonic music centre (25%)
- a federation (20%)
- a university (5%).

58% of the choral conductors say they became conductors as a result of a series of events that were not necessarily planned. However, there are three trends perceptible in the population of choral conductors: feminisation, rejuvenation and an improvement in qualifications. It is the more recently formed choirs which usually have a conductor with degree in music. This is the case for 63% of the choirs formed after 1990, compared with 55% of those created before 1970.

Note that conductors with a degree in music or a music-related occupation are likely to practice more erudite music with their choirs. The less qualified the conductors, the more likely they are to use a repertoire of songs.

Choirs whose conductors have been trained in choral direction are more likely to offer training and frequently opt for auditions or interviews to recruit choral singers.

For further information

This national survey is only a first stage. It paves the way for regular observation and has already been subjected to a sociological analysis by Guillaume Lurton. On the basis of the statistical data, the author has made a critical analysis of three aspects of choral singing today: repertoire, economy and professionalisation.

Both works can be downloaded at the following sites :

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/dmdts2006/dmdtsept071.pdf>

http://pfi-culture.org/assets/files/MISSIONS_VOIX/PratiquesChoralesRance1.pdf

http://www.artchoral.org/images/20071203041211pratiques%20chorales_partie1.pdf

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/dmdts2006/dmdtsept072.pdf>

<http://www.artchoral.org/images/20071203041212pratiques%20chorales-parties2.pdf>

http://pfi-culture.org/assets/files/MISSIONS_VOIX/PratiquesChoralesFrance2.pdf

The Ministry of culture and communication's partners in this survey

▪ **The Missions Voix en Région**

Set up by the Ministry of Culture in the late 1970s as Centres régionaux d'art polyphonique (Regional Polyphonic Centres), these associations were quickly supported by the regional authorities. With the extension of their missions to cover all vocal practices, they were renamed Missions Voix in the late 1990s. They are specialised in cultural policies related to vocal practices and stand at the junction between state and regional policies.

Their role is to develop vocal practices in each region, in liaison with all players in this field. They are not there to teach or spread singing or choral singing, but to help all those who do so and to foster links between them. They help them all – political decision-makers, heads of music schools, conductors of amateur choirs or directors of concert halls and theatres – to get to know one another and to obtain a broad view of singing events in their area.

The Missions Voix have been working together in a network for over ten years and, although each region has its specific features, they pool information, ideas and equipment. The regional surveys, available to all parties, enable them to share the information on which choices and priorities can be based.

▪ **The Institut français d'Art Choral**

The IFAC (French Choral Art Institute) set up by people active in choral singing, with support from the state (Minister of Culture and Regional Council of Poitou-Charentes), is a resource centre which aims to promote the development of choral singing:

- by acting as a place for meetings, discussion and consultation between all the parties involved,
- by acting as a place of observation and analysis, research and thinking,
- by implementing a policy of activities of various kinds
- by making its expertise and planning abilities available to all the partners concerned
- by acting as an interlocutor for national and international institutions.

The members of IFAC are choral conductors, composers, managers of choral structures, training structures, choirs, music schools, Missions Voix, choral federations, etc.