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Time to lift stigma from choirboys



SCOTT HARRISON

mages of masculinity in Australia are frequently presented in a stereotypical manner that is not conducive to men leading fulfilled and balanced lives. Recent events have emphasised the negative aspects of male-dominated activity, yet there are many opportunities for men and boys to participate in pursuits that are non-competitive, non-violent and non-misogynistic.

Artistic endeavours offer men the prospect of meaningful engagement with others. Unfortunately, artistic men often feel restricted in their recreational interests because many such activities are portrayed as feminine. Music is one case in which the consequences of this self-imposed restriction mean boys tend not to be involved in playing violin, flute and, perhaps most significantly, singing. When they do participate in the early years of schooling, the pressure of adolescence forces boys to retreat and students give up music in their droves. Again, choirs are the main site in which this takes place.

The lack of participation by men and boys in choirs has been a documented problem for the last century in Western cultures, yet the involvement of men in choirs in other cultures doesn't have the same stigma. The reasons for non-involvement in the Australian context are complex but the core element is the erroneous connection of femininity with homosexuality. Boys who participate in so-called feminine activities are subject to scrutiny and vulnerable to homophobic abuse. Participation in visual art, drama and dance can also bring

ridicule. The use of the voice, often when it is high and unchanged before puberty, is the pastime most likely to result in verbal and physical violence. Bullying through exclusion is also one of the ways in which boys are encouraged to fit the norm. This situation ultimately discourages involvement in some forms of music and, in extreme cases, leads to more complete social isolation, depression and suicidal tendencies.

Associated with this concept are two other themes: male gender role rigidity and the phenomenon of avoidance of femininity. Males are, generally speaking, less comfortable in crossing the gender divide than females and the result for arts participation is a gender imbalance. The gender divide is often too great a gap for boys to overcome, so they give up. Avoidance of femininity is, in terms of music, problematic because soft, gentle, high instruments are perceived as feminine and therefore shunned. Singing, along with flute, violin and harp are all in this category and the data from school ensembles indicates that more than 90 per cent of children playing these instruments in primary schools are female. In secondary schools, this increases to 95 per cent for flute and singing. School music teachers therefore find management of ensembles particularly problematic when this imbalance persists in upper primary and secondary schools.

The situation is not irrevocable, however. Boys and men will perform popular music and in theatrical productions. The interrogation of the unique nature of these performances provides

researchers and practitioners with possible solutions to engaging males in music. There are also isolated cases in which choirs can buck the stereotype: the recent successes of Australia's Birralee Blokes and Britain's Only Men Aloud in television competitions are proof that when strong leadership, appropriate role models and choice of repertoire are factors, men will engage with choral singing.

Boys in Britain have embraced new ways of learning through the Musical Futures and Sing Up programs. Similarly, middle-aged men are taking up their guitars in programs such as Weekend Warriors and singing in groups such as the Spooky Men's Chorale.

With moves towards a national curriculum firmly on the agenda, the time is ripe for schools and policymakers to ensure all students have the opportunity to engage in music without fear of retribution. While the arts have been included in the second phase of development of the national curriculum, a system that embraces – normalises even – singing would assist in changing attitudes towards singing, music and the arts at large. Who knows, perhaps government and the corporate world will move their sponsorship dollars into arts activities where community benefit and wellbeing are guaranteed.

Scott Harrison is a music lecturer at Griffith University and author of *Male Voices: Stories Of Boys Learning Through Making Music.*

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