

## CHILDREN'S CHORAL REPERTOIRE: HEARING THE VOICE OF SOUTH AFRICAN COMPOSERS

### Abstract

This article offers a South African perspective on the role of composers as an important link in the process of conductors selecting repertoire for children's choirs. The following research question is explored: "What is the role of South African composers with regard to the challenges that conductors experience in their quest of choosing repertoire for children's choirs?" In this qualitative study, various factors that influence the origin and nature of new compositions are examined. Methods of data collection include literature reviews, interviews and questionnaires.

South African composers as well as local and international conductors of children's choirs were

### Samevatting

Die artikel bied 'n Suid-Afrikaanse perspektief oor die rol van komponiste as 'n belangrike skakel in die proses waarvolgens dirigente repertorium vir kinderkore kies. Die volgende navorsingsvraag word ondersoek: "Wat is die rol van Suid-Afrikaanse komponiste met betrekking tot die uitdagings waarvoor dirigente in die keuse van repertorium vir kinderkore te staan kom?" Verskeie faktore wat die oorsprong en aard van nuwe komposisies beïnvloed, word in hierdie kwalitatiewe studie ondersoek. Metodes van data-insameling wat gebruik is, sluit literatuurstudie, onderhoude en vraelyste in.

Suid-Afrikaanse komponiste sowel as plaaslike en internasionale dirigente van kinderkore is as respondente betrek. Eerstens is komponiste versoek om insette te lewer oor persoonlike faktore wat 'n rol in hul belangstelling in die komponeer van koormusiek en in die aard van hul komposisies speel en, tweedens, oor hul algemene opinie

involved as respondents. Firstly, the composers were asked to reflect on personal aspects that play a role in their interest in composing choral music and that affect the nature of their compositions and, secondly, on their general opinion regarding the choice of repertoire. The conductors, in turn, reported on various role players that influence their choice of repertoire, and commented on the extent to which they include South African compositions as repertoire.

The author concludes that communication between composers and conductors is one of the key issues in the creative process of finding and expanding existing suitable South African repertoire for children's choirs.

Dirigente bied op hul beurt sienings aan oor die verskeie rolspelers wat hul keuse van repertorium beïnvloed, asook die mate waarin hulle Suid-Afrikaanse komposisies as repertorium in hul konsertprogramme insluit.

Die outeur kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat kommunikasie en interaksie tussen komponiste en dirigente 'n sleutelfaktor is in die kreatiewe proses van die keuse en uitbreiding van bestaande Suid-Afrikaanse repertorium vir kinderkore.

### Key words:

Composers / Composers of choral music / South African composers  
Children's choir  
Choral repertoire / South African choral repertoire  
Choral compositions / Choral arrangements  
Commissioned choral works  
Concert programmes for children's choirs /  
Compositions for children's choirs

## INTRODUCTION

This article offers a South African perspective on the role of composers as an important link in the process whereby choral conductors select repertoire for children's choirs. The purpose of the study is to explore the view of South African composers regarding their role in a conductor's quest to choose suitable repertoire for children's choirs and to investigate aspects that influence the origin and nature of their compositions. The argument pursued in the article is that greater interaction between composers and choral conductors could influence the choice of repertoire and, consequently, the nature of concert programmes. It is suggested that communication between these two role players could influence the notion that South African children should sing South African compositions composed within a South African context. The actual interaction between composers and conductors is examined, as well as the extent to which such contact influences the choice of repertoire for children's choirs.

Seven South African composers were included as respondents to determine their view on the role that they play in the choral conductor's quest to choose appropriate repertoire for children's choirs. Firstly, an analysis of responses to questions provides an insight into the view of these composers regarding the origin, nature and quality of repertoire for children's choirs in South Africa. Secondly, the opinion of choir conductors nationally as well as internationally was investigated to determine whether interaction with composers play a role in their choice of repertoire. Although the study is approached from a South African point of view, the opinion of both South African and internationally recognised conductors of overseas children's choirs was articulated. This offered a local as well as broader international perspective on the research question.

The choice and context of the research topic derives from the author's personal interest in children's choral work and her local as well as international experience as choral conductor of school and regional children's choirs over a period of seventeen years. Since conductors often find it difficult to locate sources of suitable choral repertoire, interaction between them and

conductors constitutes an important focus of this article. The study documents the views of composers and conductors on how repertoire is chosen, and determines whether interaction with composers plays a role in this process.

### Definitions of key aspects

The research focuses on children's choirs, which are referred to in the article as choirs consisting of "unchanged voices" (in some sources referred to as "treble voice", "equal voice" or "upper voice" choirs).

The term "choral repertoire" may include various focal points: either a specific musical work or collection of works that a specific choir performs on occasion in an annual programme or over a longer period of time, or the general collection of compositions available for choral performances.

For the purpose of this article, the term "composer" refers to a person who creates (or literally "puts together") a musical work by combining "numerous diversified elements such as voice parts" (Apel, 1979: 189) to form a musical composition to be performed vocally and/or instrumentally.

The concept "experimental techniques" used in this article refers to a trend that has since the 20<sup>th</sup> century been used in choral compositions where composers experiment with shouting, whispering, tongue clicks, imitations of natural sounds, body percussion sounds and movements, etc.

The term "arrangement" refers to a work not regarded as an original composition. It is based on original material (for example a folk song, another choral composition or instrumental composition) and has been arranged in a new form.

## GENERAL HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF CHILDREN'S CHOIRS

For centuries, particular attention was devoted to the rounding off of boys' voices, especially in choirs in England and Central Europe. The use of

boys' voices in church choirs was highly popular in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period (Broeker, 1996: 16). According to Pohjola, boys' choirs such as the *Thomanerchor* in Leipzig, the *Wiener Sängerknaben*, the *Montserrat Monastery Boys' Choir* and the *Kings College University of Cambridge Choir* acquired legendary reputations in the twentieth century (Pohjola, 2003: 13). It is only after the Second World War that children's choirs of both genders became popular. Wolff refers to these choirs with both unchanged boys' and girls' voices as "mixed-gender children's choirs" (2001: Part I, 2.3.5).

### **The children's choir genre in South Africa**

The purpose of school choirs in South Africa has changed since the 1970s. Van Pletzen describes choirs before 1970 as "choirs for occasions". These choirs prepared only a few works for specific occasions. During the nineties, however, the picture started changing and Van Pletzen remarks that "it is gladdening that during the past decade there has been a growing tendency towards singing choir literature of a high quality (1995: 184 & 337).

At present choral singing in South Africa is a cultural activity that enjoys great support among people from various ages and from various population groups. "With the years, choral singing has become the culturally most pursued activity in South Africa ... Choral singing is one of the dynamic forces in South African music" (Van der Walt, 2004: 19). Since the 1960s, the internationally growing prestige and popularity of the children's choir as ensemble has influenced trends in South Africa (Van Aswegen, 2006: 1-4; Verster, Viljoen & Niemann, 2009: 53):

The mixed gender children's choir movement has grown from strength to strength and has become the norm rather than the exception in the entire western world. Music educators discovered what a tremendously rewarding aesthetic instrument the mixed-gender choir can be (Wolff, 2001: Part I, 2.3.5).

Thus, over a period of forty years there has been an enormous increase in the number of South African

children's choirs. This has had an important impact on the available choral repertoire and resulted in more South African composers choosing to compose for children's choirs.

### **Repertoire for children's choirs**

The available repertoire for children's choirs has grown significantly along with the increasing popularity of such choirs during the course of the twentieth century:

Although Zoltán Kodály composed for children's voices in Hungary as early as in the 1920s, the new type of children's and youth choir has only developed as an instrument in the last half century (Pohjola, 1993: 148).

Pohjola's statement is supported by two facts – it is indeed very hard to find original repertoire for treble-voice children's choirs composed before the twentieth century, and the composition of repertoire for children's choirs has enjoyed a flourishing period since the beginning of the twentieth century (Broeker, 2000: 26).

Internationally, the choice of repertoire is considered to be one of the most important challenges faced by choral conductors (Broeker, 2006: 43; Gackle, 2006: 54; Apfelstadt, 2000: 19; Rao, 1993: 7-8). According to Cox, the "selection of literature for children's choirs is an important key which unlocks the doors of success" (2006: 101) and Lamb agrees that "perhaps no decision by the elementary choir director is more important than repertoire selection" (2006: 8). Ashworth-Bartle emphasises this viewpoint by remarking that "[c]learly, one of the most important and time-consuming jobs that a conductor of children's choirs must do is choosing repertoire" (2003: 182). Pohjola also stresses the important role played by a conductor's choice of repertoire:

One of the first conditions for successful choir work is the ability to choose your programme correctly. This is at the heart of the conductor's professional skills. One could almost say – tell me what you

sing, and I'll tell you what sort of conductor you are (Pohjola, 1993: 194).

The way in which a conductor selects repertoire and the resources that are available for finding suitable repertoire both play an important role in successful choral work. Therefore, when it comes to choir training, the choice of repertoire is considered to be one of the most important factors in educating potential choir conductors (Pohjola, 1993: 191; Rao, 1993: 7-8; Broeker, 1996: 35; Brinson, 1996: 74; Apfelstadt, 2000: 19). Ala-Pöllänen states that repertoire is one of the most important components of a conductor's work. "The repertoire is the basic thing. I carry out my pedagogical aim via repertoire. It is one of the most important tools" (Questionnaire: 2004). Rao argues that choral music implies intellectual involvement and that the choice of repertoire therefore has strong educational value: "The ability to sing in a choir counts as a form of knowledge" and "stylistically diverse and distinctive repertoire forms the centrepiece of instruction" (1993: xiv & 8). Consequently, a major challenge that faces the conductors of children's choirs is to find suitable and educationally sound repertoire. Reynolds points out that "We [as] music educators can make no more important decision than the selection of the material with which we teach our students" (Reynolds, 2000: 33). The educational value of quality choral music for children's choirs seems to be one of the basic fundamental aspects that should be taken into consideration by conductors working with children, as well as composers composing for children.

### **Role players that influence the choice of repertoire**

When choosing repertoire, a conductor is influenced in various ways and the success of the choir depends on various factors. "In a sense, repertoire selection is a juggling act in which several ingredients for success are balanced" (Gordon, 1989: 28). An essential "element" in this "juggling act" is interaction between choir conductors and other role players.

Although the conductor is responsible for the choice of repertoire, decisions in this regard are not

taken in isolation. To some extent the different role players are always taken into consideration. A review of the available literature and the data collected reveal that various role players influence the way in which conductors choose repertoire. Decker and Kirk maintain that conductors who choose successful repertoire are those who develop sensitivity towards the expectations of the different role players. "The conductor who develops an understanding of the diverse interests of others is better able to recognize and respond to those interests" (1988: 5).

According to Gordon (1989: 28), taking into consideration the influence of role players in combination with other factors constitutes the recipe for successful repertoire choice. The following graphic representation is based on Gordon's view of how various role players influence the choice of repertoire.

### **Illustration 1 Schematic representation: Role players that influence the choice of repertoire**

As illustrated in the above schematic representation, many authors in the literature review that was covered for this study do not consider the composer as an important role player in the process of choosing suitable repertoire (Gordon, 1989; Van Pletzen, 1995; Gackle, 2006). Some authors do however recognise the importance of the composer as a role player (Decker & Kirk, 1988; Broeker, 2006; Ashworth-Bartle, 2008; Levy, 2009).

Ashworth-Bartle emphasises the importance of including works composed by contemporary composers and the necessity of conductors to work in collaboration with composers. She supports the contribution of the conductor when working with a composer in composing a new work for a specific choir as follows: "Often composers do not understand the needs and limitations of the child's voice as well as you" (2008: 75). In interviews with successful conductors of school choirs in the United States of America, Broeker reports on two conductors who successfully joined forces with local composers and "who often give them the honor of premiering a new work" (2006: 43). One of these respondents reflects on the value of such collaboration as follows: "Their pieces are usually

well crafted and reflect an understanding of the vocal development of younger singers” (Broeker, 2006: 43). Levy refers to Harlow (President and owner of Santa Barbara Publishing Company) who recommends that composers of music for children’s choirs become “familiar with the kind of choir” for whom they are arranging music (Levy, 2009: 9). According to Freer, “occasionally, the most satisfying repertoire develops through collaboration with composers” (2007: 32). When he conducted interviews with choral directors to find out how they choose repertoire, one respondent reported as follows:

It is extremely important to collaborate with living composers in the presentation of music from our time. It is the relationship with the artist, and the participation in the creative process, that I have found to be so enriching for my ensembles and my own growth as a conductor (Freer, 2007: 32).

Some authors do however acknowledge the important role that composers play in the process of choosing appropriate repertoire. Brinson (1996: 75) suggests that good programmes reflect conductors with receptivity for the new ideas, works and styles of composers. “Directors should strive continually to broaden their level of comfort to include a variety of styles, eras and composers” (Brinson, 1996: 75). Jean Ashworth-Bartle formulates her opinion of whether commissioned works are essential as follows:

Absolutely, this [interaction between conductors and composers] is critical. Composers cannot work in a vacuum. They will improve their craft enormously if they hear their works performed regularly. Not all new pieces will be great. But it is every conductor’s responsibility to make sure that they improve the standards of composing in their country.

Decker and Kirk support the notion that composers should also be regarded as important role players. “The composer communicates with an audience through performers. Conversely, an audience

depends upon the performer’s skills in communication for enjoyment and understanding” (Decker & Kirk, 1988: 1). Collaboration between conductors and composers is accordingly recognised by some authors as a vital requirement in creating new works and enhancing choral programmes.

Within the challenging process of choosing repertoire, the role and view of South African composers are often underestimated. This phenomenon is evident from the fact that full-scale printed sources reporting on the history, contribution and views of composers were only published as little as four years ago – in 2006. Besides earlier, short publications or booklets on South African composers, a book on the composer Stefáns Grové (edited by Walton and Muller) was the first full-length study of any South African composer to be published. According to Walton, this 2008 publication on South African composers was published “very late indeed for any ‘first’ in a country” (Walton, 2008: 42).

To some extent, the role of composers could be seen as an important “missing link” in the process of choral conductors selecting repertoire for children’s choirs. It could be argued that better interaction between composers and choral conductors could greatly enhance the choice of repertoire and, consequently, the nature of concert programmes.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The primary research question addressed in this article is: “What is the role of South African composers with regard to the challenges that conductors experience in their quest of choosing repertoire for children’s choirs?” The study presents a perspective on how composers view their role in composing repertoire for children’s choirs and the importance of interaction between themselves and conductors during this process. The research involves a descriptive qualitative study of the role and function of composers in exercising repertoire choices. The methods used for data collection included descriptive information from the literature study and information derived from open-ended questionnaires and interviews. Data collected by means of questionnaires were

followed up by personal and telephonic interviews with some composers. According to Robson (1993: 241) such interviews offer the opportunity for “corrections of obvious misunderstandings and possible use of probes”. The interviews and hard copies of the author’s interpretation of data that were sent to the composers for comments gave credibility to the findings.

The main focus of the research is the data collected from seven participating South African composers. Purposive sampling was applied in choosing these composers. The composers who participated in this research include musicians writing music for choirs, as well as professional composers. The author concentrated on South African composers whose works have been performed by her own choirs, or who are known to her. Composers of works from the 1970s to 2004 have been included. The following seven composers (in chronological order) were participants in the research:

- Stefáns Grové (born 1920)
- Chris Lamprecht (born 1927)
- Rykie Pienaar (born 1929)
- Marlene Wessels (born 1931)
- Hendrik Hofmeyr (born 1957)
- Johan Cloete (born 1957)
- Niel van der Watt (born 1962)

Apart from these composer respondents, fifty-seven South African and seven overseas conductors of school choirs and regional children’s choirs were involved in the research as respondents. Respondents were chosen on the basis of purposive sampling. Initially conductors known by the author were involved. This led to “snowball sampling”, since these respondents introduced the author to other conductors who were willing to participate. Questionnaires were completed and some conductors were interviewed. In this article, however, the focus is mainly on the role of composers and on the interaction between composers and conductors in the process of choosing repertoire.

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

### **SECTION 1: Findings based on the analysis of responses received from the composers**

The responses that were received from the participating composers were analysed and listed under four main topics:

- The origin of and reasons for composers’ interest in composing for children’s choirs
- Specifications received from conductors who request commissioned works
- Composers’ view on the development of the children’s choir genre in South Africa over the past ten years or more
- Views regarding the inclusion of various types of arrangements in children’s choir repertoire

#### **A. *THE ORIGIN OF AND REASONS FOR COMPOSERS’ INTEREST IN COMPOSING FOR CHILDREN’S CHOIRS***

Questions asked in the questionnaires and interviews focused on how composers became interested in composing for children’s choirs. Four of the seven composers indicated that their interest in children’s choirs as a composition medium resulted from requests by conductors. Once they started writing commissioned works, their interest in composing for children’s choirs was aroused.

The other three respondents’ involvement in composing for children’s choirs could be ascribed to an interest in the involvement of the composer’s own children in school choirs and operettas, the nature of the respondent’s work as a music lecturer in choir conducting and a natural interest in the sound of a children’s choir. For example, Hendrik Hofmeyr remarked that “as a child I dreamed of singing in the Drakensberg Boys’ Choir. The sound of a children’s choir has always fascinated me”.

Some conductors have the perception that composers work in isolation, and come to a decision when they have an artist’s inspiration and urge to compose a new work. Although some of the composer-respondents revealed the importance of inspiration as the basis for a new composition, a significant number of them reported that the interaction between themselves and conductors played a determining role in the origin of their compositions. Six composers indicated that commissioned works and requests play the most important role in the development of their

compositions. Hendrik Hofmeyr explains: “My compositions for children’s choirs often originate in commissioned works. The particular sound quality of children’s voices and the kinds of atmospheres that can be conveyed by their voices determine the style of the work.”

Specific requirements by conductors who commission works, as well as the nature of the relationship between the conductor and composer practically influence compositions. This information reveals that composers and conductors are equally dependent on each other in adding new compositions to existing repertoire. Requests by conductors are an important motivation and stimulation for composing new works for children’s choirs.

Some of the commissioned works initially came about through rewriting existing works originally composed for mixed choirs. As Johan Cloete recalls:

During a conversation with Hennie Look of the Tygerberg Children’s Choir I became totally hooked, although in the beginning I did not experience an overwhelming reformation, more the rewriting of existing material (in this case material taken from my "White Mass" – 1993-4).

According to Johan Cloete, inspiration plays a role: “As with most of my music it must be something visual, even theatrical, that evokes a strong emotional yet mystical unknown core.” A deeply-felt inspirational element therefore seems to be another factor that influences the development of compositions.

## ***B. SPECIFICATIONS RECEIVED FROM CONDUCTORS WHO REQUEST COMMISSIONED WORKS***

The nature of a particular choir affects the work of the composer. For example, the number of voice parts in a particular choir and the range possibilities of the voices can play a role. Composers also often receive other requests from conductors that can affect the composition:

Frequently the conductor gives fairly specific indications: A cheerful song in Afrikaans, or even worse, ‘something which sounds like...’  
(Niel van der Watt)

### **The purpose of the commissioned work**

The reason why compositions are requested can determine the character of the work: "Is it meant for a competition, for singing happily, or for an overseas tour?" (Niel van der Watt)

### **The relationship between the composer and the conductor**

According to Van der Watt the nature of the relationship between the composer and the conductor who requests the commissioned work also plays a role: “My relationship with the conductor has a subjective influence on the composition.” (Niel van der Watt)

### **The unique sound quality of a particular choir**

Some composers reported that the particular sound quality and character of a specific choir influenced new compositions. Their work with choirs was the springboard that sparked their interest in composing music for children’s choirs, something which they had not considered previously. Niel van der Watt reported that he attends rehearsals or performances of a choir, or asks for CD recordings before composing the commissioned work. This enables him to determine the sound quality, standard, experience and character of a choir.

### **Geographical location of choirs**

Another factor that influences compositions involves geographical aspects that are taken into consideration when new works are composed. The repertoire requirements of choirs in rural towns often differ from those in cities:

I normally write at the request of, and/or commissioned by, conductors. This determines that I write differently for the choir of a small school in the country than for an established regional choir. (Chris Lamprecht)

Data revealed that geographical location indeed plays a role, since choirs in rural areas often do not enjoy the privilege of professional teacher-conductors and accompanists as in the case of choirs in bigger cities. On the other hand, children in cities are often much more engaged in extramural activities which lead to time constraints with regard to rehearsals. In some cases choirs in cities have more performance opportunities and exposure to other choirs and composers, which all play a role in the choice of repertoire.

### **The choice of text for compositions for children's choirs**

Texts prove to have an important effect on the origin of a composition. A composer might be inspired by a certain text and he/she either starts a new independent composition, or links the text to a commissioned work.

Feedback from Stefáns Grové, Niel van der Watt and Rykie Pienaar shows that text can influence the development and nature of a composition. From a response by Niel van der Watt it can be seen that text, as well as the personal interest of the composer at a given moment, does play a role:

What I, as a composer, am occupied with at present [influences my composition]: For example, I am currently examining texts of N.P. van Wyk Louw. If the commission should link up with this it would affect the decision regarding a new composition. (Niel van der Watt)

Most of the respondents indicated that they take into consideration the world of children's experiences – consequently, a text suitable for a children's choir is considered as an important prerequisite. According to Chris Lamprecht, “[t]exts for children's choirs should preferably fall within the comprehension and emotional maturity of children”. Niel van der Watt supported this view and added that “[a]s far as context is concerned the text should be suitable for children. It should be child-like, or informative (contain a lesson), or humorous”.

Composers sometimes use poems or create suitable texts themselves. For example, Rykie Pienaar remarked as follows: “I usually composed songs for one and two voice parts with relevant topics of interest to children. I use existing poems or write my own lyrics.”

Apart from poems, Johan Cloete reported using “...predetermined, unchanged texts from the Catholic Mass”. Stefáns Grové pointed out that the character of a text to be set to music and whether it has expressive value should also be considered. Marlene Wessels indicated that she takes into consideration the musical rhythm of words in a text:

Every person has an inherent musical rhythm. Different aspects of this rhythm will appeal to different people. The linear rhythm of the text built into the flow of the word accent interests me.

It was predicted by the author that, inevitably, composers would use text related to the age level and intellectual, emotional and musical levels of experience of the choir members' age group. Other factors that influenced composers' choice of texts included texts from which children might learn and receive positive messages, humorous content, existing poems, or predetermined unchanged texts, for example Biblical verses, texts from the Catholic Mass and own texts created by the composers themselves.

Composers further highlighted the importance of the relationship between the rhythmic and melodic character, and the atmosphere of the music and the text.

### **The role of religion or any other conviction**

Religion to a greater or lesser extent plays a role. Responses that were received from the composers in this regard can be divided into three groups: those composers who indicated that religion has no effect on their compositions; those who felt strongly about religion and insisted that their inspiration for devotional or secular works emanated directly from God; and composers who liked to compose devotional music and had a



preference for using sacred themes and texts, for example, liturgical and Latin texts.

### **A predilection for folk music**

The appreciation for the value of folk music is another aspect that was found to influence compositions. Lamprecht is well known for his significant role in promoting and preserving Afrikaans folk music in South Africa. His preference for Afrikaans folk music has played a definite role in the origin and nature of his compositions and arrangements. This is also the case with compositions by other South African composers, such as Hubert du Plessis, which had been inspired by folk music (Krige, 2007: 131).

### **Preference for, and views regarding, *a cappella* versus accompanied works**

When choosing between *a cappella* versus accompanied compositions, feedback indicates that the type of commission and the skills of the choir play a greater role than the personal preference of the composer. Niel van der Watt wrote the following on the use of *a cappella* and accompanied compositions by South African children's choirs:

In South Africa there are only a few choirs that should sing *a cappella*. Generally choir leaders aim too high. The younger the youngest member of a choir, the more simple the work should be. Accompaniment, therefore, is the norm.

The absence of a bass line in children's choral singing is another factor that plays a role in deciding whether a composition should be *a cappella* or accompanied:

SSAA music should preferably be accompanied. SSAA *a cappella* singing creates a problem because of the lack of bass sonority. Actually it only succeeds if there are very good altos in the choir. (Niel van der Watt)

Most respondents have no preference concerning *a cappella* or accompanied compositions. Two composers, however, remarked that *a cappella* choir music has greater appeal for them:

Gradually *a cappella* became my preferred medium, more for practical reasons than anything else. I now prefer it because supposedly it seems to have a purer character. (Johan Cloete)

As far as writing is concerned I prefer neither the one nor the other, but I must admit that to me much choir music with piano accompaniment sounds trite: this is not necessarily the fault of the medium. (Hendrik Hofmeyr)

It can be inferred that personal preferences regarding accompanied or *a cappella* works do not largely influence the compositions of the respondents. The nature of the commission and the ability of the choir in this regard are stronger considerations. In the present study, composers pointed out that the standard of performance of young or/and inexperienced choir singers is often better when compositions with accompaniments are chosen. An accompaniment can also supply a baseline that may have a positive influence on the intonation and sound of an equal-voice choir.

### **The use of experimental techniques**

Three composers reported that they do not use experimental techniques in their compositions. One respondent from this group, however, stated that this technique will be considered for future compositions. Four composers indicated that they had included experimental techniques. An example in this regard is the echo effects and imitation of natural sounds used in Chris Lamprecht's *Tsitsikama*. Hendrik Hofmeyr admitted that he had to some extent used experimental sounds in his composition *Tu pauperum refugium*. The composition included experimental ideas, for example, "...tongue clicks, hissing sounds, whispering and optional stamping of feet and murmuring". In *How sweet the moonlight* he admitted to have used "...whispering and aleatoric rhythmical activities within sound clouds".

It can be concluded that experimental techniques that are prominent internationally in 20<sup>th</sup> century choir compositions are to an increasing extent being used in South African compositions for children's choirs. Especially since the late 1960s, the use of experimental sounds and techniques has become popular in compositions for children's choirs. The lead in this regard was taken by composers from the Scandinavian countries. Examples of these works performed by various South African children's choirs are *Aglepta* composed in 1969 by Arne Mellnäs, *Dreams 1*, Op 85 composed in 1977 by Erik Bergman and *Revontulet* (Northern Lights) composed in 1983 by Pekka Kostiainen. In his response to the question on the use of experimental techniques, Chris Lamprecht remarked as follows on the influence of overseas trends on South African choirs and compositions:

Overseas tours are apparently a great stimulus towards prompting more contemporary composition. One good choir and conductor can often stimulate new compositions and performances, which indicate growth.

The inclusion of experimental techniques in compositions can be innovative for a number of reasons: South Africans should remain informed of international trends; this composition style lends interesting variation to a programme, and the performance of these works presents a challenge to choirs. The use of experimental techniques, however, is not a criterion for quality, and artificiality should be avoided. Niel van der Watt gave an informative response in this regard:

If an experiment is used simply for the sake of experimenting then it is merely a gimmick and has no musical justification. Experimental singing must be functional and fit in with the spirit of the work.

In the contemporary era, an increasing number of choral compositions include experimental techniques. The author has observed that more South African conductors prefer to include and even overshadow their concert programmes with works that exhibit experimental techniques. This view correlates with that of Simon (2000: 108-109)

who states that the performance of experimental works, especially as chosen repertoire for choir competitions, has become an international trend. Exposure to choirs from all over the world serve as a stimulus which leads to South African conductors including more contemporary compositions in their programmes and, consequently, to composers composing more experimental works. In the present study, some respondents maintained that composers should not include experimental effects merely for the sake of artificial effects, but that they should be purposeful, well designed and fit in with the nature of the work.

### **C. COMPOSERS' VIEW ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILDREN'S CHOIR GENRE IN SOUTH AFRICA OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS OR MORE**

Composers were asked whether there was now a greater demand for original compositions and arrangements for children's choirs than there had been in the past. Their answers indicated that over the past decade there has been growth in this field. According to Niel van der Watt there is an increasing demand for children's choir music. He added that there are frequent demands for light choral music.

Chris Lamprecht stated the following with regard to the general standard of children's choir work and choice of repertoire in South Africa:

I am glad you conduct the research from a South African perspective, because, as we all know, we lag far behind overseas countries as far as apprehension, educational value and expert assessment in programme content are concerned. There is, however, a gradual growth in musical standard as well as in programme selection. As there are more choirs than ten years ago, there is also a greater demand for choir music.

Lamprecht's view is supported by Rykie Pienaar who agreed that the standard of children's choirs had improved and the repertoire selected was of a higher quality than ten years ago.

Apparently, as a result of international exposure, regional children's choirs have improved more as far as the performance standard as well as the standard of repertoire selection is concerned. This trend has given rise to the creation of South African compositions that are in demand overseas and are being performed by choirs at international level:

The international exposure enjoyed by our best choirs leads to a greater demand for South African works to be performed overseas, and to more appreciation for, and interest in, that which originates in our own country. (Hendrik Hofmeyr)

The social and political changes in the country have an impact on children's choir repertoire. The responses offered by Johan Cloete and Chris Lamprecht provide insight regarding this aspect:

All the politicising of the past ten years naturally brought about a definite development regarding the elimination of 'apartheid'-oriented boundaries between Afro- and Eurocentric music. In other words choir music can be seen as one of the bridges between (previously) advantaged and previously less-advantaged groups. But more than mere politics: together with a new 'paradigm' (ca. 1999 – 2001) comes a greater consciousness of our (mankind's) fragile grasp on this planet. Children play an important role in this consolidation which of course is transmitted to appreciation for this specific genre. (Johan Cloete)

In South Africa, moreover, we are in a unique situation as we have eleven different cultures / languages that should be taken into consideration with great insistence from overseas to utilize

the African culture as well. A challenge indeed. (Chris Lamprecht)

Chris Lamprecht pointed out that children's choral repertoire are mostly created because composers receive commissions from conductors. The disadvantage of this state of affairs is that there is no on-going planning through which South African children's choral repertoire can be created according to needs and a planned structure. He suggested the following:

As requests appear sporadically and randomly there is no carefully considered planning for children's choir compositions. Ideally there should be proper planning according to South African needs after which chosen composers should be approached for assignments on an annual basis. Whether this will come about in our country is to be wished for, but, sadly, unlikely.

Lamprecht suggested that it could be helpful if a South African choral organisation could take the initiative to promote and structure commissioned works. In his view, South African choral repertoire can greatly benefit from such an enterprise.

The data obtained from participating composers revealed a growth in the interest in children's choirs in South Africa over the last decade. Although there is now a greater demand for children's choir music and despite a gradual improvement in the standard of children's choirs and repertoire, some composers reported that programme selection in South Africa still could not be compared to international standards. It was found, however, that international exposure (especially of regional children's choirs) had improved the performance standard as well as the standard of repertoire selection. Social and political changes over the past decade not only imply challenges, but also create opportunities for choir singing and the selection and composing of repertoire in South Africa in the future.

#### **D. VIEWS REGARDING THE INCLUSION OF VARIOUS TYPES OF ARRANGEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S CHOIR REPERTOIRE**

Six of the respondents were not opposed to arrangements, but had certain reservations in this regard. For example, "As long as it is done idiomatically and in a singing style" (Hendrik Hofmeyr), and "[a]cceptable, provided the integrity of the original work is not affected" (Johan Cloete). Stefáns Grové, however, did not regard arrangements as material of good quality: "I am strongly opposed to arrangements in any form since they alter the original message." Chris Lamprecht had ambivalent views. On the one hand, he maintained that original compositions should take preference over arranged works: "In the ordinary sense of the word, arrangements are translations – never as good as the original." On the other hand, he pointed out that the art of arranging should not be underestimated and that the compositions of well-known masters often developed from arrangements:

The more artistic value is added to the original material, the less of an arrangement it is – and the more it becomes a composition. *Aan die Noordweste* is an example. Often there is more work involved in an artful arrangement of given material than in a brand new composition, because the composer is restricted by the potential which the given material places on the 'arranger'. I am therefore of the opinion that it is short-sighted to give in to the present tendency to regard arrangements as somewhat inferior to original works. After all, without 'arrangements' we would not have had Schubert's *Ros'lein* or his *Der Lindenbaum*. (Chris Lamprecht)

#### **Arrangements of compositions for mixed voices as works for equal-voice choirs**

Chris Lamprecht remarked that arranging compositions for mixed choirs as works for equal-voice choirs had limitations that posed challenges to the arranger. "The voice range of SATB compositions is approximately three octaves compared to SSA choral music which range is approximately two octaves. This creates technical and artistic limitations." This challenge can, however, be successfully overcome and South African compositions originally composed for mixed choirs are often rewritten by the original composer for equal voices. Examples of such compositions are *White Mass* by Johan Cloete and *O diepte van die Rykdom* by Chris Lamprecht.

#### **Arrangements of instrumental compositions as works for equal-voice choirs**

Only three composers commented on the inclusion of arrangements of instrumental compositions. Marlene Wessels remarked that "...by doing this, many possibilities can be created to let the skills and tone of the instrument reverberates in the voices". Hendrik Hofmeyr and Chris Lamprecht argued that these arrangements could be included, provided that the material lends itself to choral arrangements and is arranged in a style that can be successfully performed vocally.

#### **Arrangements of compositions in a popular style as works for equal-voice choirs**

Respondents were mostly sceptical about arrangements of popular music. According to Rykie Pienaar, the large number of arrangements of popular music resulted from the great popularity of this music among South African audiences. Chris Lamprecht indicated that he was not an advocate for the arrangement of light songs and added that copyright problems could arise.

#### **Arrangements of indigenous folk music as works for equal-voice choirs**

Generally speaking, respondents were in favour of the inclusion of arrangements of folk music in choral repertoire. Chris Lamprecht argued that "[a]ny folk melody in its original state has to undergo some form of 'arranging' for public use (harmonizing, accompaniment, notation, et cetera)". Hence, the use of arrangements is

unavoidable if any folk music is to be included in choir repertoire.

The author's impression that arrangements are often regarded as inferior was confirmed by the respondents' views. Most composers maintained that original compositions should be a conductor's first choice. They argued that arrangements often did not relate to the original message and could never be as good as the original. They nevertheless pointed out that arranging music should not be underestimated. This skill could well be regarded as an art form as it required a highly skilled and artistic musician to pull it off successfully. With regard to folk music, the respondents generally agreed that any folk music in its original state had to be arranged with regard to writing down its notation and creating an accompaniment, harmonisation and other musical aspects to add to an interesting performance. Interaction between composers and conductors could spark an interest in folk music and consequently lead to a larger number of arrangements of folk music or compositions based on elements in folk music.

### **Opinions regarding qualities needed to deem a composition or an arrangement a 'good one'**

Chris Lamprecht stated that "all music should be grammatically and artistically accountable", while Johan Cloete pointed out that the criteria for a good work depended on personal views:

Criteria for good children's choral repertoire differ from person to person, depending on the subjective factors such as what can be regarded as artistically mature or, less subjectively, what testifies of technical skilfulness.

According to Cloete, therefore, music must appeal to the intellect as well as to the emotions of the singer and listener. Hendrik Hofmeyr offered a meaningful summary of criteria for children's choir compositions:

Vocally it should not be too demanding. On the musical level children can cope surprisingly well with exacting works – there is no need to write in a condescendingly 'childlike'

way, as long as the text and the way it is composed represent something with which children can identify. In musical assessment the same norms apply as in any other work.

In an interview with the conductor Petru Gräbe in 2004, he gave the following reply when requested to provide his views on criteria for good quality repertoire:

'Good quality' is very vague. It is not easily definable. I do not think one can say what the ideal piece is for a children's choir. There are too many parameters. There are compositions that are good works for children's choirs, but those are completely contrasting – for example, works by Bartók as against those of Lamprecht. Music from the Scandinavian countries can be the other corner of the triangle. There are no rules. To say, for example, that a work should be harmonic according to traditional rules, contradicts twentieth century works in which experimental harmonies often occur. ~~So, say for example that a piece should be harmoniously in order, but gainsaying twentieth century works in which experimental harmonies are common.~~ The work must complement the choir as well as the ability, preference and talent of the conductor. Naturally there are compositions in choral literature that would be considered to be of a high standard by most authorities. It is, however, difficult to formulate just what the common characteristics of these works are.

Feedback from respondents offered valuable insight regarding criteria for quality choral music for children's choirs. It is, however, clear that it is not an easy task (in fact, it will require an ongoing discussion) to pin down the qualities needed to deem a composition or an arrangement a "good one".

The next point of focus in the article involves opinions formulated by conductors. The views of conductor respondents were documented to shed further light on various role players, including

composers, who influence the choice of repertoire as well as the inclusion of South African commissioned works.

## **SECTION 2: Findings based on the analysis of the responses received from conductors**

The analysis of interviews with and questionnaires completed by participating conductors resulted in the identification of two main themes:

- The role of various role players in the process of choosing repertoire
- The extent to which South African compositions and commissioned works are included as repertoire

### ***A. THE ROLE OF VARIOUS ROLE PLAYERS IN THE PROCESS OF CHOOSING REPERTOIRE***

Conductors involved in the current study reported that a number of role players influence the way in which they choose repertoire. These include the choir members, the audience (listeners with little background knowledge of choral singing, as well as experts in the choir community, for example, adjudicators of competitions), and governing bodies (e.g. school principals or parents in parent committees). In addition to the conductor, choir members, audience, choir community and management bodies, the following role players were also identified based on the questionnaire data: the composer, the accompanist, organisations or persons who prescribe repertoire for competitions, and clergymen who make suggestions for performances during church services. Apart from management bodies, the school principal plays an important role in the choice of repertoire for school choirs. A number of respondents indicated that they could not determine a rank order of role players, as they believed that interaction between all those concerned played an equal role.

Apart from the conductor, various other role players who influence the conductor regarding the choice of repertoire were identified in the literature review as well as by the data collected. The following graph presents an illustration of the results of the data collection. The data reveal the

rank order of role players according to respondents taking part in the research.

### **Illustration 2**

#### **Graph: Rank order of role players**

Based on her own observations, the author maintains that most conductors of school choirs do not realise the importance and value of communication with composers. The respondent conductors who have been involved in the study are, however, experiencing success with their choirs and most of these choirs enjoy a high profile of success in concerts and competitions. This suggests that the interaction between conductor and composer indeed has a positive effect on repertoire choice. Respondent conductors reported that they were aware of the importance of inviting composers to listen to a choir, communicate with choir members and the conductor, and compose a work suitable for that particular choir. The data collected disclosed the composer as an important link in the process of conductors choosing their repertoire. The interaction between the various role players in the process of choosing repertoire can be illustrated as follows:

### **Illustration 3**

#### **Schematic representation: Interaction between various role players**

Although some conductors of children's choirs who have experienced success and international exposure, value the role of the composer and interact with composers by consulting them and requiring commissioned works, it is the opinion of the author that most conductors of children's choirs generally underestimate this valuable opportunity. Some conductors do not even consider the option of interacting with composers and seem to regard such opportunities exclusively for 'high profile' regional and school choirs.

Most South African respondent conductors indicated that they made use of existing South African compositions. Local respondents were, however, found to make less use of new commissioned works than their overseas counterparts.

May (2007) refers to the composer Hendrik Hofmeyr as "probably the most commissioned

composer living in South Africa” especially with regard to choral works (2007: 8). However, this collaboration between conductors and composers seems to be the exception rather than the rule. The role of South African composers in the process of a conductor’s quest to choose suitable repertoire for children’s choirs can only be fulfilled if better communication is established between conductors and composers in South Africa.

## ***B. THE USE OF SOUTH AFRICAN COMPOSITIONS AND COMMISSIONED WORKS***

Conductors were asked to what extent they used commissioned works. An analysis of feedback from South African conductors and conductors abroad revealed that South African conductors are less inclined to request commissioned works from composers. The following graph illustrates that more conductors abroad interact with composers in comparison to South African respondents.

### **Illustration 4**

#### **Graph: The use of commissioned works: a comparison between overseas and South African respondents**

In this research it was found that the role of interaction between conductors and composers can make a valuable contribution towards enhancing the repertoire of children’s choirs. It consequently expands and strengthens the collection of existing original South African choral compositions.

Finding suitable music for children’s choirs proves to be a great challenge. The author concludes that more interaction between composers and conductors can play a positive role in this respect. Only a few of the conductors involved in this study were shown to realise the value and importance of interaction with composers. Communication between composers and conductors over a wide spectrum (from regional choirs to school choirs of different levels of quality) is one of the key issues in the process of finding and expanding suitable repertoire. More conductors, especially those involved with school choirs, should be encouraged to commission works specifically for their choirs. It was found in this study that composers need the interaction with conductors who request from them

original compositions, as this stirs up composers’ motivation and contributes towards expanding the existing South African repertoire for children’s choirs. Requests from conductors are the most important stimulus for composers to compose music for children’s choirs. Composers’ interest in children’s choir repertoire and the composing of most works result from commissions that they receive.

Interaction between composers and conductors could lead to the creation of more original South African compositions as well as more arrangements of South African folk music. This would offer local choirs the opportunity to choose from a richer variety of locally composed music, or arrangements within a South African context.

Responses from composers suggested that structured commissioned works, under the leadership of a South African choir organisation, can make an enriching contribution towards a balanced and varied treasure of children’s choral repertoire in South Africa on an annual basis. Improved collaboration between composers and choral conductors, as well as the involvement of national organisations can exert a very positive influence on the wealth of repertoire for children’s choirs.

Respondents agreed that during the past decades there has been growth in the standard of South African repertoire for children’s choirs. Contemporary South African compositions for children’s choirs compare favourably with those overseas. Moreover, there is an increasing demand for repertoire in this field. The respondents also maintained that international exposure was having an influence on the choice of repertoire of South African children’s choirs.

The following has emerged regarding factors that play a role in new compositions: the use of experimental techniques has become a trend over the last decade and such techniques are employed to an increasing extent. Although *a cappella* singing is regarded as of higher value in choral singing, both *a cappella* and accompanied singing are equally applied in compositions. Personal factors, for example, their own participation as children in children’s choirs, or exposure to excellent children’s choirs sparked an interest in

composers' enthusiasm to create works for children's choirs. The role of religion as an inspiration for new compositions varies; some composers regard religion as an important force behind their compositions, while for others religion does not play a role.

The respondents generally agreed that choral arrangements can make a positive contribution to choral repertoire, especially with regard to folk music. Arrangements of popular songs, however, met with a negative reaction. It has to be noted, however, that in a world where children are increasingly exposed to the media and a commercial approach, music from a popular genre cannot be ignored and could be included as repertoire without neglecting folk and serious music.

## CONCLUSION

In this qualitative study, various factors were examined that influence the origin and nature of new compositions for children's choirs. Methods of data collection included literature reviews, interviews and questionnaires. South African composers, as well as local and international conductors of children's choirs were involved in the study as respondents. The seven composers involved reflected not only on personal aspects that play a role in their interest in and the nature of their compositions, but also on their general views regarding the choice of repertoire. The conductors involved reported on various role players that influenced their choice of repertoire, and the extent to which they themselves included South African compositions as repertoire.

The research revealed that the choice of repertoire for children's choirs is considered to be one of the most important challenges faced by conductors. The decisions that choir conductors make when choosing repertoire do not take place in isolation. Different role players affect the way conductors choose repertoire. The preferences, planning and objectives of the conductor, the interests of the choir and the expectations of the audience all play a role. However, the role of composers is often underestimated. The study found that the role that South African composers play in the process of a conductor's quest to choose suitable repertoire for

children's choirs varies. Most South African conductors who took part in this research indicated that they made use of existing choral compositions. This implies that local respondents make less use of new commissioned works than do their overseas counterparts. Feedback from respondents confirmed the notion that composers do not work in a vacuum and that collaboration between composers and conductors has a significant effect on their compositions. Requests and specific requirements by conductors who commission works, the unique sound quality of a particular choir and even the nature of the relationship between the conductor and composer play a role. Apart from inspiration, other factors that play a role include the rewriting of existing works originally composed for mixed choirs, the geographical location of choirs, religion (to a greater or lesser extent) and a predilection for compositions based on, or arrangements of folk music.

Since conductors often find it difficult to locate sources of suitable choral repertoire, requesting commissioned works from composers for specific choirs offers a constructive solution to this problem. This would support the belief that South African compositions composed within a South African context should constitute an important part of local concert programmes. It is every conductor's responsibility to ensure that composers from their own country compose new works, thereby contributing to the body of repertoire and improving the standard of local choral repertoire. Composers who are invited by conductors to attend their choir's rehearsals and concerts feel better equipped to compose suitable works for specific choirs and seem to develop a better understanding of the needs and limitations of young singers. The standard of South African compositions could also improve through regular performances and recordings of commissioned works. The author concludes that collaboration between composers and conductors as artists can be an enriching experience for all role players. This partnership is one of the key elements in the creative process of finding and expanding suitable South African repertoire for children's choirs.



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