Beyond the Making of Sounds: *An English Requiem* and the Role of Choral Music in a Changing World

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Chapel of King's College London
Joseph Fort in conversation with Olga Celda Real
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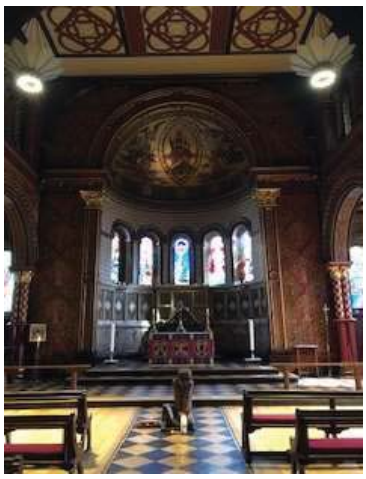
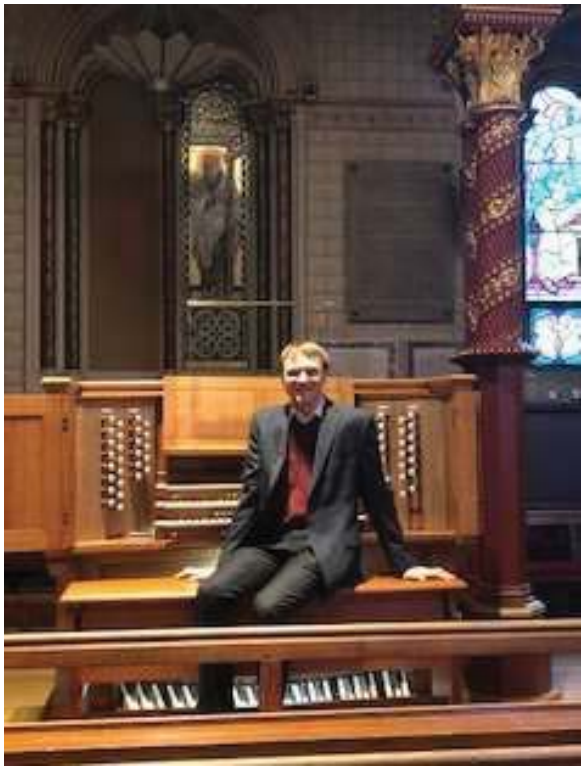


Chapel. King's College London
Photo: OCR

Ein Deutsches Requiem by Johannes Brahms is one of the seminal works by this composer. Brahms himself put together the lyrics, as he extracted the texts from the Lutheran version of the Bible, mixing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocrypha. His *Requiem* breaks with the Latin tradition in more ways than one, as Brahms himself made it clear when naming the composition a 'German Requiem' and when omitting the Last Judgement, a part included in the conventional Latin Requiem. A careful and well-balanced large-scale composition, it possesses a solid structure and it comprises seven movements, effectively making it Brahms's longest piece. Although written for orchestra, choir and soloists, Brahms also proposed a more self-contained version with two soloists and four-hands pianists. It is a very personal piece, its inspiration sometimes attributed to either the sorrow caused by the death of his mother in

1865 or to the lingering pain the tragic death of his friend and mentor in 1856, the great Romantic composer Robert Schumann, caused the young Brahms. Written in-between the years of 1865 and 1868, it has been a favourite of English audiences since its première in 1871, the year at which it was sung in London. A popular piece in both its orchestral and chamber versions, in 1873 the writer G.E Macfarren termed the English version *An English Requiem*, and it is in English that this work was almost always sung.

In December 2017, after a process of nearly two years, the Conductor and Musicologist Joseph Fort, in his position as Director of the Choir of King's College London, presented a launch concert of this seminal piece 'as it was known in nineteenth-century Britain' in the College Chapel, a perfect setting because of the very nature of it. Sung in English and with an ensemble formed by a soprano, a baritone and two pianists, this intimate and stunning version proposed a different view of it: not as an archaic piece of choral music, but as a piece capable of making the audience 'feel and think'. The recording of this version, with Joseph Fort as Conductor, was released on Delphian Records in 2017 to excellent reviews and initiated a series of recordings by him and the Choir of King's College London. This collaboration continues, as this year (2019) they have released a mesmerising recording of *Masses for Double Choir* by Kenneth Leighton and Frank Martin, also on Delphian Records.



Joseph Fort. Chapel King's College London
Photo OCR

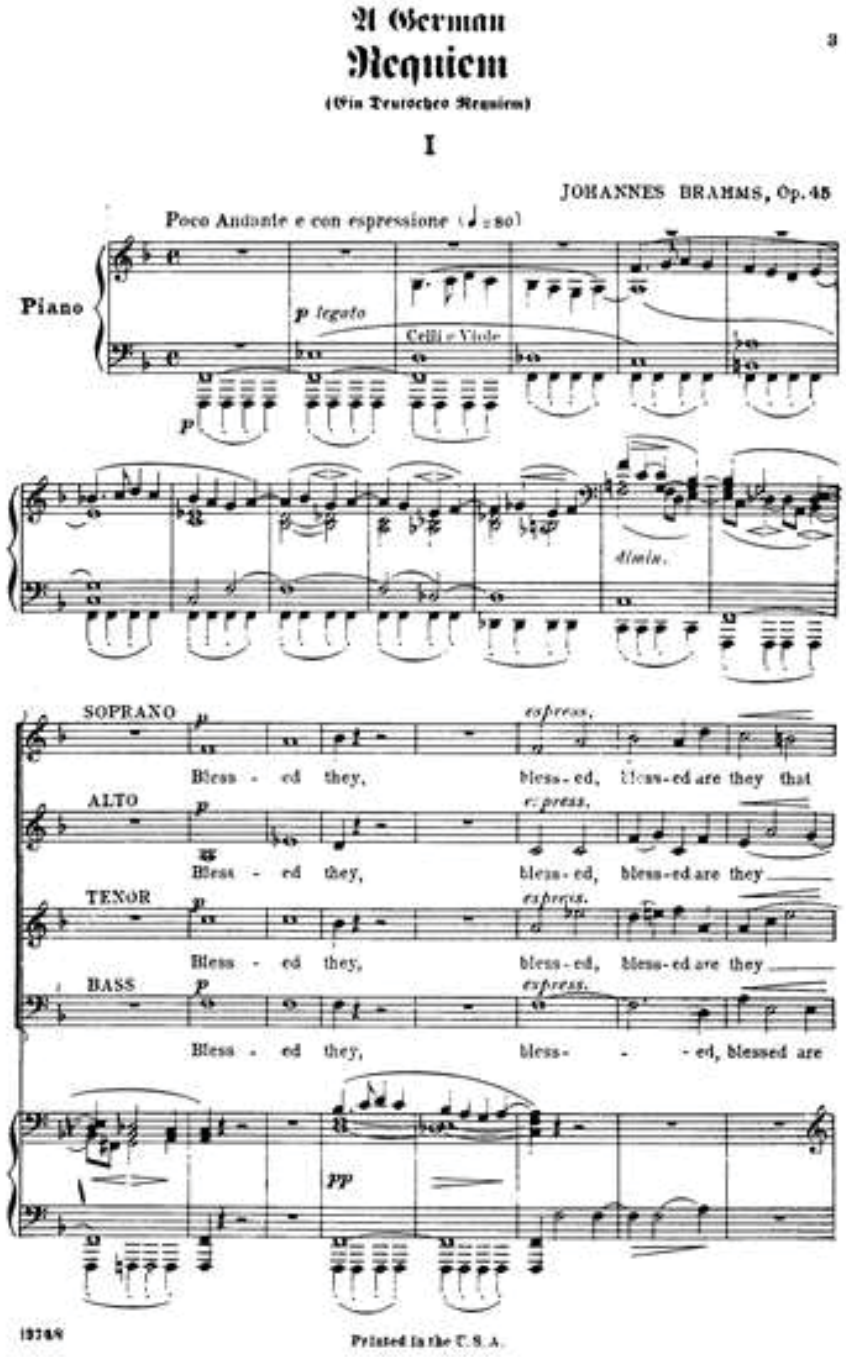
Olga Celda Real. The practice of employing English versions for performances of choral or operatic works originally written in German, Italian or French is often done in Britain, but this particular piece is universally accepted here in German. Hence, how was the process of working on an English version of this *Requiem* for the recording of a CD by the university Choir of King's College London?

Joseph Fort. This was my first CD with the Choir here and I wanted to do something because university music-making should not just be about making sounds, there also should be an intellectual aspect to it. This is why I think that a CD coming from the university should be something that makes you think, as well as moves you. And the possibility of doing this piece of Brahms was something that came to me because I was reading about its premiere. The first premiere was slightly before 1871, it was in 1868, and this was done in Germany. The English premiere happened very close to King's College, it was in Wimpole Street in the house of a surgeon. It was performed by a choir of thirty singers and instead of an orchestra we know that two pianists played. It seems they wanted to do it in English at that point, but actually they didn't have the English text ready yet. In fact, for a long time, until about 2015 or so, people thought that it had been already performed in English, but that was not the case as it was done in German in that first London performance. The person who found this important fact through research is a King's College alumnus, Michael Musgrave, who happened to be visiting King's at this time and who I had never met before. We met in 2016 because he came to do some research about previous organists at the Chapel from fifty years or so ago, and it was during our conversations that he told me about this wrong assumption and offered to send me an article about the *Requiem* he had written. I thought it was really interesting and it was a good option for us to try something novel for our CD. I was also interested about the fact that Michael wrote about how this piece sounded like in the nineteenth-century, but I thought it would be really exciting to actually trying here what it would sound like in the twentieth-first century.

Celda Real. Was the question of language an important factor in the process of creating the final piece and also the fact that the initial process linked material found by people connected to King's College?

Fort. Yes, that is how it was. The very first English version was no very good, so they quickly did a new one, which was the first time this piece was done in 1873. Interestingly also I didn't know this fact until only a few weeks ago, but I found out that there are further King's College connections because the person who conducted the very first performance in 1873 was John Hullah. He was a Fellow of King's and a Professor of Vocal Studies. He might have been employed by the Theology Department at the time, before the Music Department, and I think the singers of that first performance were students of the Royal Academy of Music. With this background we wanted to do something that made us question how Brahms was mostly heard in nineteenth-century England. And this premise made me look into what Brahms said about language. He went through the various languages this particular piece could be done and his verdict was that

Latin did not work because he was trying to get away from the usual liturgical music of the church. He said that it may work in French or Italian and obviously in German, adding that it worked in English as well as in German or perhaps a little bit better, which was great to us! The fact that Brahms himself was so for an English version is intriguing because it made us to ask ourselves why we don't perform it like this anymore.



English version employed by the Choir of King's College London (2017)
Copy provided by Joseph Fort (2019)

Celda Real. Why do you think this happens?

Fort. I think the reason we don't do it like that is anymore is because we are so obsessed by the sounds of the music that we have sort of lost sight of the need for music to communicate, to mean something, for that meaning that Brahms was so fairly chasing with this piece.

Celda Real. You are then interested not just in finding a musical piece and playing it for the sake of it, but also about performing it in a way that can really connect people.

Fort. Yes, it is about engagement and about the fact that you got all this people in a room and you just don't make or create music to make nice sounds. You make music to engage with people and to move them. The fact that Brahms was so concerned about this particular piece made it an ideal vehicle to interpret that argument. Since the CD was done, it has been really heartening to see people engage with it and to listen to it. The critics also have been positive about it, the reviews were uplifting, and it also has done well in Spotify.

Celda Real. Usually, when you think about a Requiem, the first though that comes to mind is an ensemble with an orchestra and a large choir, but your production and this recording was different, more intimate.

Fort. For this recording we had two pianists, a baritone and a soprano. I have heard James Baillieu playing a few times before and really loved it, and I knew Richard Uttley for years, whose playing I also like very much. The crucial bit in choosing them was that I thought the two of them would work really well together and would get into the spirit of it. And the same goes for the process of choosing Mary Bevan as soprano and Marcus Farnsworth as baritone as both of them are excellent. I wanted them to be English singers that sound English because that was an important point that we were making in this recording. The four of them also brought an important operatic element to the performance, something that was also present in the recorded piece.

Celda Real. I find interesting that when you talk about music, you separate what you call 'music sounds' from the message that you think music must have to convey meaning. This is something close to you, as you work in the actual performance of music that has been composed by others. Do you think this meaning that music must have can be found in all types of music, from choral to electronic music? And how do you approach the performing of that message?

Fort. Music is message in its very nature and much of what we do is trying to organise it. And this applies to all types of music. For instance, we work with wonderful graphs in scores that tell us about music, but also the role of this activity is to find order in it, so we have a feel that we can grasp its meaning. Actually, sometimes music doesn't organise very easily, as the composers are usually thinking about what they want to convey and to pour, pour out. Here, I try to embrace the messiness of it to deliver it message. One of the other

interests I also have is to explore the relationship between music and dance, something obviously rooted in performance. This relationship comes into this because, often, when you are dancing to a piece of music, you may not have anything particular to say about it verbally, but that doesn't mean it does not have significance to you. Music, particularly non-verbal music, can have a huge impact on us.

Celda Real. Any dance has a component of embodiment attached to it and it is related to its performativity. Over the last twenty years there has been a growing sense that disciplines do not function in isolation, but cross boundaries. Do you think so?

Fort. Certainly. And when they cross paths you learn so much about it

Celda Real. Your approach to the relationship between dance and music relates to your interest and research on Haydn and the *minuets* in the eighteenth-century. How did you get interested in this area of study in the first place and can you talk about the monograph you are completing at present on this subject?

Fort. I always loved Haydn's music and the *minuets* and found his music something very special. Specially the latest Symphonies, his Masses, the Oratorios and his String Quartets. Essentially, I like everything by him. But I came quite interested originally in music and dance because I was playing a piece by Bach, *The Wedding Cantata*, and in the last movement of that there were six of us working on that piece together. Something that you often do when you are making chamber music is that you work the directions of the phrases together, so that everybody works out when you are going to land with this phrase, where you are going to put the emphasis with all the musician around you. But there was something in this particular movement that wasn't working for us as we just couldn't agree where all these phrases were going to go. Above this movement, Bach had written '*gavotte*', a *gavotte* being an eighteenth-century French dance, well-known in Germany at the time. Bach was himself a keen dancer, so he knew about them. This is when I got interested in the relationship between music and dance as I thought to look at what the *gavotte* dance was, and how we could apply it to direction, as dancers must think about direction and landing all the time because of the very nature of dance. What this approach ended up coming up in our *gavotte* work was reflected in the initial uplifting at the beginning of the phrase, but also revelated that the continuation of the phrase is a much less consequent. This showed us that actually, musically, we were originally looking for the wrong thing. We were looking the forward travel of this phrase, which was not really present in the dance anyway, but still got me intrigued as to how the relationship between music and dance happens and why. I always loved Haydn music and this experience with the *cantata* made me search his *minuets* and to look at which members of the audience would dance the *minuets* in the public balls. This was interesting because at this point, at the end of the eighteenth-century in Vienna, the public balls were

becoming more popular and more accessible to the bourgeoisie, and the same people were also attending the public concerts.

Celda Real. Effectively, two ways of understanding music.

Fort. Yes, and to them this would seem absolutely natural. They were listening to concert *minuets* in bodies that knew the steps of the dance. It was an interesting factor to find about that some people at the time could say things like 'This phrase doesn't make sense because it wouldn't fit with the steps of the *minuet*', so they were clearly thinking about this relationship between dance and music and it was present in their evaluation.

Celda Real. At the beginning of this interview we included a brief introduction about yourself, as Musicologist, Organist, and Director of the Choir of King's College London in the context of your work on *An English Requiem*. But your impressive academic journey before you took these posts and your present position in the Music Department as Head of Performance stretches beyond Europe, as after being an organ scholar and academic scholar at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, you went onto studying for your PhD at Harvard University. There, you were awarded the prestigious Oscar Schafer Teaching Prize, which meant a year-long fellowship and you also served as Senior Tutor of Eliot House. It would be interesting for future students to know about your experience of two different education systems and syllabus as they work differently. Could you talk about how music is taught and perceived in these two countries?

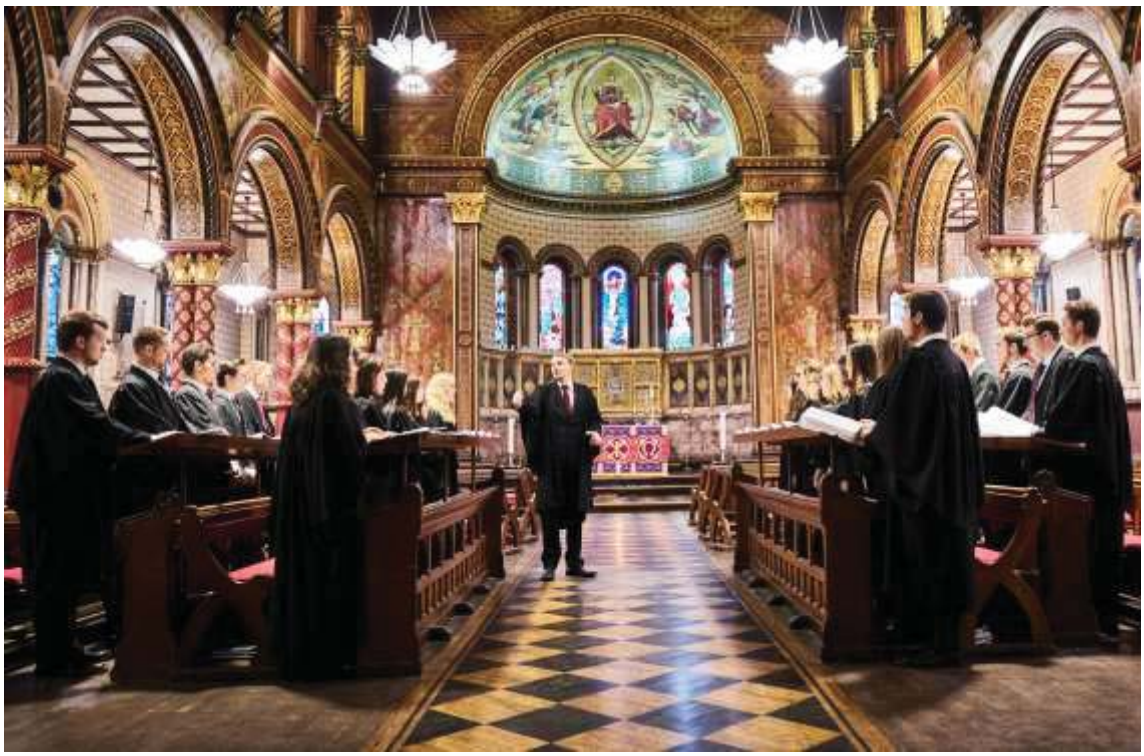
Fort. I only went originally to Harvard on a one-year visiting scholarship and ended up starting a PhD and staying six years in the end! From my experience, something that stand out with American universities is how well-resourced are and how much material they have available in their libraries. The funding also can be very generous and during my PhD I was able to go twice to Vienna and spend a couple of months each time doing research. The American system is different from the British as their students there are on a four-years degree and do not originally chose their subjects until halfway their second year. I think this gives music an interesting position because it means that a lot of the students can dip into different options – like music-, but it can also mean that at times it is difficult to focus thoroughly on something specific as you may end up doing a lot of things, but not thoroughly. This can be difficult as music demands of you a 100% commitment. The perception of music-making is also different, as it can be sometimes assessed more as a kind of leisurely activity, whether you are performing it or listening to it. It is a different tradition, but something I found very interesting in their courses is how they interlink departments. In Britain, because university singing is connected to the Chapel, we do that really well. But, in a sense, it can be an isolated activity, as it is scheduled and it happens in a specific context. But in the United States they connect with other issues or topics happening across campus. For instance, they might do a concert that is related to something that is happening in the History Department. When I was

there, it was the American Civil War anniversary, so the choirs organised concerts in ensemble with other departments.

Celda Real. This links with your idea of connecting music across borders and exploring ideas.

Fort. Universities should be about ideas, and this type of collaborations is great because they connect people coming from different paths.

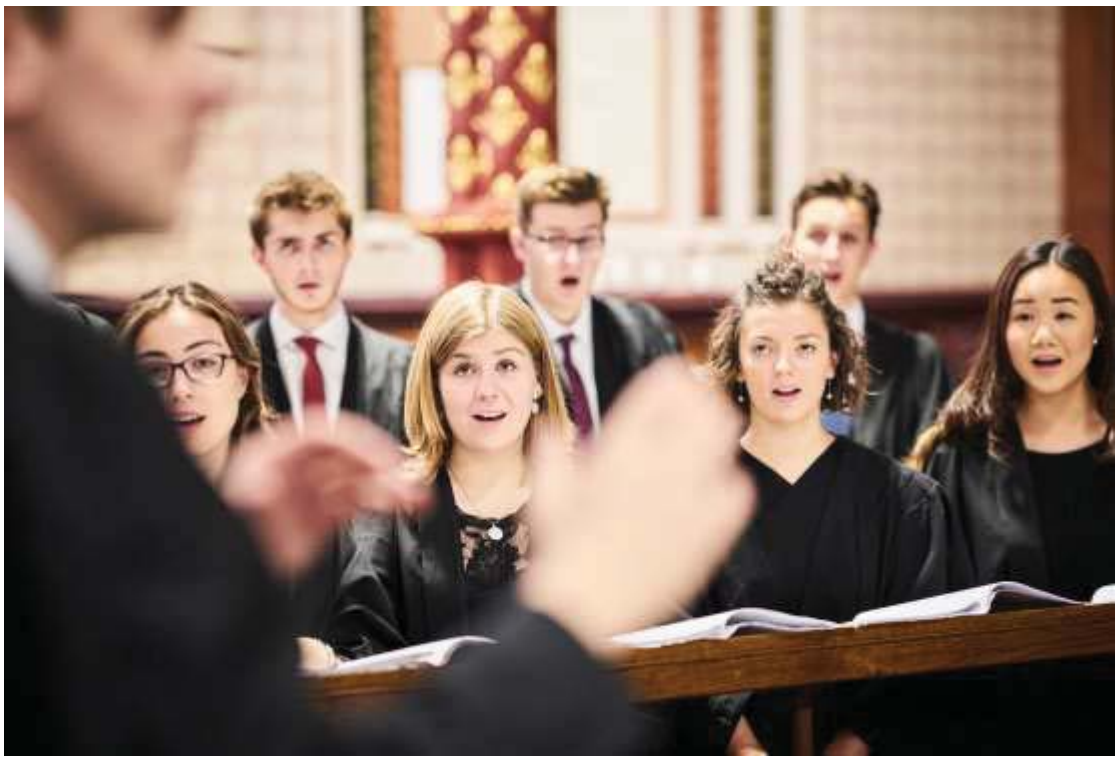
Celda Real. The Choir of King's College London is formed by university students and has a very busy performing schedule at King's and other places, here in Britain and abroad. Delphian Records has just now released a magnificent recording of *Masses for Double Choir* (2019) with pieces by Kenneth Leighton and Frank Martin in CD by the Choir, conducted by you and with James Orford at the organ. How does the Choir function as part of a Department and what is its role at large in King's College?



Choir of King's College London. Conductor: Joseph Fort
Photo: Kaupo Kikkas

Fort. The primary role of the Choir is to provide the music for the weekly worship in the Chapel. But there is also a really important secondary role that is to educate the students, to train them. Whether they are going to be full-time professional singers or to do something completely different, this is something that is at the core of the Choir's function because the three years that they are going to spend at the university are vital for their education on music and

singing. At King's the Choir is based in the offices of the Dean, so it is actually separated from the Music Department, and my job is split in time working across the two. Both of them have strong ties and recently we did collaboration on some eighteenth-century Turkish music with Martin Stokes, Professor of Music and present Head of the Department, which was something that the Choir had never done before. Another important factor is that in its performances the Choir represents King's College, but it also is a performance in its own right. For example, on 25th March this year (2019) we sung at St. Paul's Cathedral for a Service there and we also do quite a lot of concerts. We are also now preparing to go back to the United States this June and last year we did a tour in Nigeria that was really fascinating. This came out because an alumnus of King's College is now a Bishop in Lagos and we found out that there have been no choir visits to Nigeria since 1972, so we decided it was a great idea. The Vice-President of International at King's College is Professor Funmi Olonisakin, a British-Nigerian lady, and she helped us to organise it.



Choir of King's College London. Conductor: Joseph Fort
Photo: Kaupo Kikkas

Celda Real. To finish this interview, is there anything that you want to further talk about? Something that you think it is really at the core of your work.

Fort. It must then come back to what we talked about music and meaning. Also, to music's capacity to move us and to make us feel something. I think that when you are making music, unless you are doing it yourself, you need to work together with people and that is very important. Another thing is to say that we

must foster music and foster singing, particularly making sure that future musicians have access to it in school, especially Primary schools. We have seen over the last years in Britain budget cuts that have affected music as funding was withdrawn. This makes it impossible to include music in the curriculum and we must be careful with it. We cannot take for granted our extended and rich choral tradition, as the role of music and singing in a changing world is irreplaceable.

London, 2019

Additional sources:

https://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/principal/dean/choir/director

https://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/principal/dean/choir

http://delphianrecords.co.uk