

Singing, how important! - Collective singing manifesto 2020

Introduction

23% of Dutch people sing¹. Over 13,000 choirs are registered throughout the entire country². Over 10% of the population sing in a choir³. These choirs are supported by thousands of dedicated volunteers. Such popularity has a reason: of all ways to make music, singing is the most available to all. That is why people from all walks of life sing: young and old, rich and poor, educated and low-skilled. Singing empowers individuals, and collective singing stimulates social cohesion and the forming of friendships.

The Dutch choral world is vibrant. Institutions and individuals share a feeling of urgency and momentum. Momentum, because society and politics are increasingly recognizing the connecting power of choral singing. Urgency, because the choral sector has a need for better internal coordination, better connection with the youth and the public, new perspectives, and more active support from, and collaboration with, state sectors.

The first step has already been taken. In mid-2016, a large number of societies, institutions and individuals of the choral world came together in Utrecht with one goal in mind: to create a collective manifesto. A manifesto with clear spearheads that all parties involved would seek to collectively realize. These spearheads act as guidelines for the development of new ideas, plans and ambitions. They recognize opportunities as their point of departure and take today's society as a base.

After all, such opportunities are plentiful. Choirs are developing promising projects that put choral music at the heart of society; both the role of music in the classroom and the development of talent are being taken more seriously again; professionals and amateurs are increasingly collaborating, and new ways of performing and participating are arising. We see the potential to further develop choral music as an innovative art form, but also to give collective singing a central role in a connected society: *anyone* and *everyone* can join in.

To fully utilize these opportunities, however, action needs to be taken. Because there is an insufficient stream of well-educated artistic talent; the development of new repertoires attuned to present-day society is lagging behind; unions and choral associations are dealing with declining membership numbers. Moreover, the choral world is badly represented in the subsidy system and there is a need for more coordination and alignment within the choral world.

Which brings us to this manifesto: a first step in the direction of a stronger, more vital choral world. Its mission: **to connect**. The aim is to establish a strong network of amateurs, professionals, choral associations, and festivals that represent collective singing in all its diversity, and to collaborate to achieve long-term goals. A network that makes choirs from all regions, of all styles, and of any level, feel at home. It enables talented individuals to interact in a dynamic environment, and lets the all parties involved exchange repertoires, projects, and ideas. A network that is ensured by a central platform, a 'NOC*NSF', that is fostered and recognized by both the choral world and society, and will have taken on a definitive shape by 2020.

This manifesto focuses on collective singing in all possible ways. From gospel choir to chamber choir, shanty choir to close harmony groups, and the traditional oratorio societies. After all, collective singing is unique: it enables individual voices to resonate as part of a greater whole. This manifesto refers to the entire range of singing and collective singing in all its possible facets.

2020 has been chosen as an initial point of reference: it marks the end of a cultural policy period (2017-2020) and is thereby the beginning of a new period of further anchoring and refining the ambitions expressed in this manifesto.

¹ The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2016), Sport and Culture – patterns in interest and participation

² LKCA (National Centre of Expertise for Cultural Education and Amateur Arts)

³ European Choral Association – Europa Cantat (2015, in the frame of project EU-cooperation project “VOICE – Vision on Innovation for Choral Music in Europe”) Singing Europe – 37 million choral singers in Europe

Spearheads

COLLECTIVE SINGING IN SOCIETY

1. Collective singing is diverse

A wide range of target groups, a reflection of society

Situation: The choral sector currently offers a wide variety of activities. People with different cultural backgrounds collectively sing varying styles of music. Yet, not all groups are equally represented in the choral world, and different styles and cultures are too often separate worlds. Performances primarily exhibit one particular style which reinforces the divisions. The need to break down these barriers and be more attuned to today's society is widely felt.

Ultimate objective: Collective singing is inclusive: various social classes, generations, cultural backgrounds, and artistic styles come together. Distinctions between the various styles do not imply value judgements. Conductors and artistic leaders are trained to give shape to an inclusive way of choral singing, and choirs can draw upon a wide range of repertoires that reflect present-day society.

Ambition 2020: A platform has been realized for the exchange of knowledge between musical styles and cultures. Regional choral events provide a meeting place for all groups in the various regions and provinces.

2. The choral world is in contact with the public

The world as a stage for choral music

Situation: Choral music reaches a large audience and, at the same time, is not clearly visible to the general public. Audience reach can no longer be taken for granted; the traditional concert, location and repertoire are under pressure. New forms that are more attuned to the perception of broader audiences are not yet receiving the recognition and general acceptance they deserve. There is a need for new forms that are attuned to the perception of larger and more diverse target audiences.

Ultimate objective: The way the choral world reconciles "high" and "low" art sets an example for other art forms. New modes of performing are to be found that attract large audiences both inside and outside the concert halls. Choral music is present in the public domain, at national celebrations and commemorations, and in the media.

Ambition 2020: Choral music is visible to larger and more diverse audiences. Locally, choirs are to experiment with concerts at alternative locations in their city or province. Annual festivals feature innovative performances.

3. The relevance is widely recognized

The social value of collective singing is felt and expressed

Situation: Collective singing is often associated with traditional or religious values. The importance of collective singing for society is not yet public knowledge. A plethora of studies has confirmed the importance of singing for, among other things, health, social cohesion, and individual sense of purpose, yet this message has hardly got through to mainstream Dutch society and the government.

Ultimate aim: The value of collective singing is broadly recognized and is therefore utilized in society. The choral world expresses this relevance, which is given further shape by research, publications, and campaigns.

Ambition 2020: Increased societal awareness of the value of collective singing. New projects are to express the relevance by giving choral music a discerning presence in all areas of society. Choirs actively seek the connection with social organizations in their region. The value of collective singing is more often explicitly expressed and also felt during performances.

COLLECTIVE SINGING IN THE PICTURE

4. Collective singing is visible

Visible, recognizable and topical: within and outside the sector

Situation: People sing from all social, cultural, and age backgrounds. Collective singing is always a possibility, anywhere. The Netherlands hosts thousands of choirs, from shanty choirs with 100 members to early music ensembles with 6 singers. Yet, collective singing has still got an image problem and is not clearly visible.

Ultimate aim: Society views collective singing as valuable. Role models appeal to people within and outside the sector. Both professional and amateur singers proudly express the fact that they sing in a choir and are appreciated for this.

Ambition 2020: The choral world (amateurs and professionals) exhibits itself at a vibrant (inter)national festival that receives national media attention. Thanks to a powerful public campaign, society becomes aware of the importance and scope of the choral world.

5. Role models inspire choral singers

Quality and diversity with a clear connection between top and novices

Situation: People have all sorts of reasons to sing together. Often, artistic ambition goes hand in hand with the social aspect. The top choirs, which focus on the artistic aspect, often have little connection with the many choirs that prioritize collective aspect of singing. As a result, there are few transfers and exchanges. It is hard to find much-discussed projects that inspire choral singers of all levels and styles.

Ultimate aim: Thanks to appealing projects and powerful role models, new people are constantly drawn to the choral sector, and singers can easily progress from one level to the other. Exemplary and leading projects generate (inter)national attention for the choral sector as a whole. Quality is defined in terms of artistic levels as well as social value.

Ambition 2020: Several exemplary projects, of both top social and artistic value take place, which actualize the connection between the professional top and local amateur choirs in a sustainable way.

6. The Netherlands counts internationally

Professionals and amateurs as international ambassadors of their own choral culture

Situation: Dutch choirs go abroad for concert tours, exchanges, or to participate at festivals, often on their own initiative and with their own resources. Dutch choral organizations are active members of the European choral umbrella organizations. Although pieces of choral music are written in the Netherlands, they hardly ever garner recognition approach. There is little (financial) incentive for the export of Dutch choirs and choral repertoire. The Netherlands hosts only a limited number of international festivals but this potential has not yet been fully utilized.

Ultimate aim: Choirs, conductors, repertoire and knowledge are exchanged internationally. The Dutch choirs and choral conductors are clearly visible abroad, and the Netherlands is recognized as a leading country for the development of quality performances, socially relevant projects, and new repertoires.

Ambition 2020: A large international festival in the Netherlands puts the rich Dutch choral culture on the world map. Tangible connections with foreign initiatives and partners are made. Internationally renowned music publishers have their eye on Dutch choral conductors. Dutch (professional) choirs have an important role in and beyond the Netherlands.

COLLECTIVE SINGING AND EDUCATION

7. The youth sings

A role for singing at schools with appropriate repertoires and in line with extracurricular activities

Situation: The important role of music in education is again receiving more attention. However, although singing is the most approachable way of engaging with music, schools often focus on playing an instrument. Singing is not naturally part of the daily life of children and young people. Some school students sing every day, and some never do. Primary teacher training courses pay little attention to the opportunities for teachers to sing with a group.

Ultimate aim: Singing acts as the basis for all further musical education at school. Children and young people sing, both at school and elsewhere. Talent is recognized and cultivated, enabling a clear trajectory to amateur and professional choirs. Primary teacher training courses and conservatories have made choral singing a fixed and valued part of the curriculum. Professional choirs play an important role in the passing on and fostering of knowledge and developing talent and musicianship.

Ambition 2020: A national platform with an engaging ambassador draws attention to and stimulates collective singing among children and young people. Local pilot projects demonstrate the importance of collective singing for the youth and set an example for the rest of the country.

8. Development of the talented singer

A clear development path for talented singers with clear links to professional practice

Situation: Singers who would like to become professionals have difficulty finding a suitable education in the Netherlands. Conservatories mainly focus on solo singing, despite professional choirs expressing a need for high-level newcomers. Similarly, the semi-professional choral singer has little opportunities to further develop him or herself.

Ultimate goal: Because collective singing receives more attention at schools, young people can start to shape their ambition and development at an early stage. Professional choirs and conservatories offer young choral singers possibilities learning pathways of personal development. Professional art education offers tracks with direct links to the professional practice.

Ambition 2020: Every province or region can provide talented singers with clear tracks for solo and choral singing. This is realized by amateur choirs, children's choirs, educational providers, conservatories, and professional choirs collaboratively designing talent development tracks.

9. Choral conducting is a profession

Excellent education for conducting ensembles of all musical styles and levels

Situation: Few choral conductors graduate from conservatories. The Netherlands have only one internationally renowned conductor study program and hardly any alternative tracks. Conservatories educate their conductors to conduct classical top ensembles; the conducting of other musical styles barely receives any attention. Consequently, an insufficient number of adequately educated conductors are available for the 13.000 choirs in the Netherlands, mostly children and amateur choirs that focus on a broad range of musical styles. Besides, amateur choirs don't always know what makes a conductor a 'good' one, and tend to underpay them.

Ultimate objective: Choral conductors have access to diverse, high-quality educational tracks that are connected to the professional practice. The study programs pay attention to the different target groups, musical styles, and levels of ambition. Conducting an amateur choir is celebrated and seen as a profession.

Ambition 2020: Conservatories and other institutes of musical education make effective arrangements with partners in the sector about a renewed educational provision for education and further training of choral conductors.

COLLECTIVE SINGING IN THE FUTURE

10. Choral music is embedded in the future cultural domain

Structural support for professional as well as amateur choirs, and for volunteers as well as professionals

Situation: Despite many people practicing and cherishing choral music, it has not been included in the so-called *Culturele basisinfrastructuur*, the subsidized backbone of the cultural sector in the Netherlands. Structural funding of top Dutch choirs has been minimalized and focuses on classical, Western repertoires. The support for amateur choirs is not centrally organized and varies strongly from region to region. The volunteers, whom almost every amateur choir fully depends on, receive hardly any support. Due to the changing conditions laid down for the granting of a subsidy, it is difficult for the choral sector to gain access to existing resources of funds and authorities.

Ultimate aim: National and local authorities recognize the importance and scope of collective singing as an art form and a social tool. Choral singing, therefore, is embedded in the cultural infrastructure: nationally and locally, culturally and educationally, at the professional and amateur level. Choirs of all genres and styles have found their rightful place in the cultural sphere and in terms of private funding. A strong, dynamic, and supportive network of professionals and amateurs has come to life.

Ambition 2020: An energetic platform has been realized that is internally felt and externally recognized as the voice of the choral sector. This platform supports professionals and volunteers who are active in the choral world and helps to find financial resources for new initiatives.