

Pedagogical aspects in the conducting method of Boncho Bochev

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Abstract. This article focuses on some aspects of music training in the Bodra Smyana Choir. Along with the generally valid pedagogical principles, we also find distinctive instructional models. They are results of the significant experience, talent, and efforts of the founder of the choir Boncho Bochev. Through systematic and carefully planned activities, he ensured the smooth accumulation of knowledge and the development of the skills of his students. The conductor selected the repertoire and stage performances of the choir regarding the pedagogical tasks. The emotional approach to the song was essential to him, so he created an inspiring atmosphere that encouraged the choristers' initiative. Many of his principles and approaches are actual today and could be adapted to our contemporary working conditions.

Keywords: children's choir, choral singing, music pedagogy, aesthetic education

The Bodra Smyana Choir was created in the autumn of 1946 in Sofia. The official date of foundation is considered to be 1 January 1947, when it was the first public appearance of the choir (Zlateva 2001, 15). The name of Bodra Smyana remains to this day an emblem of children's choral singing in Bulgaria. Literally, the expression means replacing the weary ones who have worked so far, with fresh and rested people. It is interpreted as replacing the older, veterans of the choral work with children who are involved in building the new choral culture (Bochev 1975a, 112).

Bodra Smyana Choir imposed high criteria of interpretation and contributed to the affirmation of the new artistic tasks of children's choral singing after 1944. They referred to the rethinking the repertoire not only in terms of conceptual content but in general the function of children's song; to the increasing requirements for vocal performance quality; to an unadulterated emotional presence on the stage. Bochev's achievements have been repeatedly noted, and as the musicologist Venelin Krastev stated, "the Bodra Smyana Children's Choir first crossed the dividing line between amateur and professional art" (Krastev 1983, 49). The mechanism leading to these remarkable artistic results is yet to be

researched. In this text, we focus on some characteristics of Bochev's conducting method that reveals him as a successful teacher.

We examine the main aspects of his work, which he described in the report "Organization and training in the Bodra Smyana Choir", included in his only book, *How the Bodra Smyana Choir was created and developed* (Bochev 1975a). It provides us with valuable information about the organizational and educational principles that had crystallized in his many years of practice.

Much information can also be obtained from the choral documentation, and in particular from the school diaries. Some of them (from the late 1950s to the late 1970s) are kept in the conductor's room in the building where the choir has been rehearsing since the 1970s. They compile an overall picture of the various activities of the choir recorded day after day in the course of the school years.

Boncho Bochev - teacher and choir conductor (1899-1975)

Bochev worked in a time of rapid development of music culture and education in Bulgaria. In the 1920s and 1930s he was a teacher in Gorna Oryahovitsa, in his home village of Polikraishte, near Veliko Tarnovo, and later in Sofia (Zlateva 2001, 14). His professional pursuits were aimed at enhancing sheet music literacy, especially music reading skills, among students and music educators. At the same time, Bochev strived for high artistic results. As a teacher in Sofia, in 1935 he formed a choir of Sofia elementary schools, which was called "Sofiyskite Slaveycheta [Sofia Nightingales]" (Bochev 1975a, 7). During rehearsals, the conductor complemented his work in class with a search for quality sound and impressive stage performance.

When he left the field of mass education and became a conductor of Bodra Smyana Choir in 1946/1947, Bochev did not lose his connection with the school but successfully combined the pedagogical approach with the conductor's duty. At a conference about the experience of the choir in 1967, the prominent musicologist and teacher Gencho Gaytandzhiev emphasized that the pedagogical basis was of considerable advantage and this was conditioned by the specifics of work with children and youths (Gaytandzhiev 1967, 27).

Bochev was often described by his former students as both rigorous and demanding but at the same time, a solicitous and dedicated conductor (Zlateva 2001). For himself and his colleagues as well as for the choristers, he established rules the adherence to which guarantees the smooth fulfilment of the high criteria. Over time, Bochev built a precise system of training young singers and made his choir an important methodological centre. The model was spread and evaluated as successful not only by Bulgarian but also by foreign music authorities. Mostly in the 1960s and 1970s, Bochev was often invited to present the results of his work with Bodra Smyana Choir on different conferences and events in Bulgaria and abroad. Most popular are his views on emotional and expressive singing and the specifics of working with children's voices, especially after their publication in leading Russian editions on music and vocal education (Bochev 1963; Bochev 1975b). Along with this, Bochev has other contributions that are

significant in the Bulgarian choral pedagogy but unfortunately, have not been researched in detail yet: for example, the question of the order of the songs in the rehearsal, the individual tracking of results, the creation of a characteristic performance profile of the choir.

In the context of the requirements for the leaders of amateur art activities of the Dimitrovist Pioneer Organization “Septemberist”, which included the Bodra Smyana Choir, and of the overall state policy towards children and family, Bochev’s work stood out with a psychological and aesthetic approach. The conductor knew the age characteristics of children and youths and he was able to find the most influential way to arouse the interest in music in the youngest choristers and to keep it for a long time. As a result, personal and professional qualities, habits and skills gained by young people in the choir marked them for life.

Basic principles of Boncho Bochev’s work

The work of Boncho Bochev was multifaceted. In addition to teaching and conducting, he invested a lot of energy in administrative duties related to the provision of material and technical facilities for rehearsals; organizing tours, concerts, participations; leading seminars and courses for conductors and teachers. Communication with schools was also essential for him, not only in the process of recruiting new choristers but also in tracing their development. Bochev demanded excellent marks at school from his singers, but at the same time, he prevented them from being mistreated by some of their teachers, who did not approve and hindered their participation in the choir for their own reasons.

In order to protect children from fatigue or applying different educational methods, the conductor released his students from other extracurricular activities and brigades. However, as the most successful administrative measure Bochev pointed out the effort to win the confidence of the children. He was convinced that if the choir gave them more than a school and they found a pleasant creative environment in which they felt complete, they would think of their own ways of visiting the choir and solving problems that they had. Singers learned to manage their time so that they could combine rehearsals with schoolwork. Gradually, they attached themselves to the team, and this was the best way to ensure regular attendance, active participation, and initiative. Then discipline and adherence to the established rules were perceived as mutual respect, and teaching and learning methods were applied without force and tension.

In his book *How the Bodra Smyana Choir was created and developed* (Bochev 1975a, 36), Bochev synthesized his basic principles of work in six points. They were necessary prerequisites that provided gradual learning and conscious mastery of the music material.

1. Systematic work at a professional level

That meant regular rehearsals twice a week, 9-10 months during the year. In addition, once a week the children had a solfeggio lesson and a public performance such as a concert, studio record, participation in the Opera Theatre,

etc. The children rested during the summer vacations if they were not on a tour or at camp. These diverse activities complemented the traditional way of learning during the rehearsals - classroom activities with a fixed duration and strictly defined tasks.

The work was set at a professional level, although Bodra Smyana was an amateur choir. Music activities were not intended only for brilliant or extremely gifted children, but professionalism was in the intensity of work and the high artistic criteria.

2. Maintaining a numerically large choir and renewing it with recruits every three years

Boncho Bochev created a large choir in order to make it sustainable, that is, not to be affected by the turnover of the choristers, and to ensure a permanent concert activity and continuing education. The whole choir consisted of about 300 children from the 1st to the 11th grade in school. Admission exams for new singers were organized every three years for kids between 6-7 and 10 years old. In Bochev's opinion, this was the best age to start music training and it should not be missed.

3. Distributing the choristers in groups at different levels within the choir

By dividing the choir into several groups, Bochev provided different stages in music training according to the age and musical abilities of the children. Each group had its own repertoire and tasks, but sometimes they practiced together.

- New choristers from whom the choir of little ones was formed

The main principle was that the younger learned from the more experienced by observing and imitating them. For Bochev aural modelling was much more effective than verbal instruction. When the new ones attended the rehearsals of the older choristers, they sang together the warming-up exercises and the easier pieces, and during the rest of the time, they were listening to the right way of singing, the requirements of the conductor, etc. This was what Boncho Bochev called "passive learning".

- Junior choristers

After going through the children's repertoire and learning basic singing habits, it was considered that the little ones were ready to perform more difficult compositions and participate in more responsible concerts. They were already able to learn new songs by reading the sheet music and not only by imitating and repeating the melody.

- Senior choristers from whom the "elite choir" was formed

There was no specific age at which junior choristers become senior. For some of them, it happened after 3-4 years of practicing, for others 5-6 or even more, depending on the individual progress. "The elders" performed the most

difficult works that the choir was famous for. Before each trip abroad, an “elite choir” of the best singers among them was formed.

- Combinations of the three categories

Sometimes the main categories were divided into two groups at the same level that alternate in order to avoid the fatigue in children when there were too many concerts. On special occasions, the whole mass choir performed together.

4. Prolonged stay in the choir

The stay in the choir was for at least 5-6 years to 10-11 years except for boys who were released earlier due to mutation. Music training is a long process within the overall development of the individual. It takes time to form habits of proper posture, breath management, tension control, vowel formation, and diction. Sight-reading is a skill that also requires much drill to become automatic. Boncho Bochev believed that the children needed to feel confident and he never gave them tasks that went beyond their musical abilities.

5. A vast repertoire including works from the baroque, renaissance and classical period of music, as well as works by contemporary authors

The main goal of Boncho Bochev when choosing a repertoire was enhancing students’ musical culture and shaping an aesthetic taste. The conductor selected songs with appropriate vocal ranges and technique difficulties, and he made musical accommodations as necessary. He always coordinated the upcoming concert programs with childrens’ music training.

6. Repertoire exams at least twice a year with each chorister

Exams were the way to trace the individual development and vocal changes of each chorister. Everyone could take the exam more than once in order to improve the grade, and this was important for entering the “elite choir”. On the one hand, Boncho Bochev used the competition as a method to encourage childrens’ self-initiative and ambition to show the best that they were capable of. On the other hand, through exams, he got feedback on the effectiveness of his own work. In Bodra Smyana Choir some of the senior singers could be jury members on the exams of the others. They evaluated the musical performances using the criteria established by their teacher and discussed the results together. The grades were entered in the individual exam cards of the choristers. In Boncho Bochev’s school diaries we can find out when the exams for each group were held, on which songs, attendance report and sometimes a brief comment.

School diaries of Bodra Smyana Choir

The school diaries are large hardcover notebooks filled in by Boncho Bochev personally or by his colleagues. These documents reveal that the conductor really respected the principle of systematic work at a professional level. Fig. 1 shows a randomly selected page from the school diaries with a rehearsal plan

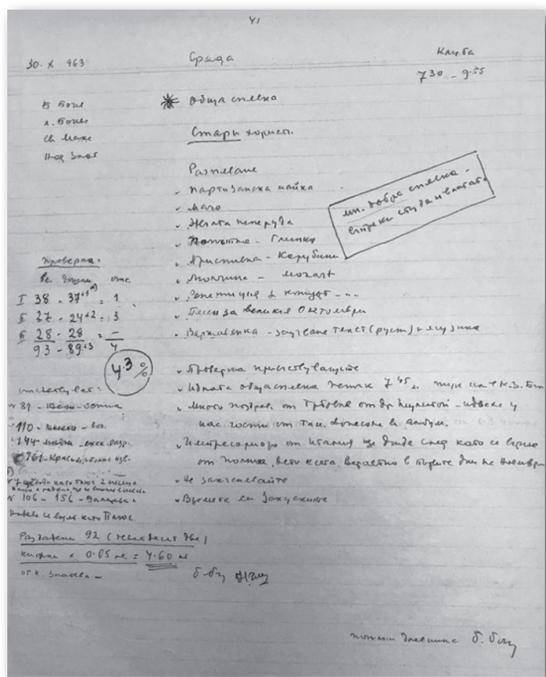


Fig. 1. A page from the school diaries with a rehearsal plan for senior choristers, written by Boncho Bochev, 30 October 1963

They were organized not only for those who had been absent but also for those whose voices were changing or simply didn't feel confident in the songs being studied. Bochev recognized in his choristers the different levels of readiness and music aptitude and created an atmosphere that encouraged learning. The work was intensive, but he made sure no one was left behind.

In the content covered during a rehearsal of 90 minutes, except the warming-up vocal exercises, we see the names of 8-9 songs. It was important which music works would be selected, in what order, and how much time would be spent on each one. Bochev invented a logical and substantiated method (Bochev 1975a, 40). He did not begin with either the newest tasks or the most urgent ones. In order to predispose the children to work, the conductor started with a song that was already presented the last time and recalled what was learned. Then, when the students were mentally prepared, in the most productive minutes of the rehearsal, he continued with the most difficult songs - those on which the children would be examined and which would be performed on stage. The new song was introduced last to keep the curiosity and interest of the children until the next time. In this way, Bochev provided time for the children to adapt to the pace of work and relied a lot on the emotional charge of the rehearsal. And this was important not only for the pleasant atmosphere and the uplift mood but also for the timbre and intonation of the performance.

for senior choristers from 1963, on which Boncho Bochev's handwriting can be seen.

Every rehearsal has a scheme just like the lessons in class. It has a date, time and place framework, attendance report, list of teacher's tasks, content covered, evaluation of the results and even a financial report for the money spent for croissants or sweets for the children.

As in school, attendance was important and the reasons for absences were required. At some point, this information was analysed, and it was considered when was the best time of the year for concert tours, when the children were most busy at school, in which months they got sick more often, etc. Despite the obstacles, the conditions allowed the students to continue their development in the choir without tension - there were additional rehearsals provided, if necessary, individual ones. They

Bochev usually asked the children whether they liked the new song. In fact, he was a very talented person and his artistic and emotional way to introduce the music was always attractive for the choristers and provided a fully engaging learning experience. The conductor took students opinion into consideration, so this kind of questions were not just a way to interact with them. Bochev avoided assigning songs that the children would not like, even if they had many educational qualities.

Turning on a page of the diaries with a report of a concert (Fig. 2), we can see that Bochev also valued the reaction of the public: whether they liked the new pieces in the repertoire, what were their favourite songs, etc. Although most of the time he was standing with his back to the audience, the conductor noticed the attendance of the concerts and analysed with equal importance the behaviour of the public, whether it consisted of children, non-professionals or a jury. His purpose was not only to please the audience. Rather, he needed this feedback to find the best way to fulfil his mission of presenting the composer's achievements to the public.

The audience's estimation was reflected in the selection of the repertoire, the dynamics in the construction of the concert program - the number and the order of the songs, as well as the way they were presented. When we look at the information in the diaries about the different concerts, we notice certain regularities - the duration of a concert allowed the performance of about 20 songs, with the Bulgarian and foreign ones being almost equal in number. There were some songs envisioned "for an encore", such as "Moonlight" by Claude Debussy, arrangement by Todor Popov, "Lullaby" by Bernhard Flies, "Rehearsal for Concert" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, "Letite, golubi" ["Fly, doves"] by Isaak Dunayevsky, etc.

The diaries give us information on the structure of rehearsals and public appearances of Bodra Smyana Choir. These documents form an important part of the choir's archive and compile a comprehensive calendar of various commitments: concerts, competitions, recording sessions, tours, camps, visits to cultural events, etc. The diaries reveal how the conductor planned and reported on his work. The analysis of the achieved results was an integral part of Bochev's pedagogical activity. This process made it possible to track the progress of the choir, to review the training method and to specify future tasks.

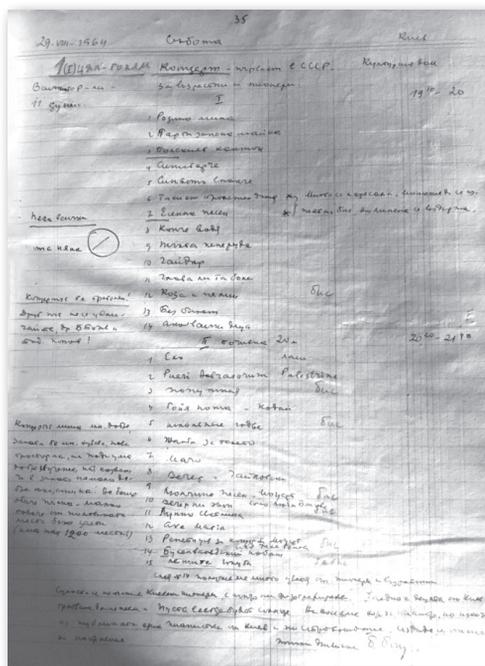


Fig. 2. A page from the school diaries with a report of a concert, 29 August 1964

Differences in the work of Bodra Smyana and school choirs

Some factors were specific to Bodra Smyana and were not applicable to school choirs. Bochev pointed out three main differences and described the practice in schools (Bochev 1975a, 23).

1. Less choice of children (not always)

Unlike a school choir, in Bodra Smyana the conductor selected his choristers from many more children from different schools. The criteria were higher and there were many requirements for admission in terms of musical abilities and vocal quality.

2. Fewer singers in the choir

Maybe in Bochev's opinion, this would affect the sound. He knew that children's voices were weaker, so he preferred to work with around 60 singers. This was the average number of children that travel abroad.

3. Easier repertoire

In the past, Bodra Smyana Choir was unsurpassed by the difficulty of the repertoire. Even today, it is hard to find a choir to perform their repertoire of that time. The concert program was indicative of the level of the choir. But in the end, quality was more important and choosing easier songs that would be performed well by the children was better than risking with difficult ones.

Bochev believed that the presence of the three factors above did not necessarily mean lower achievement, and cited the names of some teachers in Sofia who, in his opinion, were a good example of how an excellent vocal ensemble could be led at school (Bochev 1975a, 23). The conductor motivated his colleagues to apply the methodology of Bodra Smyana to their school choirs as far as conditions permit. A music teacher had fewer hours for choir than was the number of rehearsals at Bodra Smyana, but on the other hand, he could rely on the base he had built in class regarding the formation of singing habits and musical literacy. Good organization and long-term planning could achieve great results according to school priorities.

Work in a school choir is usually focused on developing the talents of the students and presenting the achievements of the respective school. Bodra Smyana's purpose was also to highlight the children's singing gifts, but there were many other tasks. Bochev's choir was a representative one, which means that in Sofia it was often the first performer of many new composers' works. The children of the "elite group" travelled abroad at least once a year and proved the level of Bulgarian choral singing at different festivals and competitions. And last but not least: one of the tasks of the representative choir was also to provide methodological assistance to other choirs, including the school ones.

Larger responsibilities require higher-level music training. The three advantages that Bochev pointed out were a prerequisite for excellence. More prepared children and numerous choir that could be divided into groups on different levels with specific commitments ensured the learning of much larger

and more difficult repertoire. The conditions were incomparable when a team of pedagogues worked as in Bodra Smyana Choir: conductor, piano accompanist, solfeggio teacher, organizer, and when the teacher had to reconcile all these roles on his own. Having their own rehearsal building; cooperation with composers, music educators, and conductors from Bulgaria and abroad; as well as travel and camp opportunities were advantages that the school choir did not have. Bochev did not have these material conditions and contacts at the beginning of his artistic career when he was conducting Sofiyskite Slaveycheta Choir in the 1930s and 1940s. He was an example of how quality performance could be achieved with less resources in a school. This required the same effort and energy when planning the teaching process. Among the most important tasks were the proper selection of a repertoire relevant to the choir's capabilities, the constant care for proper vocal formation and expressive singing and the planning of concert practice through performances that went beyond school holidays and celebrations. Individual tracking of the vocal qualities of the singers should not only take place during the entrance examination but could become a routine practice.

Conductors at school are given the opportunity to choose their method of work. The appearance that their choir receives is a reflection of their own aesthetic preferences and pedagogical approaches. A school choir has the Bodra Smyana model in front of it, but this does not oblige it to follow its example, because a school choir falls into another "category" with different functions and goals and even regulations to which it is subject. But being able to apply some time-honoured principles it could save a lot of energy, effort and "discoveries".

Pedagogical aspects applicable today

Many aspects of Bochev's work are applicable today. We would successfully adapt the following principles of work at Bodra Smyana Choir to our current conditions:

- Individual exams

They can be organized as a competition in a way that motivates children and encourages their self-improvement and should not remind of a test in class. The solo performance in front of the choir resembles a scene and helps performers gain confidence. Students who show good results could receive incentives other than appreciation and a high mark. It is appropriate for them to be assigned different roles, such as to supervise newcomers, be soloists or announcers. More experienced choristers may be involved in the task of being a jury during the exams of others, so they will not be bored while listening to songs they have already learned, but they will form their criteria with the help of the conductor. Exams can be an engaging form of individual work to complement the benefits of the collective rehearsal process.

- Varied repertoire in every rehearsal

From the diaries, we find that Boncho Bochev worked on several different songs at each rehearsal. This means that it is a good practice to sing more works, for 5-10 minutes each, instead of devoting the entire rehearsal to just one or two of them. In the long run, learning the whole music piece will take longer, but the current repertoire will be more diverse. This method is effective when working with children as it is difficult for them to concentrate on the same issue for too long. This is where Bochev's experience can be applied to the order of the songs, as well as planning the specific stages in the assimilation of the lyrics and the music and placing gradually complicated tasks on the already known songs. Moreover, diversity in the repertoire does not necessarily mean the inclusion of works in a variety of genres and styles, but it is necessary to look for a united, logically arranged and pedagogically justified thread in the selection of songs according to the level of children's progress in music and the conductor's vision.

- More stage performances

Usually, stage performances motivate students; they see them as an exciting holiday. Public appearances are not just a way to demonstrate to the audience the results of the rehearsals of the school choir. Concerts also play a pedagogical role. Through them, children acquire practice and form a number of qualities and skills: stage behaviour, self-control, endurance, and discipline. For this reason, it is good to have more concert participations, though only with 2-3 songs, than having solo concerts, but only a few times a year.

The singers gain experience and listening to the other participants in the event is of great benefit to them. Concerts must be carefully selected to match the level of the choir and its performance profile if it has been already established.

Due to the lack of equal interchangeable groups, commitments in the choir need to be organized according to the school program of the children so that they do not hinder but complement their main activity.

Conclusion

As we can conclude, many of the pedagogical aspects of Boncho Bochev's conducting method seem relevant today. Of course, times are changing and some of them have remained in the past. For example, the discipline can no longer have such an authoritative stance because of the changing role of the teacher and the different behaviour of the students. The principle of building a numerous choir of hundreds of singers is not applicable. Some examples of the repertoire also do not sound up to date.

Other aspects are always valid, such as systematic work, detailed planning, and individual approach. The good teacher should observe and analyse the students' progress and help them show the maximum of their abilities. It is also important to know the children's mindset and to be engaged with their world. For Bochev, the emotional approach to music and the learning process as a whole was important. Despite his high demands and strict rules, through his

communication with the singers, he showed that he appreciated and respected them, and they responded to him with the same.

Today the pedagogical work of the conductor needs to be adapted to the children's interests by diversifying the methods of work and providing the necessary practice. The accumulated knowledge and skills are most successfully consolidated on stage. It provides the necessary experience that leaves lasting traces in the minds of choristers and forms their aesthetic perceptions.

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