



## **3/5 Management of collective vocal practices** **Tours, 18/22 – Saint-Lô 23 October 2014**

### ***Organic Choir: Ensemble techniques for rhythm, blend, and intonation within the choir***

The singer, composer, arranger and ensemble leader Peder Karlsson led an inspiring session on the techniques of what he terms the “Organic Choir”. He began by asking the question “Why do we sing?” Responses centred around community, pleasure, sharing, communication, and a sense of belonging. Peder then led the amateur choir “Maniwata” in a performance of Lennon and McCartney’s *All You Need Is Love*, in an arrangement which he had helped the choir to learn on the previous day, and asked delegates to listen to the choir and make a list of the things we liked about it. Delegates noted that the choir members were smiling, that they sang with movement, that the harmonies were enjoyable, and that they seemed to sing and perform as a unit.

These responses tied in with Peder’s vision of amateur choral singing as being intrinsically about how we relate to one another and how we respond to one another – not about being a question of who is better or best. His aim is to take aspects of judgement out of singing, and to build improvement by creating an environment in which the singers as a unit monitor and teach themselves.

He then described his rehearsal techniques in which he focuses on five main areas: 1) blend and tone colours; 2) rhythm; 3) phrasing; 4) intonation; 5) communication. Central to his methods were some important guidelines:

- Work on one main area at a time – temporarily ignore the other four areas;
- One item at a time – sing a short section and work on that;
- Help the singers as much as you can with piano and pulse/time references;
- In a cappella music there is no external reference for intonation and pulse, so therefore: Let singers take turns being the internal reference for intonation and pulse that the other singers in the group refer to;
- Help must be specific. Focus in on exactly the change you want to achieve.

He advocated rehearsal techniques which allow the singers to learn through their experience rather than through instruction. For example, he had the choir sing opposite extremes – very soft to very loud, very dark to very nasal – and had them experiment with the different degrees between these extremes. He would then choose a person within the choir to be the “reference point”, and ask others to take their lead for dynamics, pulse, tone colour, etc from that singer. This built the choir’s awareness of one another, improved their listening skills, and transferred responsibility and involvement onto them, making them fully invested members of the ensemble rather than passive receivers of instructions. To get rid of an unwanted element of the sound – for example, breathiness or scooping, Peder recommended getting the choir to sing in an exaggerated breathy or scoopy way, and then to move to the opposite extreme – again, allowing them to learn through their own experience.

I found this to be a very instructive, inspirational and practical session with many useful, well-thought out and well-demonstrated ways of working with amateur choirs.