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Children's Choirs

An Interview with Helen Kemp

by Barbara Tagg and Dennis Shrock

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Tagg: When did you begin your work with children, and who were the significant individuals who have influenced you?

Kemp: I began as a sophomore or junior in college when I took a weekend church position that involved a children's choir. Prior to that I had no experience at all working with children, and at first I really floundered.

I was helped and greatly influenced by my father. He had a wonderful tenor voice, but his profession was making the American and National League baseballs for the Spalding Company. He visited my rehearsals and told me that I was paying attention only to the music, not to the children. So, he offered what I called "the baseball bribe." He would give an official American or National League baseball to every child, girl or boy, who had 100% attendance and excellent behavior. Well, I'll tell you, I had a large, captive, and well-behaved choir. His offer was a real

motivator, and it was great for me because I could concentrate on working with the choir. This experience gave me my first insight into the importance of working with the whole child, emotionally as well as musically, and of relating musical things to familiar and popular things like athletics. (My dad was a baseball coach, too.) Now, I don't recommend bribes, but I give my father a lot of credit for helping me to learn to work effectively with children.

My mother was also a good influence. She was a gentle encourager to whom music in

the home was important. Through home singing and the "family orchestra" we heard *and participated* in music at home as a way of life.

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Other very influential people were my high school music

Choristers Guild LETTERS

teacher, J. Edward Moyer (who is still doing choral work) and his wife, Frances (who was my basketball coach as well as an excellent pianist). They helped me discover that I could really sing, and gave me my first solo singing experience, the lead role in an operetta. This changed my life. Moyer also led me to Westminster Choir College, where I studied with LoRean Hodapp, another tremendous artistic influence. To this day I still rely on the pure, lyric, spinning vocal quality which she had and taught me to develop. It's my model for working with children.

Perhaps my most important influence came from my own children. As they grew, I saw how the whole child develops, not just the voice. I saw how physical, mental, and emotional factors all relate, and how a wholeness of approach helps with the teaching of music.

Shrock: Can you elaborate on the importance of singing as part of home life? I know that you and your husband, John sang at home with your five children, and even toured as "The Kemp Carolers." How important is home singing to the musical development of children?

Kemp: Let me put it this way: My husband and I are both idealists. When we decided we wanted to have a family, we also decided that providing our children with a musical home atmosphere was very important. This involved singing together as a family experience. Our eleven grandchildren now sing in their homes, and whenever we get together, we

all sing. Our sons and daughters have taught their children what we call "the family repertoire" — rounds, canons, and songs. This summer seventeen of us sang a family concert in North Carolina. It was a special joy.

It's difficult to teach children who have no musical experiences at home—who neither sing nor hear their mothers or fathers sing, even if it's just humming. Without the home experience, a child doesn't feel the naturalness, spontaneity, or enjoyment of singing, and the sense of well-being it can provide.

I'm going to continue my work with mothers, because I believe in the importance of their children's early musical experiences.

As a result of my experiences and the value I place on family singing, I've been working with organizations such as MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers). I recently did a workshop with mothers and their three to five-year-olds. I taught them songs they could sing together, and was very pleased by the response, especially from mothers who had nice voices but thought they couldn't sing at all; they were overjoyed at being given such a rewarding activity for themselves and their children. I'm going to continue my work with

mothers, because I believe in the importance of their children's early musical experiences.

Shrock: You have talked about the influence of your voice study. I know you have a superior solo voice and have done significant solo vocal work. How important is *your* voice to *your* work with children?

Kemp: It is really very important, but I think the repertoire and teaching techniques are more important. The director of a children's choir doesn't have to have a great solo voice, but he or she has to have an understanding of the child's voice.

I'm always amazed that people know so little repertoire. It is important to give young children music that is appropriate for them — quality music that encourages interest and good vocal habits.

Tagg: Would you please describe the progression of your career?

Kemp: In my early adult life I considered myself mainly a singer. I sang most of the oratorio literature. Working with children was a sideline, although I was doing it and enjoying it very much. After I graduated from Westminster and taught there for three years, John and I took positions at a church in Oklahoma City where I was the soprano soloist and directed four children's choirs. Early in our work there, John and I became involved with Choristers Guild. In fact, we were charter members.

Because of my work with the children at the church and my involvement with Choristers Guild, I was asked to work with other children's choirs across the country and do workshops for teachers. Eventually, in 1968, John became Executive Director of Choristers Guild and I became their Director of Workshops and Festivals. I worked with people across the country in setting up children's festivals — in planning them (often a year in advance), choosing repertoire, working with local teachers during the training period, and then directing the final program. This work contributed a lot to promoting interest in children's choirs across the country, and in giving people tools and techniques for raising the standards of children's choral experiences.

Then, in 1972, John and I rejoined the faculty of Westminster Choir College, and taught there until 1983.

Tagg: What significant changes have you seen throughout the progression of your career?

Kemp: First of all — this is a generalization — there were larger choirs years ago. Our children's choir in the church, for instance, had eighty members. Today, there seem to be fewer children in choirs, but then there are more choirs.

The biggest change over the years is in the availability of material-repertoire and tools for teaching. In the early 1940's there were perhaps five or so single pieces and several collections. That was all. And there were no source

materials for instruction. That is why Choristers Guild was founded. Ruth Jacobs had a vision that there should be standards of quality for children, and that directors should have teaching materials available to them. She often came to see me rehearse my children's choirs and asked me to write about the things I was doing. When she died, her husband gave me all her notebooks — lectures she gave all over the country. Now, as Choristers Guild celebrates its 40th anniversary, I have edited some of Ruth's writings.

Today there is a generous amount of available repertoire and teaching material. We have many skilled people sharing their expertise and we have a wealth of repertoire from which to choose. With so many options, it's important to search for repertoire of quality and to make our choices carefully.

Tagg: What changes have you observed in the children during the course of your career?

Kemp: The children themselves have not changed, but their models have. The music children listen to and then use as a model has a big effect on their willingness to strive for the kind of vocal production we want from them. If they listen to a lot of rock, especially hard rock, or if they listen to only one kind of popular music, then any kind of reference to another sound production is like a foreign language to them. This is difficult, because you must first overcome this language barrier before you can accomplish your musical work.

Not long ago I was involved in some recording sessions. I used six very smart children, but they produced glottal attacks on many sounds, and they scooped up to pitches. It was quite a challenge for them to overcome this. At first they couldn't hear what they were doing. But, when they heard themselves on tape and made a conscious effort, they were able to overcome these habits. In earlier years working on good vocal production wasn't the issue it is now. Today, it is your first and most important challenge.

Shrock: You have worked with many, many directors of children's choirs. Are there common concerns they seem to have? What questions do they most frequently ask you?

Kemp: Everyone wants to know what to do with the children who can't sing — the "monotones" and the ones who don't match pitch. This seems to be an eternal question. I've worked in this area a lot and have written about it, but there is no single, magic answer or solution. There are, however, some helpful considerations and techniques. Basically, the child needs to know that the sound must be heard in the brain; the child should listen like a computer. Generally, individual work is necessary — several minutes before each rehearsal. In addition to this, children having problems matching pitch must have experience in unison singing with other voices — this gives them the sensation of matching pitch. When I work with children I usually have them sing songs rather than scales. *Happy Birthday*

or *Jingle Bells* will give me a much better indication of their abilities and will allow me to accomplish more than a scale or abstract melodic pattern. I insist that the children listen with their *ears* and their *eyes*. This is as important as what they do with their throats and vocal cords. *Listen* is the key word. I ask the children to listen louder than they sing. And when children do not match the tones I sing, I match *their* tones.

There are different reasons for pitch difficulties. From the jitters to the imitation of adults, many of the causes are not musical. Developing a close relationship with the children will often give you clues to remedies. In my book, *Of Primary Importance: Information and Application: A practical guide for directors of younger elementary choristers* (published by Choristers Guild and distributed by The Lorenz Corporation), I identify many of the common problems dealing with pitch matching and I recommend various techniques for remedy.

I find that addressing multiple senses — sight and feeling, with color and movement — grabs the attention of the children.

Another common question deals with behavior. Every-

one wants to know how to deal with the hyperactive child, or how to keep children quiet enough so that work can be done. In answer to this, I try to give teaching examples which are so interesting and fascinating that they command attention. Attention is the key. I find that addressing multiple senses — sight and feeling, with color and movement — grabs the attention of the children. I do a lot with visual reminders like targets on the wall and posters. The old saying, "One picture is worth a thousand words" is very true in dealing with children. One of the suggestions I give in my book is making a chart of pictorial representation of the story of each song. It is not only interesting to the young child to see the music in pictures, but it also helps them learn and remember the song.

Maintaining enthusiasm and interest help with getting and keeping the attention of the children. I've done a lot of this since I'm not a policeman. Children are not afraid of me. My first consideration deals with the selection of materials. Music must be worthwhile and of quality. My next consideration deals with the presentation of materials. The way a song is presented is in exact proportion to the children's interest and enthusiasm. If you believe in the music — if you have studied it and know what you want to do with it — if you have a plan that considers where the children are in terms of their background and culture, and attempt to reach them in terms they can understand and relate to — if you are excited yourself about what

you are doing — and if you make your presentation seem fresh and spontaneous, you will get the attention of the children.

I remember a particular boy who was pretty tough, but there was one song that got to him. It was a simple song about a tree. One day he asked me if he could take the music home. I said he probably shouldn't because we only had a limited number of copies; if he should forget to bring it back, someone would have to do without. Later, he asked me if he could *buy* the song. I told him I would think about it. That night I met his father and gave him a copy of the music, rolled up and tied with a bow, to give to his son as a present. This song was so important to him, I wanted him to appreciate it as much as possible. Repertoire is *so* important; often it strikes meaningful chords in youngsters.

Shrock: Are problems similar amongst different ages of children?

Kemp: Absolutely. Musical skills don't seem to go by age. You can't say that just because someone is six years old and in first grade he or she should be able to do a certain thing in singing. It's as if each child has his or her own schedule of development. However, I know that the younger you start the process of helping the child develop a musical awareness, the more success you can have.

Tagg: Do you feel that the younger the children come to great music, the more they appreciate it? What are the implications of this for public school teachers?

Kemp: There are very important implications. Quality music is a must, but it often takes time both to learn to sing *and* to appreciate. Directors need to be careful of instant gratification. I go to a lot of reading sessions and hear too many songs that are insubstantial. Now, I'm not a kill-joy; I love a good jazzy piece. But too many pieces cater to immediate enjoyment without enough substance for lasting appreciation. Teachers often feel that they are obliged to make things too good too soon. They want to come up with successful programs right away, and they want to please parents. This gets them into the "entertainment only" syndrome. Entertainment is important, but it is not the only function of the teacher. I remember doing *O Lord, Our Governor* by Benedetto Marcello. It had some nice descending melodic passages. The children in the choir absolutely hated it at first. But by the end of the year, it was their favorite. In fact, other music that they were not so enthused about at first also became favorites of theirs. And, the pieces which they thought were favorites at the beginning were not those that lasted; before long they tired of them. Sometimes we're in such a hurry we don't give lasting appreciation an opportunity to occur.

I encourage teachers to plan their repertoire as they do their menus. They need to plan a well-balanced musical diet. They should serve certain pieces for musical protein and other pieces for musical desserts. Some pieces with immediate appeal stimulate the appetite, while others are important for long-term growth. Just as you shouldn't

eat all foods of only one type, you shouldn't sing all music of only one type. Music, as food, is better and more satisfying for you the greater its nutritional content.

Texts are just as important in this consideration. When I choose music for a festival, I check the words carefully; I evaluate them as poetry, asking myself if they are worth "taking up space" in the minds of young, impressionable children. I often write the texts on the inside cover of my music, and then read them as poetry. This helps me evaluate the entire piece of music.

Tagg: How would you describe to beginning teachers or directors your concept of tone quality?

Kemp: Clear, vital, buoyant, rather floating, and lively. This last consideration, *lively*, is important. Many people go for a sound that is too pale. I think children's voices are not pale. They are alive, bright, energetic, and unforced, and still they have clarity and purity.

Tagg: What about differences between boys' and girls' voices?

Kemp: Until puberty, until the boy's speaking voice gives indication that it is changing, I treat both boys and girls exactly alike. This is so even though the timbres of boys' and girls' voices are somewhat different and identifiable. With my eyes closed, I can tell the difference. *But, they sing the same way.* My energy level has to be higher, and my focus stronger when working with boys, especially those who need motivation.

And to get the most out of them, I place them in the center of the choirs, with girls on both sides. I don't do this particularly for vocal or musical reasons (although sometimes this is a consideration); I do it for reasons of focus and attention.

I want to talk a bit about the boy's changing voice. When it happens it must be treated as normal, even exciting process. The boy should not think he is strange or different, and he should not be forced to continue singing music which has become too high for him or to sing music which is too low. On the other hand, however, teachers should be aware that many times the boys can still sing in upper registers longer than they may think. Teachers also should not force boys into another choir, such as a junior high group, which may be too old for them. A boy's voice can change when he is only eleven or twelve years old. Recently, I worked with two boys in a summer music camp who were entering the sixth grade. Both were good musicians and had good senses of pitch, but they could no longer sing the high parts. I suggested they go into an older age group choir, but they said they weren't ready for junior high. Socially, some boys are not ready for this leap. In situations like this, sing only what fits their voices. I often have them sing parts an octave lower than printed. Of course, I encourage them to sing lightly. This is better, I think, than having the boys mouth words or sing uncomfortable parts. You want to keep the boys involved — singing — and working to find their right placement.

Age classification is very important in children's choirs. Too wide an age span in one choir is usually a disadvantage, since it is very difficult to choose materials to stimulate the interest of both the oldest and youngest children. Moreover, a choir of eight to eighteen-year-olds is no longer exclusively a children's choir. It is best to work with children who have similar abilities. I say this because I've adjudicated in situations where younger children have attempted to do things too difficult for them — like singing in multiple parts when unison singing would have been better. Beautiful, simple unison singing can be as rewarding and as great an accomplishment as difficult, multiple-part singing. Beauty and the development of the voice with good intonation are the goals.

Shrock: Do you have suggestions for men teaching children? Should men sing in the octave of children?

Kemp: Men should do most of their singing in their own natural octave. They should have the ability to match the tones of the children, but they should not sing everything in falsetto — this gives children a false sense of the male voice, even though many men can sing falsetto beautifully. I worked with some wonderful male teachers this summer who had developed nodes because of constantly singing and modeling in falsetto. A male teacher can identify a model sound amongst the children for demonstration, and he can let the children know that *his* octave is for *his* voice while *their* octave is for

theirs. Beyond this, it is important for teachers, male and female, to demonstrate a good posture and stance. And the look of the face, the expression and enjoyment of singing, is extremely helpful in establishing good tone.

Tagg: On a practical level, how can one incorporate these things into an efficient rehearsal? How can one achieve excellence in a short amount of rehearsal time?

Kemp: In striving for excellence in a limited amount of time you should concentrate on fundamentals. These will build your program by building on each other, and they will make your later work more efficient. Careful work on fundamentals will build good habits. I have certain things I do in my first rehearsals, and certain other things in later stages. At first I stress discipline (by this I mean order and structure, not negative behavior response) and posture, and I teach a process of sitting, standing, breathing, and then singing. Of course, I teach an *attitude* about all this, not just the technique. I find that a structured way of sitting and standing gets me started well. If you have guidelines, the children accept them and respond. Children want and respond well to structure. The mastery of fundamentals frees the teacher to teach creatively and artistically.

I always have a plan, although I try to make it seem spontaneous and natural, and I always relate everything I do to the children. I often make my plan visible — on a board or a large newsprint tablet. I list the main objectives of the rehearsal and check them off

as they are accomplished. Children love to see accomplishments.

Tagg: Do you begin rehearsals with vocalization exercises or do you work on this in conjunction with repertoire in the rehearsal?

Kemp: I use warm-ups at the beginnings of rehearsals, but always with a purpose. Instead of abstract melodic scales or patterns, I'll use snatches of music from our repertoire. Musical phrases are much better for the children; they are more interesting, more accessible, and they help you relate warm-ups to the music.

Tagg: Do your rehearsals include music reading?

Kemp: Yes. This is important. I base my work on what I call the transition "from rote to note." From the ear to the eye, I tell the children the music "sounds like this and looks like that." I stress the connection between what they hear and what they see, between the sound of music and its notational language. I also encourage parents to give their children instrumental lessons. This really helps musical development. From the second grade, when children are learning to read words, they should have music in their hands and be learning to read music.

Shrock: Is there a way you can express your philosophy that includes all the elements you've been talking about?

Kemp: I often say to the children, and have them sing as a warm-up, "Body, mind, spirit, voice; it takes the whole person to sing and

rejoice." Or, as my grand children have taught me — from a Whitney Houston song — "I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way."

Bibliography by Helen Kemp

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- Children Sing His Praise—*Helen Kemp is one of five contributing writers. Her chapter on "Understanding and Developing the Child's Voice" is coordinated with the two video cassettes listed below. (Concordia Publishing House 99-1238. 214 pages. 1985)
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- Sing and Rejoice; Guiding Young Singers—*Classroom performance demonstrations and techniques. (Concordia Publishing House VHS - 87MZ0231. Beta II - 87MZ0233) □