ETHNA BARROR:
PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL CHORAL CONDUCTOR

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MPhil

December 2008
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Master’s Degree (M Phil in Music)

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Date: December 4th 2008
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Abbreviations

ACDA  American Choral Directors Association
NCH  National Concert Hall
RDS  Royal Dublin Society
RTÉSO  Radio Telefís Éireann Symphony Orchestra
RTÉCO  Radio Telefís Éireann Concert Orchestra
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following:

Ethna Barror, for her generosity in sharing her knowledge, ‘wisdom of practice’, and her personal documents.

The interviewees, for their insights.

Administrators Feis Ceoil, Cumann Náisiúnta na gCór

Christine Pruscha, American Choral Directors’ Association, and Dr. John Feeley for sourcing choral data.

Library Staff: Dublin Institute of Technology, ILAC Centre, Pearse St. Library, National Library of Ireland

Eithne Reynolds, for her valued assistance throughout this project.

Noel, Ciarán and Feargal for their constant support.

Finally, Dr. Ita Beausang and Dr. Mary Lennon for their expertise, guidance and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis.
Abstract

This study documents the musical career and teaching methodology of one of Ireland’s leading choral conductors, Ethna Barror (1915 - ) and explores the factors contributing to her success as a conductor, with particular reference to her choir, The Lindsay Singers. The study is informed by life history methodology, focusing on interviews with Barror which were conducted over an extended period of time. The research also includes interviews with some of Barror’s peers and choir members. This data is supported by documentary material relating to the Lindsay Singers performances, achievements and awards, and the repertoire they performed. The research is also informed by personal documents and correspondence provided by Barror.

The study identifies Barror’s success in the field of choral conducting as a product of her musical abilities and her unique personality. It reveals how Barror’s methods and techniques evolved through her experience of conducting choirs, and as a result of her ongoing evaluation of her own performance and rehearsal activity. Barror herself points to factors which she considers have contributed to her success and these include: enthusiasm for her work, discipline, imagination, technique, musicality and flexibility in performance. She refers to rhythm, diction, blend, intonation and interpretation as some of the key elements contributing to the quality of her renowned choral sound. The comments of Barror’s peers and choir members highlight, not only her musical expertise and achievement, but also the personal and leadership qualities she brings to her work. The implications of the research outcomes for choral conductors and choral conductor education are explored, and suggestions made for further research.
Introduction

This research focuses on an examination of the musical career and teaching philosophy of Ethna Barror (1915 - ). Barror is regarded as one of the most successful choral conductors in the country. Throughout her career, Barror has conducted choirs, ranging from a dozen singers to groups of two thousand children singing at the Carols for Fun concerts, both in the RDS Concert Hall and the National Concert Hall. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, she has been an inspiration to many teachers and singers in Ireland and many of her past students have forged careers in singing and choral conducting.

Barror’s success as a teacher and choral conductor is celebrated both in Ireland and internationally, in particular through her choir, The Lindsay Singers, which will soon celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Very little research has been conducted into choral conducting in Ireland, and, when the research opportunity arose, I decided to study the factors which contributed to Barror’s success as a choral conductor. The rationale for this research was based on the desire to explore and examine the many aspects of Barror’s choral training, and to document this knowledge, which is of historical and pedagogical value.

In my early twenties, I first encountered Ethna Barror when she asked me to accompany her choirs in Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf. Throughout the years, I accompanied the Lindsay Singers on various occasions, and I was impressed by her unique qualities as a choral trainer and conductor. I also worked with other conductors in my role as an accompanist and chorus master for other musical and choral societies, and as a result I was keenly aware of the issues involved in producing a quality choral sound and in achieving a high standard of performance.

This research focuses on three main objectives:

1. To document Barror’s musical career, with particular reference to the Lindsay Singers
2. To examine her methodological approach to choral training and the philosophy underpinning her practice
3. To explore the factors contributing to her success as a conductor

Adopting the life history approach, I interviewed Barror regularly over a number of years and she was extremely generous with her time and in sharing her knowledge and expertise. The
interviews focused on her musical career and on her philosophy and methodology. Barror also gave me access to personal documents on The Lindsay Singers, in relation to their performances, repertoire and awards. This data was supplemented by historical research, and reference to archival material, available in newspaper reviews and music festival records. In an effort to get further insight into the factors contributing to her success, I also interviewed some of Barror’s peers, who are established Irish choral conductors, along with members of her choir, The Lindsay Singers, who have first hand knowledge of her methodology.

The dissertation consists of an Introduction, five chapters, followed by a Conclusion, Bibliography and Appendices.

Chapter 1 gives an account of Barror’s life and work in the context of her involvement in choral singing in Ireland, with particular emphasis on The Lindsay Singers.

In Chapter 2 the literature on choral conducting is reviewed through a survey of publications by the principal conductors and choir trainers from the 1940s to the present day. This chapter also highlights the musical elements that contribute to a quality choral sound and focuses on some of the musical, rehearsal and communication skills required by conductors in their quest to elicit a high standard of performance.

Chapter 3 articulates the research methodology, outlining the life history approach adopted, describing the conduct of the interviews, outlining the nature of the historical research involved, and explaining the rationale behind the organisation, analysis and interpretation of the material.

Chapter 4 presents Barror’s wisdom of practice, focusing in particular on her philosophy and methodology. It documents her rehearsal management, and the techniques which she employs to produce the quality of sound, and high standard of singing, for which she is renowned.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from interviews conducted with well-known Irish choral conductors, and past and present members of The Lindsay Singers, who identify a variety of the factors which have contributed to her successful conducting and teaching career. The Appendices contain historical data and information on repertoire, awards, concerts, recordings and correspondence, along with transcripts of peer interviews and interviews with choir members.
1.1 Family Background

Ethna Barror, née Graham, was born in 1915 and has lived all her life in the Glasnevin area on the north side of Dublin. She was born in Iona Rd., the youngest of four children, and moved to nearby Lindsay Road following her marriage to Cecil Barror, a well known actor, singer and presenter. Her father, Joseph Thomas Graham was born in Bolton, Lancashire. Her mother, Connie Clarke was Irish. Her father was interested in both sport and music. He was a member of Clonliffe Harriers Athletics Club and was an international cross-country runner. He was also an international judge for cycling and athletics. He loved music, played the piano and was a member of the Glee Singers. Although he was English by birth, her father had a strong interest in the Irish language, and both parents were founder members of the Gaelic League.

From a very early age, Barror’s two passions in life - love of music and love of sport - were fostered at home. Her mother won gold medals at Ireland’s major music festival the Feis Ceoil, for singing, in both Irish and English. Her father was an accomplished pianist, and the whole family gathered around the piano in the evenings while the children picked out the pieces that they wanted him to play. As the only girl, she was quite a tomboy and participated with her brothers, Brendan, Enda and Colm in sports such as football, tennis and cycling.

In 1920, at the age of four, Barror attended a kindergarten school in St Joseph’s Lane run by Miss Mullaly, where she remembers singing songs and playing the xylophone. When she was six, her brother died. Two years after her brother’s death, her mother died. Barror recalls that her mother was ill as the War of Independence was in progress, and at that time, houses in the area were kept under surveillance. In the evenings, two small tanks would drive into the road and remain parked all night with their lights shining into the houses. She remembers well the night that the Black and Tans searched many homes in the area, including her family home. Although her mother was very ill, she was lifted from her bed while the children were crying and distressed.

As Barror was so young, she did not understand the full impact of her mother’s death, and life seemed to continue as normal. She attended primary school at Dominican College, Eccles St, where Mother Henry taught her music and she took piano lessons with Miss Ward. Two years
after her mother’s death in 1926, she was sent to boarding school, at the Convent of Mercy, Arklow.

### 1.2 Music Education

Barror vividly remembers leaving home and taking the train journey to Arklow with her father. She loved home and this was a huge change for someone so young. She was ten years old and the youngest in the school. Her musical talents were recognised immediately by the nuns, and she was given singing and piano lessons. From the age of ten, she played for the school drill display, and continued to do this throughout her school career, thus developing a natural feel for rhythm and movement. At an early age, she was awarded an Exhibition by Trinity College London Examinations Board, for excellence in piano playing at their annual examinations. At that time only six Exhibitions were awarded for the whole of the British Isles. Three other well-known names in classical music in Ireland were awarded Exhibitions at that time - Deirdre Farragher [Gibson], Jeannie Reddin and Maura Nolan [Sr. Agnes Cecilia].

Barror also studied the violin and played for her first show at a very early age. She recalls that there was very little room in the orchestra pit and, as the only child among six adults, she could hardly be seen “sawing away” at the second violin part, but she loved every minute of it. She developed her sight-reading skills at the piano by playing the snippets of pieces at the back of examination books. They were advertisements for the works, and she loved to play them and to run one piece into the next. She had a keen musical ear and, through these activities, she acquired her skills of extemporising and modulating at ease from one key to another.

Her apprenticeship in choral training began in her early teens, when she first encountered the works of Gilbert and Sullivan which were to become so important in her life. In preparing for the annual school production, the music teacher, Sister Dympna, enlisted Barror to help with the music for the chorus. Together, they drew the stave, with a slat from a window blind, on large sheets of sugar paper, and wrote out the parts in giant notation, one copying soprano and bass, the other alto and tenor. By the time this was finished, she knew all the parts; it was the beginning of a life-long involvement with Gilbert and Sullivan opera. The school productions were of a high quality. The first big part she played was as Nanki-Poo in *The Mikado*, produced by George Prescott, for which the costumes came from Birkinshaw’s in England.

Barror’s other passion in life was sport. In post-primary school she excelled in gymnastics,
tennis and hockey. She was captain of the school’s hockey team. Sport was an important part of the school curriculum and training was ‘serious business’ according to Barror. Before the team set out for a hockey final, the priest came and gave them a blessing. During the school holidays, she was involved in sport with her brothers, attending rugby, and soccer matches. She learned to swim at an early age and, in summertime, the family regularly cycled to swim at the Bull Wall, a well-known landmark on the north coast of Dublin. Throughout her life, swimming has given Barror great pleasure, and she still enjoys this pursuit when the opportunity arises. She joined the local Charleville Lawn Tennis Club and yet again excelled at the sport. She won the Ladies Singles competition in 1939, 1940 and 1941.

On leaving school, Barror joined the Muckross hockey club. She played on the first team which won the Senior League on nine occasions. She returned to her school in Arklow and coached hockey teams for three years. She played hockey for Ireland, and tennis for Leinster. Barror’s interest in sport never wavered throughout her life. She is familiar with all aspects of rugby, soccer, tennis, golf and snooker. She is particularly interested in the level of physical and psychological training, and the discipline that athletes require in order to achieve success at the top level in these sports. She happily admits that if she had not followed a career in music, sport would have been her next choice.

However music took precedence and in 1939 Barror joined the chorus of the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society, where she was first introduced to Cecil Barror, who was later to become her husband. She auditioned for various roles and became understudy to Mabel Holme, a leading singer, wife of Professor George Hewson. In 1940 Barror joined the Belvedere Musical Society where she played all the female roles in *Iolanthe*. She played her favourite part of the Fairy Queen in a memorable production in the Jesuit Hall in Milltown. In the same production, Cecil Barror played the part of the Lord Chancellor. He was quite an established performer at this time and she remembers him complimenting her on her performance. In addition to performing in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, she gained valuable experience by playing parts in the popular musicals of the time including *The Quaker Girl*, *Waltz Time*, *The Country Girl*, *Miss Hook of Holland*, *The Arcadians*, *Floridora* and *No No Nanette*.

Meanwhile, she studied piano with Claude Biggs, singing with Jean Nolan and Margaret Dempsey, theory with Harold White, and violin and viola with Michael McNamara. At Feis Ceoil, she won the Wallis Cup for singing to her own piano accompaniment two years in succession, but was beaten by a quarter of a mark in the third year, 1950, by Gabriel Crehan,
and so did not win the cup outright. She also won the Mezzo-soprano Cup in 1944 and 1948
and the Geoghegan Cup in 1950.

1.3 Choral Training
Barror’s career as choir mistress started in 1942 when she was asked to conduct the Old
Belvedere Group in the Theatre Royal. Old Belvedere Musical Society was formed in the late
1930s and they also had a large choir attached to the musical society. The choir rehearsed in
the Aberdeen Hall of the Gresham Hotel. Barror played the piano at rehearsals and
occasionally sang as a soloist. When she stepped in to conduct the opening number at one of
their concerts, it was the beginning of her career as a choir director. She continued as choir
mistress for the following ten years. Harold Whyte, Colonel J. Doyle, Tommy Doyle and
Michael Bowles were its musical directors throughout that period. Old Belvedere presented
concerts and musicals in the Gate Theatre and the Theatre Royal where Jimmy Campbell was
musical director.

At the same time, she was chorus master for the Dublin Musical Society and acted as voice
coach to the soloists for their lavish shows. She also worked as musical director of the Loreto
North Great Georges St. and the Dominican Convent Wicklow past pupils’ Musical Societies
and as chorus master of the Seabreeze Choral Group.

1.4 Teaching Career
Following her marriage to Cecil Barror in 1942, they moved to Lindsay Road, Glasnevin, and
they had three sons and two daughters. Barror taught singing privately at home, and choral
singing in a number of schools. Over a forty-year period, her students have successfully
competed in all the major singing and choral competitions including Feis Ceoil, Feis Maitiú,
Sligo Feis, and Cork International Choral Festival. Barror has been a member of the Feis
Ceoil for over sixty-two years and is one of its staunchest supporters. During that period she
has served on the Executive Committee and on the Junior Vocal Sub-committee.

Throughout her career, Barror has been to the forefront in training young singers in solo and
ensemble singing, many of whom have subsequently carved careers in music. She is an
experienced adjudicator and she has been invited to adjudicate in major festivals in Dublin,
Cork, New Ross and Sligo. Barror was the first adjudicator for the Irish Federation of
Women’s Clubs Choral Competition, and she was one of a panel of adjudicators for the
Department of Education Schools Choral Competition held in the National Concert Hall.
Adjudicating is an area of special interest to her, where she feels that she can offer positive
advice to choirs. Her expertise was sought for competitions over the years and she adjudicated alongside Dr. Brian Boydell, Dr. Geoffrey Spratt, Dr. Albert Bradshaw, Sir David Lumsden and Colin Mawby at various music festivals throughout Ireland. Barror was invited to adjudicate at the Cork Choral Festival on a number of occasions but she declined the offer as she was still involved in the competition. She has examined school choirs on behalf of the Department of Education, and Junior and Leaving Certificate music examinations. She has given seminars in Dublin, Waterford and Cork on all aspects of the teaching of choral music, from church music to barbershop workshops; such is the diversity of her knowledge.

In a long and successful career, Barror has trained up to fifteen school choirs in the Greater Dublin area. These include: Crumlin Vocational School; Loreto Secondary School, Leeson Lane; O’Connell’s School; Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham; Marino Vocational School; Maryfield College; Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf; Sacred Heart School, Leeson Street; St. Fintan’s, Sutton; and Cardiffsbridge, Finglas. Each one of the above choirs won prizes in competitions throughout the country. She was one of the first Irish conductors to travel to Rome for performances with the boy’s choir from O’Connell’s Schools where she taught for eleven years. When added up, the number of years that she taught in schools totals over fifty. However, the choir that will always be associated with Barror in Ireland and abroad, The Lindsay Singers, originated in her own home, and took its name from the road where she lived with her husband, Cecil and their children.

In 1993, following the death of Professor Aloys Fleischman, Barror was invited to succeed him as Honorary Life President of Cumann Náisiúnta na gCór. At that time, Dr. Geoffrey Spratt was chairman of the association. In conversation with Dr. Spratt in November 2007, he paid tribute to her saying that ‘when Dr. Fleischmann died, the only logical person to replace him as Honorary President was Barror. There would not be many people who could replace him: Barror was chosen because she was a beacon of what a choir trainer could be.’ In 1994, she was invited to give the opening speech at the Cork International Choral Festival. In 1999, further honours were bestowed on Barror when she was presented with the first Santa Cecilia Choral Award by the Vocal Heritage Society, for her contribution to choral singing.

1.5 The Lindsay Singers

As previously stated, in addition to her work as a chorus mistress and producer, Barror taught singing privately in her home in Lindsay Rd., and she entered her pupils for solo, duet and trio competitions in Feis Ceoil and other festivals around the country. In 1958, following their
successes in the various solo and ensemble competitions, Barror decided to bring her pupils together as a choir, and so The Lindsay Singers was founded with ten young members from the Glasnevin area. Their first variety concerts were held in her house, with lighting effects by her husband, Cecil.

Soon there was not enough room for the audience so they moved to the local Claude hall. In 1965 she brought older girls into the group, and gradually the numbers increased. Practices were held in Lindsay Road School once a week. The members were chosen by audition, with an average membership of twenty-five to thirty singers, and the catchment area was extended to Counties Wicklow and Meath.

In choosing members, Barror looked for singers with clear voices, without tremolo, with an ability to blend vocally with others. The singers also had to have a special sense of commitment. Sight-reading skills were not required provided the singer had a good ear. As the original Lindsay Singers matured, they were joined by The Linnettes, [under12 years] and by the Young Lindsay Singers [12-18 years]. By 1969, the three choirs were travelling to compete in music festivals in England and Wales. Interviews with three members of The Lindsay Singers are given in Appendix H.

1.6 Awards
For over forty years, The Lindsay Singers have been acknowledged as Ireland’s leading SSAA choir. They have won numerous awards at competitions, both at home and abroad, of which a full list is given in Appendix B. These include the Feis Ceoil, the Belfast Musical Festival, The Isle of Man Festival, Teeside International Festival and, in particular, the Cork International Choral Festival where they competed on no less than thirty occasions from 1968. In 1998, they won the coveted Fleischmann International Trophy and the Lady Mayer Memorial Trophy in Cork, when their performance was described by one adjudicator as ‘sensational.’ They also won several trophies on a number of occasions at the Eisteddfod Choral Festival, and in 1973 were awarded first prize from a total of thirty-nine choirs representing eighteen countries.

1.7 Performances: Concerts/Broadcasts/Recordings
The Lindsay Singers will soon celebrate their fiftieth anniversary. Some of the original singers are still performing with the choir. During its time, the choir has given concerts in the most prestigious venues in Dublin. Indeed they were the first music group to perform in the new Abbey Theatre, apart from a performance by the Radio Telefís Éireann Light Orchestra
which was primarily a ‘coming-of-age programme’. For many years, The Lindsay Singers performed at Christmas time, first in the Metropolitan Hall in Abbey Street, and later in the RDS Concert Hall where their annual concert entitled *Carols for Fun* attracted packed audiences before it was moved to the NCH. They presented the first Christmas Carols Concert in the National Concert Hall. Throughout the years, The Lindsay Singers have given many concerts in aid of charitable causes and, as recently as 2006 they raised over €10,000 for charity at concerts in churches in Raheny and Beaumont Dublin.

In 1970, they represented Ireland in the BBC competition *Let the People Sing* and they shared first prize and a trophy with a choir from Sofia, Bulgaria. A total of twenty-five choirs from eighteen countries took part in the contest. In September of that year, Charles Beardsall, Head of Light Music at the BBC, travelled to Dublin and presented them with an illuminated scroll as part of their award. Their twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 1983 was held in the Shelbourne Hotel. Among those who attended on that occasion were Professor Aloys Fleishmann, founder of the Cork International Choral Festival, and Havelock Nelson, Director of Music, BBC Northern Ireland. The choir has given several performances with the RTÉSO, including Debussy’s *Nocturnes*, Mahler’s Symphony No 3 and Holst’s ‘The Planets’. They have taken part in radio and television programmes and were guests of honour on two occasions on the BBC programme *Friday Night is Music Night*. The Lindsay Singers were invited by the BBC and RTÉ to perform four poems by the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney set to music by Michael Holohan for the television presentation ‘A Tribute to Seamus Heaney’. They have recorded a single, two CDs, and have also featured on compilation recordings.

1.8 Repertoire and Reviews
The Lindsay Singers have a wide and varied repertoire of which a complete list is given in Appendix A. Barror popularised new repertoire for SSAA by Kodaly, Strobach, Tucapsky, Michael Head, Havelock Nelson, Michael Holohan and Gerard Victory. Elizabeth Maconchy dedicated her work *Prayer before Birth* to the choir. In 1984, The Lindsay Singers commissioned and sang *Suantraoi Gráinne*, composed by one of their own members, Rhona Clarke, for which they were awarded the Seán Ó Riada Trophy at The Cork International Choral Festival. As a pioneer of new repertoire, Barror’s musical interpretation received praise from several contemporary composers. Havelock Nelson considered The Lindsay Singers to be ‘quite an outstanding choir by any standard in the world.’ Following a performance of one of his own compositions, he said ‘I composed this piece with a
performance in mind. I have heard that performance and do not expect to hear it again.’
Elizabeth Maconchy also wrote to Barror to ‘send my most heartfelt thanks to you and your
Lindsay Singers for the lovely performance of Prayer before Birth’. It was a really beautiful,
sensitive and intelligent performance - what one most wishes for, but does not often get’ (18
May 1972). Michael Holohan describes the sound that Barror produces with The Lindsay
Singers as ‘exquisite…. She paints choral sounds in colour’ (in conversation with the author
May 2008).

Reviewers and adjudicators have paid tribute to the excellent standard of the choir, and to
Barror’s skill as a conductor. The following examples are taken from reviews of The Lindsay
Singers by the late Charles Acton, the renowned music critic of The Irish Times. He singles
out their quality of sound, breathing, technique and phrasing for particular mention:

Among all their usual outstanding qualities, three points seemed particularly impressive yesterday:
the sheer beauty of the sound they make: their ability to hold a long note steady without a waver or
doubt: and their complete continuity of line throughout a phrase. Many professional
instrumentalists could learn from them (I.T.16 November 1973).

In a review of the choir the following year, Charles Acton paid tribute to Barror’s special
qualities:

….its achievement is Mrs Barror’s. And they can only achieve this for her, if she has the
personality that makes people want to achieve perfection in addition to the skill to teach it to them
(I.T. 2 December 1974).

In subsequent reviews he wrote:

The Lindsay Singers themselves proved once again just what a superlative choir trainer Mrs Barror
is (I.T. 16 December 1980).

It seems remarkable that there was ever a time without them, so firmly has she implanted them in
our hearts and so strikingly high a standard has she brought them to from just about the beginning.
Every choir thinks that it aims for perfection: hardly any achieve it, but then Mrs Barror is unique

Many adjudicators have praised the standard of the performances given by The Lindsay
Singers. On one occasion at the Teesside Choral Competition, the world renowned Hungarian
musician and adjudicator, Professor E. Sonyi, stated in her critique that ‘We think the angels
must sing like this choir’. Following their winning performance in July 1973 at the Welsh
Eisteddfod International Choral Competition, Kenneth Wright OBE wrote to Barror to
congratulate her. In his letter, dated July 30th he commented on the fact that he and the other
adjudicators were agreed that The Lindsay Singers had set the standard for that particular
competition. Although there were fine performances by other choirs, the adjudicators
questioned ‘but were they as good as the Dublin Lindsays?’ In a radio interview following the Cork International Choral Competition in 1992, the Welsh adjudicator Roy Bohana described The Lindsay Singers as a ‘... very fine international choir of the highest standard. You should be very proud to have a choir of The Lindsay Singers in Ireland’ (BBC May 1992).

The quality of The Lindsay Singers’ singing was due to a combination of tone, diction, intonation, interpretation and much more. In the late 1950s, when Barror formed The Lindsay Singers and was training school choirs, there was very little information available to teachers on the art of choral singing compared to what is available today. We now have access to books, journals, recordings and the Internet. Barror states that her methods and techniques evolved through the practical experience of what worked for her in rehearsal and performance: continuous evaluation, creative problem solving, setting goals, and constantly striving for a quality sound and that elusive sense of perfection.

Chapter 2 examines the literature on the elements that contribute to a quality choral sound and performance, and the overall skills required for effective choral conducting.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

A good conductor ought to be a good chauffeur; the qualities that make the one also make the other. They are concentration, an incessant control of attention, and presence of mind: the conductor only has to add a little sense of music. (Rachmaninov, cited in Anderson, 2003: 80).

The conductor should have musicianship, intelligence, and a passion to communicate through word and gesture, and an understanding of how people learn (Flummerfelt, cited in Glenn, 1991: 109).

This literature review will explore what makes for ‘effective’ conducting, as presented in the literature, focussing on aspects such as conductor effectiveness, rehearsal techniques and interpretation. Since the middle of the twentieth century, much research has been undertaken on the elements that constitute effective conducting, and the research is ongoing. Many authors who are established conductors deal comprehensively with the technical aspects of conducting and vocal training, while acknowledging that there is more to conducting than mere technique.

Throughout the decades, the emphasis shifted back and forth from publications that dealt with multiple issues such as tone, rhythm, diction and the art of vocalisation, to books that concentrated on single issues. Books on choral conducting, printed in English, before 1939 are rare according to a study undertaken by Steven Robert Hart in 1985. However, William J. Finn’s *The Art of the Choral Conductor*, written in 1939, is a fine example in which he covers a range of topics. On the other hand, in literature from the 1950s and 1960s, different elements, such as the development of tone or rhythm, were organised into separate chapters. The emphasis changed in later publications where issues were discussed from the author’s viewpoint. For example, *The Dynamic Choral Conductor* (Stanton, 1971) was written from the conductor’s perspective. In *Choral Conducting Symposium* (ed. Harold Decker and Julius Herford, 1988) the authors gathered different experts to present a chapter on their particular area of expertise.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, books such as *Choral Conducting* (Kaplan, 1985), and *Face to Face with an Orchestra* (Moses, 1987) were written on a single subject and were highly specialised, and were followed by a return to integrated publications examining a variety of topics. *Five Centuries of Choral Music* (ed., Paine 1988) is a collection of essays by well respected authors, dedicated to Howard Swan. *The Complete Choral Conductor* (Demaree and Moses, 1995) examines a range of topics, but performance practice dominates.
A more recent publication, *Conducting Choral Music* (Robert Garretson: 2002), covers all aspects of choral conducting and is essential reading for the student or novice embarking on a career as a choral conductor. It examines conducting techniques, the development of tone, maintaining vocal health, training children’s voices, style, interpretation and rehearsal techniques. Garretson also includes useful chapters on the management of a choir and the planning of programmes and concerts. Finally *Prescriptions for Choral Excellence* (Emmons and Chase: 2006) is a valuable source for choral conductors. It covers a wide range of topics, including vocal technique and how to maintain vocal health as well as leadership psychology, and it also offers practical solutions to issues that may arise in rehearsal.

A new and exciting aspect was added to the choral scene in America when the American Choral Directors’ Association (ACDA) was founded in 1959. The ACDA is a ‘non-profit music-education organisation, whose central purpose is to promote excellence in choral music through performance, composition, publication, researching and teaching.’ Its publication, *The Choral Journal’s* editorial mission is ‘to provide practical and scholarly information about choral music and its performance’, is an invaluable resource for all choral conductors. In regular articles, the journal explores up-to-date trends in pedagogy, performance, vocal health, and all types of choral groups. *Conscience of a Profession* (Swan, 1967) was an important compilation of articles and addresses written in this period. *The Choral Journal* also includes reviews of books, discs and performances and provides information on repertoire, standards and job opportunities in the field of choral conducting throughout the United States (American Choral Directors’ Association on the ‘About A.C.D.A.’ page, 20 October 2007, www.acdaonline.org).

The literature reveals that, while choral conductors may differ in their approach to certain aspects of choral singing, there is a broad consensus among writers, both on the skills that are necessary for effective choral conducting and on the elements required to produce a quality choral sound and a high standard of choral singing. This literature review will concentrate on musical issues such as rhythm, diction, blend and interpretation and it will also examine the important elements relating to effective rehearsal management and communication skills. These issues were explored in interviews with Ethna Barror and her responses are documented in Chapter 4.
2.1 Rhythm

Rhythm is the motion of sound waves marked off into symmetrical periods... Since motion according to a pattern is the differentiating quality between music and mere noise, musicians must take cognizance of its implications... Thus it behooves the modern conductor to address his attention seriously to the subject of rhythmic forms and patterns, and to perfect his organization in the skill acquired to present these forms (Finn, 1939: 205).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music’s definition of rhythm states that it ‘includes the effects of beats, accents, measures, groupings of notes into beats, grouping of beats into measures and grouping of measures into phrases.’ When all these factors are judiciously treated by the performer, we feel and say that the performer ‘possesses a sense of rhythm’ (Scholes, 1968: 482). Most conductors have their own beliefs and methods for teaching the various elements that constitute choral technique and, in books on choral conducting some writers discuss rhythm as a separate element. Others suggest that rhythm, diction, and the control of dynamics and tempo, are all closely linked, and that they are interdependent.

Finn stresses the importance of the sense of motion and forward movement through the distribution of accented and unaccented notes and he discusses the various ways of achieving refined differentiations between strong, weak and unaccented beats. In his opinion, the down-beats take care of themselves, and the mystery of music is in the up-beat. He is aware that many conductors are merely time-beaters or ‘metronomic leaders’. He suggests that conductors who carefully follow the composer’s intentions and ‘appraise at its true worth the value of taking weight and stress off weak beats unless special accentuation be indicated by the composer, are probably instrumentalities of convincing music and genuine masters of the lyricism of the art’ (Finn, 1939: 205).

Archibald Davison (1971) does not deal with rhythmic choral singing as a separate feature of technique. His approach is based on the theory that rhythmic security comes from attention to the six elements that he considers contribute to choral technique: pronunciation, tone, breathing, phrasing, variety in dynamics and impressiveness (Davison, 1971: 47). He considers that the sole justification for choral technique is ‘that it makes possible the final and full revelation of the beauty that resides in the music’ (Davison: 43).

In dealing with rhythm, Walter Ehret (1984) devotes a section on note values and their correct execution in music. He stresses the importance of accuracy, and he maintains that the shortening of note values is ‘one of the primary weaknesses in choral singing today’ (Ehret, 1984: 32). He suggests that notes should only be shortened in order to take a ‘catch breath’. He advises that singers should be made aware of ‘natural group accents’ and, in syncopated or
irregular rhythms, the accents should be carefully placed. According to Ehret, attention must be given to the correct releasing of notes, particularly in polyphonic music. He points out that, in this style of music, notes of varying length ‘usually create the harmonic and rhythmic stresses and represent the endings of important phrase lines. If these releases are not properly planned for on a certain beat, or part thereof, the entire structure is devitalised’ (Ehret, 1984: 34).

As previously noted, some writers do not treat rhythm as a separate entity. Robert Garretson includes rhythm in his chapter on rehearsal technique and states the following:

Rhythmic security in the music not only aids in the precision and the vitality of the performance but also reduces to some extent excessive muscular tension and improves the tone quality of the group. Rhythmic security can be improved by encouraging a stronger rhythmic response to the music (Garretson, 2002: 215).

He includes the following useful pointers for establishing rhythmic responsiveness:

- Recite the text in correct musical rhythm
- Clap the rhythm
- Isolate rhythmic problems
- Analyse them and respond by clapping or chanting
- Write a familiar song on the chalkboard and alter the rhythm to include variations
- Initially use simple alterations, but soon include more difficult and varying rhythm patterns (Garretson, 2002: 210).

Garretson suggests that in practising rhythmic patterns and their alteration, a familiar song may be used in the initial stages of the exercise. In this way, full attention can be focussed on the rhythm. Robert Shaw has written extensively on all aspects of conducting choral music. In his view:

Rhythm is a psychological and physical phenomenon that exists innately - this does not mean that each of us is a natural-born expert in its practice. There are, after all, basic human differences in rhythmic talent as in every other field. Good rhythm has to be based upon a natural aptitude - but even for the most gifted it is an acquired skill (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 61).

Shaw maintains that very little vocal training or experience really prepares one to sing rhythmically, because ‘in the training of the would-be professional solo-voice, attention is centred on quality (quite necessarily) but largely to the exclusion of how a voice is to be used rhythmically.’ He points out that ‘the principal target seems to be ‘personal’ communication - no matter how it may stretch, distort or rewrite the original creation’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 62).
Shaw also refers to the fact that rhythmic talent varies from one individual to the next. However he believes that even for the most gifted, it is an acquired skill. He counsels that the way we become more expert in the exercise of rhythm and tempo, is the way we become better at anything else, namely:

- Drill, drill, drill
- Work on sight-reading
- Use the piano at rehearsal only when necessary
- Occasionally put consonants ahead of the beat
- Sing vowels on the beat
- Make an effort to be more rhythmical in personal vocalises and in solo materials (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 62).

Royal Stanton (1971) comments on the influence of rhythm on tone:

The majority of all problems of choral performance are fundamentally rhythmic. A principal dimension of tone is its duration which postulates a precise beginning or attack and an equally precise ending or release. Between attack and release, consider tone as a live, moving entity, whose vitality depends on its sense of motion through time (Stanton, 1971: 68).

Stanton also discusses how rhythm influences tone, and he suggests how rhythm may be used as a tool to inject vitality into the music when tonal problems arise:

When a tonal problem resists usual devices, new tactics can be introduced by the conductor to inject new life into the music. He points out that ‘an abrupt, dramatic and strongly rhythmic change of pace, if possible based on “off-beat” methods, will demand fresh attention and vigour from each singer’ (Stanton, 1971: 68).

His method includes temporarily adapting tempo changes, as in doubling the tempo or using *staccato* articulation instead of *legato*. He suggests that in this way a conductor can revitalise a score and enable the choir to view the music in a new light, ‘…after which they will return to the directions given in the score’ (Stanton, 1971: 70).

The singers must understand that this is a temporary change, and that they need to capture this vitality at the original tempo and direction given by the composer. Reference to this exercise can be made to acquire this vitality at future rehearsals, and Stanton maintains that ‘this device has proven to be strong medicine in curing similar ills in *a cappella* works, both religious and secular’ (Stanton, 1971: 71).

Shaw states succinctly that there ‘comes a time when only a “visual aid” can bring cohesion’, and that singers must abandon their scores and focus on the conductor. He believes that: ‘Finally, precision and rightness are the ultimate convincers and communicators, anything less than that is musical pornography’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 95).
2.2 Diction

The choral art of our time has not even begun to understand and utilise text and enunciation as the consummate conjurers of musical colour and timbre (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 96).

The quality of choral performances can be affected through lack of attention to diction, with the result that it is often impossible to grasp the meaning of the work performed. In some situations, it is even difficult to hear in which language the text is sung. This makes for poor communication with the audience and it detracts from the overall enjoyment of the performance, regardless of the beauty or colour of the sound produced. As with all the elements that contribute to good choral singing, there are differences of opinion among the conductors and teachers throughout the choral world with regard to the subject of diction, and its relevance.

William J. Finn in *The Art of Choral Conducting* stresses the importance of diction. He believes that all song is a combination of words and music, and relates some of the difficulties that he has encountered with diction over the years with choral groups. He comments on the difficulties in diction that polyphonic music presents for singers:

> One source of serious difficulty in making choral utterances comprehensible is the complex structure of certain styles of the music itself. In homophonic music, there is usually synchronous delivery of consonants and vowels by all parts, but in contrapuntal compositions, this is impossible (Finn, 1939: 226).

Finn suggests that there are two ways of listening to polyphonic music:

> The first way is to concentrate attention on a single line and follow it through. The second is to listen to the music as a whole. The style itself disregards the allocation of words (Finn, 1939: 226).

Finn believes that conductors and singers are challenged by music which contains many vowels and consonants sung rapidly on short notes, and that a note per syllable in allegro tempo is a serious obstacle to clear diction. He is scathing in his comments about some vocal repertoire ‘crowded with unsympathetic consonants and vowels without affinity that come from the pens of composers who should rewrite their fiddle faddle for fiddles and flutes’ (Finn, 1939: 228).

He also mentions the problem that a conductor must contend with in finding a balance between a chorus and its accompaniment, whether it is piano, organ or orchestral accompaniment: ‘The effect on diction, of excessive quantity in accompaniment is disastrous, neutralising the most carefully planned efforts on its behalf”(Finn, 1939: 229). Finally, he maintains that some defects of enunciation are due to the ‘ignorance or carelessness of singers, rather than to acoustical or idiomatic factors’ pointing to ‘improper phonation of pure
vowels and their differentiations, and indistinct articulation of consonants’ (Finn, 1939: 229).

Kaplan also believes that good diction is of paramount importance in achieving uniformity of sound, especially in choral music, and he advises that ‘a correct, relaxed pronunciation of vowels and consonants is also the key to a good and unrestricted vocal production’ (Kaplan, 1985: 57).

While the subject of diction receives different emphasis from various experts, all appear to agree on the importance of the correct enunciation of vowels and consonants. Lloyd Pfautch points out that when the conductor places emphasis on uniformity of vowels, it results in better tone colour, intonation and blend. He believes that conductors must insist that every singer:

…strives to contribute uniform vowel sounds, carefully articulated consonants, and well-modulated verbal and melodic nuances...Vocal and choral music is a consequence of the text... so that in addition to the appeal of the music itself, there is an added essential dimension when the text is heard (Decker and Herford, 1988: 100).

Davison (1945) also points to the importance of consonants stating that:

Once the tonal method has been established, the vowels will, save for occasional special treatment, take care of themselves. Without consonants however, the whole fabric of the music becomes shabby and meaningless. (Davison, 1945: 49)

Furthermore, Pfautch (1988) links rhythmic problems to faulty articulation of consonants. He suggests how various exercises can be incorporated into rehearsal procedures to secure accurate rhythm by correlating the syllabic sounds with the note values. He cautions against continuous use of the text in rehearsals which ‘leads to a sense of familiarity that can weaken the formation of vowels’, and he advises that the conductor must listen critically and ‘respond to the diction of his chorus like an objective listener in an audience who is hearing the text for the first time’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 101).

There is also a debate concerning the importance of text over music or music over text. Since the time of Dufay, claims Finn, musicians have been divided on this issue, ‘some ceding the high prerogatives to music, and others to text’ (Finn, 1939: 235). Finn contends that the difference between the importance of text over music or music over text depends on the situation and the music itself i.e. the text is more important in liturgical music, but he recommends that ‘for concert performance, if there is a conflict between the two elements, the music must be granted first consideration’ (Finn, 1939: 235).
According to Kaplan, ‘vocal music is a finely balanced amalgam of two forms of communication: language and music’ (Kaplan, 1985: 55). He points out that whether the conductor is dealing with early or modern works is irrelevant. Kaplan urges that ‘in vocal music we communicate the meaning of the text by drawing the audience’s attention to the most important words through clear and correct diction and through musical device’ (Kaplan, 1985: 57).

Barbara Conable (2000) suggests that the text is as important as the music: ‘Choral music is sung poetry or prayer. The text is significant and the words are an essential part of the artistic whole. Therefore Polyhymania, Muse of Choral Singing, is displeased when her words can’t be understood by an audience’ (Conable, 2000: 22).

Conable advises that indistinct words result from two causes: ‘undervalued consonants and mismapping of lips.’ She states that singers often don’t use what she describes as our ‘movement lips which extend from cheek to cheek and from the base of the nose to the base of the gums.’ Her advice is to sing using all the muscles (Conable: 22).

In his chapter on the development of choral tone, Robert Garretson (2002) offers detailed exercises for improving breath control and diction, and discusses the different styles of diction, legato, marcato and staccato (Garretson, 2002: 99). He counsels that ‘tone and diction are the chief means of transmitting the poetic qualities of the music to the audience’, pointing out that they are ‘essential to effective interpretation’ and to be achieved, must receive your detailed, exacting attention’ (Garretson, 2002: 106).

Walter Ehret (1984) argues that singing diction should be natural and distinct. The audience should not be aware of any mannerisms in pronunciation, but each syllable should be clearly intelligible to the listener without giving the impression of stress or strain. He advises that ‘singers and the director must develop imaginative use of vocal tone colour if complete expression is to be achieved and the full significance of the words to be communicated to the listener’ (Ehret, 1984: 47). Ehret believes that it is the responsibility of the conductor to ‘stimulate an imaginative response to the emotional content of words and music’ (Ehret: 47). His advice is to analyse the mood and emotion of the text, and to highlight key words and phrases that are emotionally expressive.

Robert Shaw’s thoughts on diction, as with all aspects of choral singing that he has explored in his teaching and writings, bring clarity to the subject. He has four principles as foundations
of rehearsal techniques and performance practice. The first principle is that ‘intonation is the sine qua non of choral singing’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 52). Shaw’s second premise is that ‘time is divisible’ (Shaw in Blocker: 53) and must be particularized with a precision as inexhaustibly sensitive as that accorded to intonation.’ His third premise is that ‘vocal tone, in addition to being capable of absolute pitch at an absolute moment, is also capable of variety of dynamics and colours’ (Shaw in Blocker: 54). The fourth rule applies to the subject of diction.

Vocal (choral) music has words - as well as pitches, rhythms and colours; and that it is possible most of the time to project them through and over instrumental collaboration. We do this by concentrating not upon the words themselves, but upon the distinct and successive sounds which form those words, and by allotting to each of these sounds their precise moment and amount of musical time (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 55).

In his writings, Shaw weaves together the elements that contribute to good choral singing. He refers to diction when he discusses rhythm and intonation. He explains that the principal challenge in dealing with the problem of enunciation is to ensure that the ‘phonetic building blocks’ are placed in ‘their precise approved slots in time. This is where rhythmic accuracy influences proper diction’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 83).

Shaw later explains that when we speak, our voices rise and fall in a natural curve, in sentences and in phrases. The same applies to vocal music with text. The composer wishes the text to be heard and highlighted. Shaw maintains that this is brought about by replacing the ‘customary rhythms, pitches, durations and accentuations of speech’ with ‘musical rhythms, pitches, durations and accentuations’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 92). Shaw stresses that while each note ‘becomes a musical event - to be slurred or accentuated, to be increased or decreased, to be lengthened or darkened - or any combination of the above, each syllable must be crafted with care and precision - and also take its place in a sequence’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 93). In so doing ‘one moves from the elegance of the spoken word to the revelation of its musical manifestation’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 92).

In my experience of working with choral groups, I have observed that performing vocal music with text is about communicating an idea, a feeling or emotion. But it is difficult to portray an idea, feeling or emotion without words that are clear, intelligible, and audible. Unlike acting where it is possible to demonstrate love or anger through actions, in choral singing we express these emotions with quality tone, rhythm and, most importantly, diction.
2.3 Blend

Blend is a result, not a thing of itself. It’s a result of the right pitch at the right time on the right dynamic level with the right vowel (Glenn, 1991: 58).

Choral tone and its development occupy the minds and energy of all choral conductors. A chorus’ tone is its principal product and every choir has its own sound, because ‘it is the amalgamation of the unique individuals that comprise it’ (Stanton, 1971: 39). No two choirs or vocal ensembles sound the same, and the choice of a pleasing choral sound varies from one choral director to another. Opinions differ among singing teachers and choral directors with regard to matching vocal sounds. Many experts refer to the process of achieving a unified delivery of sound as blend. Others refuse to use the word blend in practice. The conductor Robert Page states: ‘I never use the word blend in a rehearsal. To me, blend is a pastry term used in a kitchen. I do cook!’ (Glenn, 1991: 57).

Swan points to the fact that:

It is not possible to find a definition of the term ‘blend’ in a musical source. To blend is to combine or mix. One voice blends into another by establishing uniform pronunciation, dynamic level and precision of attack and release. This should remain unchanged, regardless of the demands of the score. When a chorus achieves this goal, the aesthetic result is exceedingly beautiful (Rasmussen, 1989: 81).

There is general agreement on the components that contribute to a unified choral sound, although conductors and teachers may use different terminology or emphasise the importance of one component over another. In determining the elements that contribute to a unified choral sound, in this study I refer to the process as ‘blend.’ The veteran conductor Walter Ehret has drawn up a collection of ideas, procedures and devices which he maintains ‘have been successfully used with choral groups of all ages’ (Ehret, 1984: Foreword).

In his book he discusses the subject of blend and he suggests that ‘complete blend is only possible when the following properties are present:’

- Accuracy of pitch
- Uniform vowels
- Uniform dynamic level
- Uniform tone colour
- Rhythmic unity
- Uniform diction
He further asserts that before any single line can be blended into the ensemble it must be a thoroughly blended unit in itself. Basic tonal blend is achieved when the individual tonal characteristics of each voice are fused into one sound. As a tool he uses what he refers to as ‘Travellers’ for balance. He explains that ‘Travellers’ are selected members of each section who can shift to another voice part whenever necessary. This adds weight where it belongs and takes weight from where it is needed. In addition to balance, colour effects may be obtained from such manipulation of the voices. Ehret also describes voices as ‘flute’ (light) ‘reed’ (reedy) and ‘string’ (well balanced) and he suggests that ‘in seating these voices, alternate all three types F R S F R S to assist blending’ (Ehret, 1984: 35).

The comparison of the sectional sounds of an orchestra to the different sound of voices is also discussed by Finn. He considers the blending and balancing of all choral lines to be of primary importance in developing a choral sound. He compares the possibility of ‘blend’ a chorus can produce, to the sounds of the different sections of the orchestra and he argues that

There must be no single elements, either individual voices or groups of voices, so prominent as to attract attention to themselves... so the consummate art of chorophony depends upon the correlation of polychrome voices, lyric flute-sopranos trading with lyric reed sopranos, giving lucidity to dark contraltos, borrowing harmonic authority from solid basses or a quasi-vibrato from high cello-tenors (Finn, 1939: 166).

Finn maintains that it is important that each individual conductor develops a technique with this in mind. He concludes that the simplest means of achieving blend is

- to blend each part with itself first
- to blend the extremes i.e. the sopranos and the basses
- to establish the altos and the tenors as the choral axis
- to establish the baritones as the comptrollers of blending unification (Finn, 1939: 167).
Finn discusses these four principles in great detail and he produces exercises in pursuance of his plan. He works on achieving tonal colours and balance in each individual part, allowing the various timbres within the choral line to dominate or subdue, as and when required to do so. Finn also takes the size of the choir into consideration and observes that ‘integral and essential to the blending process of the choral lines is the tonal balance which is generally determined by the number of voices on each line’ (Finn, 1939: 188).

When dealing with the subject of blend, one must take into account the repertoire that is being performed, according to Robert Wagner:

There are moments in music where blend is not an important factor. For instance I couldn’t tell my choir to blend in the Dies Irae of the Verdi Requiem….However it is important that, at all times, there should be a homogeneous sound without sacrificing vitality (Glenn, 1991: 59).

Margaret Hillis suggests that the conductor must take into account the style of music being performed and the sound that is required. According to Hillis, the composer tells what kind of quality of sound is necessary for the music, and it is up to the choral director to produce the composer’s sound (Glenn, 1991: 53).

Based on his vast experience as a choral conductor, Gerald Eskelin (2005) has also written on the subject of choral blend. He suggests that factors that affect vocal sound quality include pitch, vowel formation, resonance, brightness, density, breathing, phrasing, tuning and variety in dynamics. Eskelin believes that because conductors and teachers may use different terminology to describe the components that constitute quality tone or blend, this can sometimes lead to confusion for students. He makes the point that some singing teachers discourage their students from joining choral groups in case they are exposed to harmful techniques in the quest for a uniform sound (Eskelin, 2005: 22).

For example, Eskelin says that a common obstacle to achieving choral blend occurs when a singer assumes that his or her teacher’s method is the only correct technique. He believes that because the singer takes on the role of a soloist, that it can be a limiting factor. He draws attention to the fact that once a singer abandons the ‘my voice’ concept, development of vocal flexibility and sensitivity become possible….Awareness of vocal sound components can make any singer a better blender and even a better singer (Eskelin, 2005: 22). Eskelin advises that when voice teachers caution students about adopting another voice teacher’s method, the difference may be only a matter of terminology and not technique. His objective is to help a singer to recognise the components of vocal sound ‘regardless of the terminology, and thereby
achieve results they can hear for themselves’ (Eskelin, 2005: 10). He believes that using his method ensures that blend is achieved by the conductor, the individual singer, and the ensemble, through experimenting with physical adjustments to the sound, and always guided by the ear.

Describing the nature of choral tone, Stanton (1971) considers that each choir member has to be involved in the process of control:

At the outset individual voices singing together produce diverse, conflicting sounds which must be modified in the direction of one consistent group tone. This modification must derive from each voice, its unique characteristics and timbres, produced in a natural way, devoid of strain, and blending with, rather than dominating, other voices (Stanton, 1971: 39).

Swan states that the effort is rewarded and that eventually:

Regardless of problems, satisfaction will come when a choral ensemble produces a tone which aesthetically is beautiful, which is achieved with no harm done to the voices of the singers and which serves effectively a considerable number of compositions representing many styles and periods (Rasmussen, 1989: 81).

Margaret Hillis encourages each singer to participate in the process of improving the sound. She believes that listening is the key to producing a beautiful sound and when conducting, she ‘constantly cautions’ the singers to ‘listen’ maintaining that:

When a chorus listens to itself, it immediately informs them of balance, blend, unison within sections and intonation. Their act of listening makes a tremendous difference to the sound….It is not a natural process and requires regular reminders from the podium (Hillis, 2002: 15).

Eskelin focuses on ‘attitude’ as an important component of vocal blend. He suggests that every singer must ‘be aware of the consensus of sound in the ensemble’ and be prepared to sacrifice his or her own preferences and adjust accordingly to ensure a rich malleable group tone (Eskelin, 2005: 51). Stanton believes that the pursuit of perfection must be a goal shared, and sought with relentless enthusiasm by the singers and conductor alike because he states: ‘the more vibrant the group’s tone, the more firmly hooked the individual will become on the basic joy of choral singing’ (Stanton, 1971: 41).

One of the essential components of blend is correct intonation. One aspect which is thought to influence the blend and intonation is the formation of the singers. One of the earliest experiments on the arrangement of singers and its influence on their sound was conducted by Lambson (1961). He concluded that the formation of the choir did not greatly influence the sound. However, in a later study in 1990, Tocheff ’examined the effect of acoustic placement of singers on homophonic and polyphonic selections,’ and he found that the placement had a ‘great influence on the dependent variables of overall blend, intonation, and achievement of
choral ensemble.’ James F. Daugherty has written extensively on the topic of ‘circumambient spacing.’ In his 1996, 1999, and 2003 studies, he examined the effects of choral formations on sound. One of the most interesting points about this research was that 95.6% of the choristers reported that they felt that spacing influenced choral sound (Aspaas/McCrea/Morris/Fowler: IJRCS, 2004).

In an article in the choral journal on the subject of intonation, Kevin D. Skelton refers to spacing as one of the ‘environmental and easy-to-fix problems’ that affect intonation (Skelton, 2005: 29). Other environmental factors that influence intonation are weather, time of day, room acoustics and conducting gesture. The singers’ vocal production, posture, breathing, diction, listening skills and the conductor’s gestures and verbal instructions all contribute to intonation which is ‘faultless in pitch’ and which affects the over-all quality of the sound (Skelton, 2005: 33).

Thomas Wine offers the following rehearsal techniques for resolving intonation problems:

- Ensure there is sufficient air and light
- Re-arrange the seating
- Practise humming
- Change the key and/or tempo of the work under rehearsal
- Practise singing every note as staccato quavers
- Silently sing phrases, then sing them aloud and check the pitch of the singing
- Raise the pitch of a note one half tone on every eighth count
- Record the rehearsal if necessary to identify where the problems are occurring

Wine maintains that singing in tune requires good vocal fundamentals, precise diction and a dedication from every singer to making every note relate to the voices around them. Correct intonation is the result of a total choral experience (Wine, 2004: 27).
Daniel Moe wrote:

In dealing with the special problems of singing in tune, it should be re-emphasized that no single aspect of choral technique can ever be neatly isolated. Tone, diction, vowel formation, rhythmic consistency, style and intonation are all interdependent. As a result, artistic choral singing can be achieved only when all the elements of technique are successfully synthesized (Moe, 2005: 29).

What becomes clear from these studies is that while each choir or choral group, irrespective of size, may acquire its own unique sound and tone, it is imperative that each group achieves a unified sound or choral blend. This blend is achieved by working with such basic tools as accurate pitch, uniform vowels, unified sections, and by sacrificing the notion of the soloist’s voice. All these are combined with a common goal, the constant striving for perfection.

2.4 Interpretation

In music as in drama no two live performances are ever the same. Just as a dramatist cannot determine how actors will interpret his lines, a composer has only limited control over the execution of his work. ‘Interpretation in music is merely the act of performance, with the implication that in it the performer’s judgement and personality have a share’ (Ward, 1964: 289).

Traditionally, interpretation is linked with the search for meaning, and what appeals to one listener may not appeal to another. Most of the major composers’ works have been performed by various artists and conductors, and no two recordings will offer the same interpretation. While we now have choice, only one interpretation can be heard inwardly and outwardly at any given time.

Choirs are often restricted in the repertoire they can perform by their function or philosophy. However, unless their repertoire is strictly limited, as in choirs that only sing liturgical chant or advertisement commercials, for example, the conductor has to consider at some stage how many styles he will incorporate into a given year and how to approach their interpretation. Eskelin adopts the view that ‘when music of any style is performed in a vital and dynamic manner, it will come to life, appealing to larger and more enthusiastic audiences’ (Eskelin, 2005: 49).

Stanton maintains that in dealing with interpretation, the dominance of the conductor’s concept is essential, and ‘ideally is a composite of his knowledge of the music, his awareness of his singers’ potential, and his skill in leadership and teaching’ (Stanton, 1971: 115). He states that the conductor is required ‘to know the music, and be known for knowing’ (Stanton, 1971: 115). He further states that to uphold the attitude of ‘not as I say, but as the music says’ is the basis for interpretation, and that this is best brought about by the ‘accurate use of musical material’ (Stanton, 1971: 115).
He later points out that:

> Insipid music breeds vapid singing. Effective music on the other hand is a cornerstone of dynamic performance. The conductor’s ability to tell one from the other is a valuable asset which must be cultivated at the cost of study, time, effort, and thought (Stanton, 1971: 137).

Whichever route the conductor takes, the success of the group will depend not on the choice of material, but on how well the material is interpreted and performed and whether it remains faithful to the composer’s intentions. Just as a great artist will refine a painting, great interpretations arise when the conductor sifts through the finer details of the composer’s work and searches beyond for hidden depths. This requires the conductor to ‘know the music’ as Garretson stated and to possess the skill to put the ‘knowing’ into practice. To interpret the music is the primary function of the conductor and Garretson states: ‘An understanding of the main historical periods, as well as the styles within that period, is a requisite to the proper interpretation of any composer’s music’ (Garretson, 2002: 155).

In this area, Walter Collins, the conductor and musicologist, offers the view that the activities of the musicologist can be of enormous help to the conductor. More and more performers and conductors are collaborating with musicologists in their background research. In practice, the musicologist can provide accurate scores, information on how to perform them according to the composer’s expectations, and produce reference and literary publications that will assist the performer to find and understand the music. This is especially true of early music. He advises that the ‘ideal performance of a piece of music is one that most closely approaches the composer’s expectations for performance, and the ideal edition of music is one that most accurately reveals the composer’s expectation for its performance’ (Decker/ Herford, 1988: 127).

Swan suggests the following guidelines to help conductors with regard to performance practice. These are:

- Learn the stylistic practices of the period
- Study the stylistic compositional techniques of the periods
- Study the works of the individual composer
- Be willing to compromise and change (Swan in Rasmussen, 1989: 35).
There are many varieties of tone colour and shadings. Just as an actor will change the colour of his words when he expresses sentiments of love and hate, so too the singer can change the emotional content of a phrase to project the thought and feeling behind the words, using a wide range of dynamic colours.

The approach of the eminent conductor and teacher McEwen to singing music from various musical periods stems from implementing ‘a greater palette of vowel colours, not in explaining more abstract musicological concepts’. He believes that performance practices from period to period are not ‘enormously distinct’, and his attitude is simple and straightforward: ‘Renaissance music requires lighter vowels that help propel linear movement. Baroque repertoire requires vowels capable of rhythmic clarity and buoyancy’. However, he confirms that for him ‘uniform vowels and vital rhythms are lifeless unless put in the context of musical line …. There is nothing as exciting as a great musical line. I would like that to be my epitaph.’ (McEwen, in Christianson, 1998: 57)

To enable the conductor to express the full significance of words and music, Ehret gives some practical advice, and suggests that tone colour response can be developed as follows:

Elicit a physical response to the music. Translate emotional thought into muscular action. This is reflected in body attitudes and facial expression which affect tone colour...even taking a breath must be initiated by the emotional thought behind it (Ehret, 1984: 47).

Ehret further advises that an emotional response can be achieved by

- a good sensitive recitation of the text
- discussion of the mood of the text
- highlighting key words and phrases that are emotionally expressive, and shaping them in a musical way (Ehret:47).

Robert Shaw also emphasises the importance of analysing the music and text. For him, the most stimulating aspect consists first in identifying the nature and dimension of the principal tone and metric materials, and ‘in following their alteration and variation as the music grows through time’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 58). Although Shaw believes that it is the duty of the conductor through long hours of study to facilitate the interpretation of the music to the chorus, he states that it is often that the most ‘instructive and productive analysis only takes place in rehearsals, where it mingles with sweat, sound and occasional sniffles’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004:57).
Hillis was at one time Shaw’s assistant and was influenced by his work ethic and technique. When it comes to interpretation, Hillis ‘always had the final product in her ear. She had an incredible ability to make complex issues seem easy as well as being a superb teacher. Her genius was in how she gradually revealed her concept of the work during the rehearsal series. She rehearsed by placing the building blocks of the work in planned succession.’ She revealed that:

They don’t know it because I don’t tell them, but I prepare a work in such a way that they feel the structure of the piece so well that they just can’t go wrong (Hillis, 2002: 14).

All the expert conductors point to the importance of faithfully interpreting and paying attention to the musical detail of each composer. There is, however, an added ingredient which is difficult to define, and that is musical imagination. The conductor, who possesses this ability to move beyond the standard interpretation, separates an average performance from an exceptional one, turning it into one which communicates with the audience and in Shaw’s words ‘draws them for an instant from their everyday existence.’ He describes the process as follows:

It is precisely this kaleidoscopic transforming miracle of detail which allows a massed chorus to escape its mass. These are the elements through which a chorus becomes personalised, which individuate its communication (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 59).

In order to facilitate the aesthetic quality of the music, the conductor has to know the music and know how to communicate that knowledge in rehearsal (Durant, 1994: 6). The conductor must have the skill to think and act spontaneously. Marvin points out that ‘when technique becomes “second nature” the conductor’s ‘concentration increases’. He describes this process in terms of a flow of energy between the conductor and the chorus. He states:

Onward flows the energy from the conductor to chorus and back to the conductor. The cycle is revitalizing for both. The process is real but invisible; it is thus often felt to be spiritual, and its essence inspires and enriches the lives of the participants (Marvin, 1988: 26).

Marvin also maintains that:

As they work to ‘project a unity of conception through a unity of presentation, their spirits soar’.

In performance, projecting their collective vision of the beauty of music, inspires, rejuvenates, and enriches the lives of the participants (Marvin, 1988: 32).

Music-making, according to Csikzentmihalyi, is an excellent opportunity for people to experience flow (Spencer, 2000: 73). Flow is attained when a person becomes so ‘totally engaged that he or she loses track of time and a sense of self, and experiences a sense of enjoyment’ (Spencer: 73). Aaron Williamson supports this notion. He states that the ‘trance-like state often described by musicians during their best performances is another manifestation of flow’ (Williamson, 2004: 31). John Rutter describes it thus: ‘Once singers
have experienced this joy, they have been put in touch with something inside of themselves, which is their soul’ (TV Interview: 2006).

Reimer suggests that ‘one creative act - one aesthetic decision - suggests another that we could not have envisioned until the first was captured’ (Reimer, 1970: 36). Through their participation in choirs and choral societies, singers gain both artistically and musically. The experience of learning and singing expands their musical understanding, sharpens their listening skills, and enables singers to respond more fully to music.

2.5 Rehearsal Management

It is at rehearsals that the real work is done (Archibald T. Davison, 1971: 43).

The choral conductor’s job is a highly complex one. Foremost he must be a musician, but the successful, dynamic choral conductor must also be a leader, teacher, and organiser. In large organisations, the conductor’s responsibility lies in the artistic area and the practicalities are taken care of by a committee or board of management. Often however, the conductor is involved in dealing with local issues that accompany the choral scene, such as the day-to-day planning of rehearsal schedules and choosing rehearsal accommodation. The choral conductor’s success depends not only on his ability to impart vocal and musical techniques, but also on his capacity to plan and execute productive rehearsals. Having acquired a venue and singers to fill it, it is the responsibility of the choral conductor to make effective use of the rehearsal time.

In her article entitled ‘Helpful Hints for Meaningful, Efficient Rehearsals’ Patricia Hennings, director of the Peninsula Women’s Chorus, suggests that ‘creating a personal space for each singer creates a sense of self worth’ and as a result singers sing ‘with confidence and joy.’ She further states:

My philosophy towards rehearsal is additive. Know your sound ideal, goal and stylistic aim and build towards it, gradually moving from the general to the specific. Singers need to feel that they are successful and making progress (Hennings, 2000: 40).

Hennings constantly changes the physical arrangements and always ends the rehearsal on a happy note. She claims that ‘creating individual responsibility is the key to the greatest musical growth’.

Robert Shaw also believes that the singers have individual and collective responsibilities. These include commitment, attendance; punctuality and a high degree of concentration for the
duration of the rehearsal time.

Great corporate sound depends on great corporate responsibility. Some of us read faster than others. Some of us have more voice and more beautiful voices than others… Each of us has gifts enough for the job at hand. All that could be lacking are desire and industry (Blocker, 2004: 40).

The interaction of individuals within sections of the chorus, in the chorus as a whole, and with the conductor, all has a bearing on the successful outcome of rehearsals. However, as most of the books on conducting state, it is the conductor who is the motivator, in determining the discipline, concentration, morale and artistic growth of the ensemble. Shaw states that rehearsals should have two major objectives: the first is to ‘save the human voice’ and the second is to ‘use devices which make it impossible not to hear recognise and correct errors of pitch, rhythm and text’ (Shaw in Blocker, 2004: 51).

In his chapter on the subject of rehearsals, Pfautch maintains that the ‘organisation of a rehearsal is the most important responsibility of a choral conductor’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 77). According to him rehearsals should begin on time and finish on time as this encourages punctuality and ‘indicates a respect for the individual’s right to determine his own use of time outside the rehearsal. Pfautch advises that: ‘a planned rehearsal that is well paced, contributes much to the good rapport between the conductor and the chorus’ that rehearsal procedures should assist the continuity of concentration (Decker and Herford, 1988: 77). This may vary from rehearsal to rehearsal, with some yielding more success than others: ‘In either instance, the span of concentration will be dependent on the interaction between conductor and chorus’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 85).

The rehearsal sequence can vary and no two conductors will apply the same techniques. Many conductors advocate warm-ups, while others prefer to get down to the business of learning straight away. When used, warm-ups should be ‘fun, related to the music being learnt and positive’ (Mike Brewer, 1997: 20). Pfautch agrees that warm-ups are beneficial when the conductor takes the time to vary the procedure. This calls for imagination and ingenuity on the part of the conductor (Decker and Herford, 1988: 78).

Shaw’s first objective - to save the human voice - is a belief also held by Pfautch. He advises conducting students on the importance of judging the pace of the rehearsal, and when and how to vary the work. This is vital in order to avoid fatigue in the singers, or at the other end of the scale, to avoid boring them. ‘Group conversations can be thwarted by a pace and a momentum that never allows time for such exchanges’ (Decker and Herford: 82).
Davison also makes a similar point:

Sustained interest at rehearsals depends not a little on the order in which the pieces are taken up. The principle of alternating styles, loud and soft, vigorous and gentle, fast and slow is fundamentally sound; and the initial piece should, by all means, be calculated to enlist the immediate interest of the chorus (Davison, 1971: 38).

Many conductors choose to begin the rehearsal with familiar pieces, whereas others feel that the beginning of the rehearsal is the ideal time to introduce new repertoire or to work on difficult passages, because this is when the energy of the singers is at its peak. All of the pedagogues put forward ideas on how to teach new repertoire to choirs that have poor to moderate reading ability. Unless the choir is professional or semi-professional, it is at this level that many choirs operate, and it is here that the imagination and ingenuity of the conductor is stretched. It is usual for time to be spent on teaching individual lines, and often it is at this point that precious time is wasted and concentration wanes. If the conductor wishes to maintain interest when rehearsing individual parts, he has to devise ways to include the other parts, and so use the rehearsal time to the group’s advantage. The following are suggested rehearsal techniques put forward by conductors, aimed at learning material in the shortest possible time and at the same time sustaining interest.

The conductor should have full knowledge of the score. The best procedures are those that facilitate learning and achieve artistic singing in the shortest periods of time (Garretson, 2002: 206).

While one part is being rehearsed, the other parts should be asked to study the part and listen to it in relation to the other parts (Garretson: 207).

Hum their part in the background (Garretson: 207).

All voices may sing their parts in unison (Garretson: 207).

Separate the elements often in rehearsal. Spend time on words only, rhythm only, melody only, or chording only (Brewer, 1997: 17).

If there are mistakes, look at the problem in isolation rather than singing a whole section again. Trouble shoot, and if helpful, makes a game out of the problem (Brewer, 1997: 17).

Always give a reason for repetition. Out with ‘let’s do it again’ (Ehret, 1984: 12).

Memorize while learning. An efficient mentally alert rehearsal brings about memorization from the very beginning (Ehret: 12).

Sing whenever you feel the inclination to talk (Davison, 1971: 40).

In order to maintain momentum in rehearsal, most texts counsel against too much talking at or to the chorus. Davison advises that when you sing to demonstrate rather than talk, ‘your
example will in fact, be a very brief wordless lecture on phrasing, tone, breathing, interpretation, and pronunciation’ (Davison, 1971:40).

Pfautch also encourages conductors to demonstrate: ‘The choral conductor must be willing to use whatever potential he has in demonstrating for the group what he wants to hear from them … While a well-trained voice is an asset, the purpose and the quality of demonstration is more important’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 97).

Durant also believes that the pace of the rehearsal should not be interrupted by constant correction. Choristers assemble because they love to sing, and unnecessary interruptions can be frustrating. In his study on the structured teaching of conducting, Durant refers to Kahn’s strategy on rehearsal discipline where he suggests that ‘consideration should be given to the appropriateness of stopping to deal with points, and deciding when to accept that correction may not be reasonable at a particular stage of progress in rehearsing (Durant, 1994: 65).

The literature suggests that when corrections are necessary in rehearsal, they can be done with humour. Humour is an essential element of a successful rehearsal. Many conductors possess a natural wit, while others, recognising its value, gather quotations, jokes and anecdotes to use as light relief when the need arises. Humour contributes to the morale and dynamics of the group particularly if it is as a result of a slip of the tongue, or is based on a situation that arises at a rehearsal. Pfautch believes that ‘every choral conductor is responsible for controlling the use of humour and he should know how to encourage as well as stifle it’. He advises conductors to ‘Be Yourself and work with humour in your own way’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 83).

Davison also emphasises the importance of humour when he states:

> Of all the factors, musical and personal, which serve to bring about a community of spirit between conductor and chorus, none is more powerful than the exercise of spontaneous humour (Davison, 1971: 9).

Davison suggests that in weighing up the qualities a conductor should cultivate, you cannot underestimate the value of humour. He believes that:

> A rehearsal should be enjoyable in the widest sense. The conductor or singer who does not anticipate the fun, as well as the artistic profit, should stay at home (Davison, 1971: 9).

There are varying opinions on the subject of using a piano as an aid at rehearsals. Some choral conductors counsel against a reliance on the piano while others use it to their advantage at the
initial stages of learning new repertoire. Davison maintains:

Some ability as a pianist is desirable…. There are instances when the leader can instruct much more quickly from the keyboard than from the podium as, for example, in the early stages of teaching a new and difficult piece, when with even the best accompanists there is bound to be a time-lag where there are frequent corrections (Davison, 1971: 7).

According to Stanton, the conductor will have to engage with an accompanist unless the group sings only _a cappella_ arrangements. In choosing an accompanist, Stanton advises that ‘very often the success of a performance depends as much on the skill of his accompanist as on that of the conductor’ (Stanton: 187).

Kaplan advises that pianists, unlike orchestral players, are not always experienced in following a conductor’s beat, and that it is not easy playing a keyboard instrument, or organ, to do so. He continues that it is necessary to work out in advance the relationship and balance required between the piano accompaniment and the chorus at any given time. And it ‘should be determined in every case on the basis of the individual structure of the piece being performed’ (Kaplan: 109).

When Pfautch discusses the extra skills required for a good choral accompanist, the word flexibility best sums up his description:

Every choral conductor rejoices when he has an accompanist who almost thinks as he does, who does not have to be told what parts need assistance, who is constantly alert to mistakes, who reacts intuitively to rehearsal procedures, and who can help the momentum, interaction and humour (Decker and Herford, 1988: 87).

If proper planning, preparation and management is applied to rehearsal time, the conductor facilitates the musical growth of the chorus. Success also demands that each individual in the chorus contributes one hundred per cent for the duration of the rehearsal time. When this communion of spirit occurs the rehearsal can be an enjoyable and uplifting experience. Robert Shaw’s description is apt:

A chorus in performance is an overwhelming apparently spontaneous, combustive unison of hearts, minds, physical energies and sound. Such spontaneity is a lie…the real explanation is the week after week tenacious, restless search for discipline in rehearsals. In art, as in a good many other affairs of men, miracles don’t just happen. They’re earned (Blocker: 22).

While it is accepted that the ‘primary and most commonly recognised goal of choral rehearsals is the concert appearance,’(Decker and Herford, 1988: 69) and most singers eagerly await the opportunity to perform, Davison stresses the significance of the rehearsal process:

There the chorus, not on parade, grows into a corporate artistic individuality and learns how to make the composer’s message eloquent and moving. Indeed for singers, too, as well as for the conductor, I am sure it is the rehearsal and not the concert that most often spells adventure (Davison, 1971: 44).
2.6 Communication

Foremost the conductor must be able to communicate and inspire… The person with feeling will always mesmerise and appeal (Glenn, 1991: 108).

The matter of conducting a choral group is a multifaceted activity and, at various times, the conductor is called upon to assume the role of musician, teacher, leader, interpreter and manager. Much of the literature written on the subject of choral conducting lists some of the qualities required to be an effective and successful conductor. Chief amongst the qualities identified are musicianship, musical sensitivity, aural skills, intelligence, an understanding of how people learn, and a passion to communicate through word and gesture.

Much emphasis is placed on leadership skills and the ability to communicate, in addition to the musical and technical skills. In order to do his job as leader, the conductor should be ‘the focal point through which all group effort is co-ordinated, the impetus for group action, and a reliable constant’ (Stanton, 1971: 112). To fulfil these criteria, he must be ‘proficient in dynamics of leadership such as vitality, decisiveness, confidence, knowledge, and self-possession’ (Stanton:112). Therefore, it is evident that the choir must be strongly impressed by his expertise or personality to be willing to work at, and carry out, his directives. They need to be able to trust that he has the group’s best interest at heart and that he has the motivation to steer them to realise their potential. Stanton maintains that this is not an easy task. It demands a resolute attitude which must be supported by ‘devices of knowledge, communication, and the skilled self-control of leadership if he is to accomplish his goals’ (Stanton: 113).

Emmons and Chase make the point that it is helpful if a conductor has some understanding of general group dynamics and how to deal with them. The dynamics of a choral ensemble will resemble those of any group, and the various stages that groups pass through are ‘forming, storming, norming and performing.’ Choral groups are no different to other groups in that the dynamic process is constantly changing as variables change. For example, the dynamics of a line may change within a choir with the addition of a new singer. It is important for the conductor to be aware whenever these changes are occurring and to guide the group through these transitional periods (Emmons and Chase, 2006: 215).

Emmons and Chase discuss leadership in great detail and describe different types of leaders i.e. the ‘command-deference leader who prizes results and finds human relations to be less important than results’ and, at the other end of the spectrum, there is the ‘social club leader who has a high interest in people and low interest in performance results.’ (Emmons and
Chase, 2006: 237). Somewhere in between lies the individual who can combine an interest in people and also produce results.

The conductor Benjamin Zander describes how it dawned on him, after twenty years conducting, that the conductor does not make a sound’. His true power derives from his ability to make other people powerful' (Zander, 2000: 68). He believes that as a result of this insight, he started to communicate with the musicians on a different level, and his method shifted the emphasis for the musicians from a passive exercise to one in which ‘they became active participants’ (Zander: 73).

Emmons and Chase also advise on the importance of ‘creating a climate of openness’ between the conductor and the singers, and they suggest that the conductor should strive to develop cohesion because they maintain that without cohesion, a group may continue to exist, but it will lack unity and purpose requisite to vital performance.’ Many choirs develop a great sense of unity or team spirit. ‘Although all teams are groups, not all groups are teams.... team members share common goals and tasks to a stronger degree than do group members.... Leading the choir through a metamorphosis from group to team will cultivate performing–enhancing cohesion’ (Emmons and Chase, 2006; 217).

Glenn, (1991) in her book *In Quest of Answers: Interviews with American Choral Conductors*, asks the following question of a number of prominent and respected choral directors in America: ‘What are the most important musical and personal qualities for a successful conductor?’ The responses include the following:

- The greatest single personal characteristic would be a certain instinctive communication which immediately brings a kind of respect. It is an immediacy of communication, so that when a conductor speaks or works, people pay attention (Lannom in Glenn: 112).

- I remember Robert Wagner telling me that a conductor must know what he wants, know how to obtain it, and be able to obtain it.... Being able to obtain it effectively is where the field of the successful choral conductor narrows. Basic to this is the ability to communicate (Salamunovich in Glenn: 117).

- One must cherish and seek to nurture art above almost every other consideration under the sun. But because ours is a corporate endeavour, we must strive to be sensitive human beings who make an effort to care about other people with whom we are privileged to make music (Hoggard in Glenn: 110).

- The conductor is essentially a teacher. How one goes about teaching and communicating concepts and enlisting the active support of the ensemble in doing one’s will, has to do with the powers of persuasion, communication, and leadership…. It involves integrity and consistency on the part of the conductor in everything that he or she does and says and is, so that the singers believe that this man, this woman, this leader is worth following into the battle (Moe in Glenn: 114).
In addition to the musical and technical skills required for the role, the emphasis on communication and the ability to communicate is evident in almost all the answers.

Conductors communicate using verbal and non-verbal techniques. These include posture, eye, facial and hand movement or gesture technique, choice of words, inflection and imagery. While this study is not concerned with the technique of beating patterns or the questions surrounding it and the use of the baton, it is important to point out that the effective conductor communicates his interpretation of a piece of music to his ensemble through verbal and non-verbal techniques, and so his command over non-verbal techniques strengthens his over-all effectiveness. Inconsistencies in this area may leave the group lacking in confidence and unable to respond. For the conductor, the performance begins the moment he stands before the ensemble at rehearsal.

Stanton believes that ‘Assumption of leadership starts with a stance which emanates readiness to lead and imparts confidence in that leadership’….‘The most successful conductors maintain a convincing posture of command throughout the performance’ (Stanton, 1971: 26). Stanton states that eye contact is the most forceful non-verbal communication possible. It is by far the most direct and immediate means of commanding attention. ‘Leadership or command starts with habitual eye contact’ and extends to the manner and tonal inflection in which directions are given. However before he speaks at all, conscious and subconscious meanings are communicated by what he does or fails to do.... These may even be strong enough to supersede much of his verbal communication. What you do speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you say’ (Stanton: 23).

Stanton further maintains that the hands are second only to the eyes as a means of communication for the conductor. Mike Brewer supports this belief. He says that ‘Every gesture betrays deep feelings - your choir can sense equally your tension, confidence, insecurity, control, flow involvement and understanding of the music’ (Brewer, 1982: 10).

The importance of the effect of motion and gesture on sound was initially recognised and researched in the 1960s by conductors such as Ehmann, Eichenberger and later by Jordan, a student of Ehmann. Wilhelm Ehmann’s philosophy for rehearsing choral music was based on movement activities for the conductor and the singer. He encouraged choral members to get involved in sport or other outdoor pursuits as he believed it helped the sharpening of rhythm, but if such activities were not freely available then he suggested incorporating movement activities into every choral rehearsal. However, he was not specific in describing a method.
James Jordan, a student of Ehmann, continued to research the importance of movement training, and he adopted the ‘Laban Movement Analysis’ as a way of exploring movement for conductors. In a study on developing a gestural conducting vocabulary, the author describes the Laban theory as follows:

Rudolf Laban’s early work in developing his Movement Theory around the premise that all movements have a purpose and can be broken down into pockets of physical and emotional memory. This premise is applicable to conductors, who draw from movement and its implied meaning to express music (Billingham, 2001: 10).

Jordan suggests that: ‘Whether one is beginning one’s study of conducting or has considerable experience conducting, the movement categorizations of Laban can be of great assistance in solving several issues’ (Jordan, 1996: 42).

Throughout his life, the conductor and pedagogue Eichenberger developed a passion for the subject of non-verbal gestures and the art of choral conducting. He believes that there is a direct relationship between gestures and sound. He states that: ‘Sound is more than notes in motion; sound is notes in emotion (Con, 2002: 46). ‘Therefore music enables emotion to be manifested aurally.’ Eichenberger acknowledged that the face which includes the shape of the mouth, and eye contact, are part of the communication tools at the conductor’s disposal. Through his study he came to the conclusion that ‘if the face communicated emotion, it could also affect sound.’ His findings concur with Stanton. If the non-verbal direction does not match the verbal, a mixed message will result in confusion in the singer’s perception of the conductor’s musical intentions and in the choral context ultimately the sound of the choir is affected (Con: 46).

The conductor Robert Page also refers to the importance of communicating through gesture and he believes that while a conductor may be very knowledgeable:

…if they are unable to project that through the semaphore signals of conducting, they are going to be stymied…the conductor who is incapable of doing musically what he says he is going to do musically is, in the final analysis, inept (Glenn, 1991: 115).

The ability to recognise the needs of the members of the choir, to be alert to problems which may impinge on the smooth running of the group and the ability to solve problems is essential. Parallel with this is the need for good communication skills, both verbally and non-verbally, both musically and psychologically, all add up to a very important brief for the choral conductor.
2.7 Schools of Conducting

In the process of conducting the literature review it is appropriate to summarise the evolution of six different schools of conducting that have influenced choral singing in the USA in the second half of the twentieth century. Through the medium of radio, television and recordings, a number of conductors in America achieved recognition for the excellence of their choirs and gained followers for their methods. The schools are referred to in Garretson book and in a chapter on *Choral Conducting* edited by Harold Decker and Julius Herford (1988). Although this influence has waned, most choral conductors would have adopted some of the principles of one or other of these schools in their methods, and the following is a summary of the schools and their theories.

**School A:** In this school much emphasis is placed on physical exercise. Movements are used to develop choral posture, and include clasping the hands behind the head with the elbows almost touching in front. Other exercises are advocated if the singer is overweight. Emphasis is placed on a sharp attack. Women generally sing softly; men are asked to produce a big tone. The result in performance is one of a pyramid effect. ‘The men sing with a tone that is big and dark and the women with a sound that at times could be characterised as shrill by some listeners.’ In summary, choral balance is not achieved and softer dynamics will not be heard’ (Garretson, 2002: 107). Garretson counsels that the only place where this sound is effective is in works such as the ‘last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony where volume and force are required’ (Garretson, 108).

**School B:** This school maintains that each singer has a tone similar to that of an orchestral instrument, and its method uses an exceptional amount of vocalisation to achieve this timbral quality. Advocates of this school strive towards excellence in the performance of polyphonic music. William J. Finn elaborates on this method, and he states that ‘through intelligent and regular vocalisation, each singer becomes habituated to the proper use of his voice to its proper contribution to the integral unit. The mind controls the muscles of the larynx, habit directs the mind, and vocalisation infixes the habit’ (Finn: 248).

He continues:

If therefore, a conductor instils the true art of vocalisation in his choir-hall, according it the place of honour at all rehearsals, he will have entrusted his chorus to the pure medium through which it can pay fitting tribute to the Muses, and through which *per retro*, he will hear Euterpe’s sweet sounding *jubilos* of approval undulating back from Olympus (Finn: 258).
School C: ‘The main objective of this school is the development of a choral blend.’ (Garretson, 2002: 108). In its quest, singers subordinate their own ideas of tone and diction. Choirs adopting this method often sing at a dynamic level ranging from pp to mf which is only suitable for certain styles of music. One of the first advocates of this technique was F. Melius Christiansan, ‘who is said to have founded the a cappella school of singing in the 1930s’ (Garretson, 109).

School D: This is the method used by Fred Waring whose fame arose from his ensemble ‘Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians’. They presented weekly radio shows and television programmes beginning in the 1950s. This approach is based on the importance of good diction and pronunciation and the correct use of tone syllables. Blend is also stressed, but ‘diction is the most important choral characteristic…speech in song’ (Decker and Herford, 1988: 50).

School E: This school was started by a group of private teachers including Joseph Klein, Arnold Rose, Douglas Stanley, and John Wilcox. Each has published articles on their methodology. They called it the ‘scientific’ approach’ (Garretson, 2002: 111). Their system contradicts the methods of most singing teachers who ask their students to ‘project their tone forward and upward’ (Garretson, 111) where the scientific approach ‘advocates the sensation of focussing the tone backward and downward’ (Garretson, 111). ‘This school works for a choral tone that is big, full and dark’ (Decker/ Herford: 35). Its methods have come in for some criticism, as the desire for intensity of tone can create tension and vocal problems for singers in a choir, unless correctly taught.

School F: This school is based on the beliefs of the conductor, Robert Shaw. He believes that the conductor has to work on elements such as pitch, tone, dynamics, speech and rhythm to produce a choral sound. He has lectured, and written extensively on the subject of choral singing.

He considers that:

Song is drama. It has all the unboundaries of music, but its essential defining element is drama. You are obliged therefore to do a lot more than make pretty sounds. You are obliged to make sense as well as sensation (Decker and Herford: 40).

In his opinion, effective communication between the conductor and the singers is one of the most important ingredients and he advocates that:
While working hard on musical discipline was and is important, all we have accomplished is worth nothing at all unless it releases the spirit to sing and shout, laugh and cry, or pray the primitive prayer. I earnestly believe that the spirit and only the spirit can guide us to the sound’ (Garretson, 112).

Garretson offers a note of caution: ‘before adopting any new ideas advocated by these six different schools of thought, study the writings of the advocates carefully’ (Garretson, 113).

### 2.8 The Kodaly Method

We have to establish already in schoolchildren the belief that music belongs to everyone and is with little effort available to everyone (Kodaly in Watson, 1991: 102).

In considering “schools” of choral conducting, it is important to note the major influence of Zoltán Kodály. Just as conductors in the United States have adopted some of the principles of the preceding six schools, so too have choral conductors in Europe and the United States been influenced by the work of the Hungarian composer and educationalist, Zoltán Kodály.

According to Kodály’s philosophy, musical literacy can be achieved through singing, and should be available to children from an early age, primarily through primary schools. He believes that every child should be taught to sing from an early age by a ‘competent good teacher’ using rhythmic and melodic games (Kocsár, 2002: 15). Kodály advises teaching rhythm first, followed by pitch, using hand signals to enable the student to visualise the tone rising and falling. Through practice, this method enables the student to progress with ease to sol-fa and staff notation. Kodály emphasises the importance of pure intonation as opposed to tempered intonation. He believes that the correct tuning of intervals occurs between two voices, with one supporting the other, while singing the sustained tonic or dominant notes, or using simple canons. He advocates singing in two parts, without the aid of a piano. He maintains that when this goal is achieved, one can attempt unison singing. His philosophy and technique fosters aural awareness, and sight-reading skills. In his writings, Kodály asserts that singing without the aid of an instrument increases confidence. Through his method, Kodály hoped to develop a love for classical music, in children and adults, and to take pride in their native folk songs, believing that ‘there is no complete spiritual life without music, for the human soul has regions which can be illuminated only by music’ (Kocsár: 51).

Throughout his life, Kodály collected and categorised tens of thousands of folk songs His choral compositions include twenty–four \textit{a cappella} male choruses, forty-five mixed choruses and seventy-eight children’s and women’s choruses, many of them composed for educational purposes. Kodály believed that choral singing offered the best opportunity to ‘get the greatest
possible mass of people into direct contact with really valuable music’ (Kocsár: 63). Music educators and conductors world-wide, travel to study this philosophy in the Kodály Academy in Budapest. In America and Canada, conductors and master teachers, such as Doreen Rao, have successfully adopted and adapted Kodály’s philosophy. Rao’s publication, ‘We Will Sing!’ for classroom choirs, is based on the Kodály principle that ‘music belongs to everyone’ (Rao, 1993: vi).

2.9 Overview
As noted in the literature review, all the experts agree that in order to be effective, the choral conductor must have a wide musical background, knowledge of vocal production, and the musical elements that contribute to a quality choral sound. In parallel, the experts also emphasise that the conductor must be able to manage rehearsal time efficiently, and must possess leadership qualities and the ability to communicate.

With regard to the musical and technical elements outlined in the review, while there appears to be general consensus on the interlocking issues required to produce a quality sound, including rhythm, diction, blend, intonation and interpretation, the various choral experts choose to look at them through different lenses. It is interesting to note that Finn, Ehret and Shaw treat rhythm as a separate element. However, Davison considers that rhythmic security comes from a combination of tone, phrasing, pronunciation and dynamics. He uses these elements as stepping stones in his quest to reveal the beauty in the music. As might be expected, there are differing opinions on the importance of clarity of diction and how to achieve it. Pfautch emphasises such details as vowels and consonants, because he believes that their correct execution affects the quality of sound and intonation. Conable also maintains that the text is as important as the music; whereas Finn recommends, for concert performances, if there is a conflict between the music and the text, the music must take priority.

The literature reveals that while there is a lack of agreement on the terminology used to describe an aesthetically beautiful tone, there is a consensus on the value of working towards that end. Ingredients include Ehret’s quest for overall unity, Finn’s approach to sectional blending, Eskelin’s emphasis on attitude, and Hillis’ belief that listening is the key factor. All these elements have a role in the conductor’s interpretation of a choral work. With regard to interpretation, the range of views expressed is striking. Garrison declares that the primary function of the conductor is to interpret the music. Swan and Stanton stress the importance of
understanding the stylistic musical practices of each period. Collins recommends detailed musicological research, particularly in early music. However, McEwen differs from others in placing emphasis on the colour of the vowels in distinguishing the stylistic periods. All agree that an exceptional performance, which communicates fully with an audience, depends on the faithful interpretation of the music.

One of the overriding characteristics of the literature review is the emphasis on the importance of effective rehearsal management, which is a composite of time management and organisation skills. This is considered in various ways by the experts, who all agree that the quality of work done at the rehearsal reflects on the performance. No two conductors apply the exact same rehearsal techniques, or prioritise similar issues, in search of a quality performance. Both Pfautch and Shaw believe in conserving the voice, through careful pacing at rehearsals to avoid vocal fatigue. Hillis claims that careful preparation for rehearsal ensures that a complex work can be mastered, while Robert Shaw asserts that the singers themselves must have individual and collective responsibilities and a special sense of commitment.

It would appear that rehearsal techniques are dependent on the individual conductor, the specific choral group with which they are working, and the performance context; these issues will be considered in relation to Barror in Chapter 4. The literature review highlights that all these components are totally dependent on the leadership and communication skills of the conductor. Emmons and Chase define the essential leadership qualities required by conductors. Stanton refers to verbal and non-verbal techniques of the conductor in establishing control. Both Brewer and Stanton emphasise the importance of gesture and agree that the hands are second only to the eyes as a means of communication, and all the experts speak about the ability to motivate and inspire people.

Given the range of choral conducting contexts, it is difficult to be prescriptive. The six schools of conducting, as categorised by Swan, cover the relevant musical and technical elements. All the schools suggest methods and practices for developing a quality choral sound, and a standard of excellence in performing; in the process, however, some go to extremes in prioritising diction and tone projection. All have the same goal but have different ways of achieving it.

From my own experience, I believe that in order to be effective and successful in the art of choral conducting, the choral conductor must strive to acquire the wide range of musical
knowledge, communication and leadership skills revealed in the literature review. In studying the teachings of eminent choral conductors and their various methods, it is possible to adopt certain principles to add to the conductor’s own knowledge base, and individual style of conducting. In Chapter 4, I will focus on the elements that Barror considers are necessary for success in the field of choral conducting, with particular focus on important issues that emerged in the course of the literature review.

In my interviews with Barror these issues, amongst others, were questioned, and her ‘wisdom of practice’ was explored. She has built up this knowledge herself over the years through her teaching experience and reflective practice; as she herself states, ‘through trial and error’. Chapter 4 presents Barror’s choir management philosophy, together with the practical application of that philosophy in every aspect of choral training.
Chapter 3
Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to give an account of the important events in Barror’s personal and professional life in relation to her development as a successful choral conductor, and to provide information regarding her philosophy and methodology with regard to choral singing and conducting. The historical part of the study follows ‘steps or procedures that Hockett avers are (1) collecting data, (2) evaluating the data collected, and (3) presenting it in readable form’ (Phelps et al, 2005: 211). The early part of the study adopts a life history approach in chronicling events in Barror’s career and in the history of The Lindsay Singers. The research goes on to present Barror’s ‘wisdom of practice’, and the philosophical and methodological approaches underpinning her practice, and explores the factors which contributed to her success with some of Barror’s peers, and three members of The Lindsay Singers.

Qualitative research is described in different terms, including field studies and ethnographic study. Researchers often use multi-method approaches to achieve results. Most recently the term ‘bricolage’ (taken from the French term for DIY) has been ascribed to it, and hence the researcher has been likened to a ‘bricoleur’. This description is used because the researcher often has to ‘select the appropriate method (or tool)’ to allow flexibility in responding to the individual or group being researched (Phelps et al: 79).

The literature on interviewing techniques could also be described as a ‘bricolage’, because of the different categories of interviews; ranging from structured to unstructured, depending on the area of research, and the numbers of people involved. Hitchcock and Hughes describe the different forms of interviews, and state that ‘structured interviews usually involve large numbers of people yielding “yes” or “no” answers, because their aim is often to produce generalised statements’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 155). The unstructured interview assumes the appearance of a natural interesting conversation, but to the ‘proficient interviewer it is always a controlled conversation which he/she guides and bends to the service of the research interest (Palmer, 1928: 171, cited in Burgess 1982) (Hitchcock: 163).

There is also the life history interview, or ‘career histories that encourage narrative accounts of the participants’ professional or personal life’ (Phelps et al, 2005: 97). Hitchcock suggests ‘that the life history interview can prove valuable because of its ability to represent
subjectively meaningful experience through time’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 185). He explains that the basic concern of the life history approach is the presentation of experience from the perspective of the subject or subjects themselves (Hitchcock and Hughes: 186). Hitchcock states: ‘As a result of the flexibility and adaptability of the life history technique … versions of this approach have been used in education, medicine, psychology, sociology and gerontology’ (Hitchcock and Hughes: 189).

Since the invention of the tape recorder in the 1950s, life history projects have been transformed, and since that period, oral history studies have occurred in all disciplines. However, it was not until the success of the oral history study on the life of Charles Ives, conducted by Vivien Perils in the seventies, that the significance of oral history projects was recognised as a ‘valid method of research and a new and interesting approach to biography’ (Yale website on the ‘about OHAM’ page, 15 November 2007, www.yale.edu/oham).

‘Close to oral history but used more conventionally as a sociological tool’, is Jack Douglas’s ‘creative interviewing’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 80). In 1985, Jack Douglas introduced the notion of creative interviewing because he believed that each interview is different, and so interviewers must ‘necessarily be creative and adapt themselves to the ever-changing situations they face’ (Denzin and Lincoln: 80). Douglas also suggests that if interviews are carried out ‘over many days’, the reports may become life histories (Denzin and Lincoln: 80). According to Bailey, ‘age, gender, race, class, dress, and language of the interviewers and interviewees, will all exert influence on the interview itself’ (Bailey, 1983: 183). When interviewing, Patton advises that the interviewer adopts a relaxed approach to questions and language, in order ‘to generate rich descriptions and authentic data’ (Patton, 1980: 210).

Given the research context and the objectives of the project, the life history approach and the creative interviewing technique described above, were considered to provide an appropriate starting point in the process of exploring Barror’s professional life and practice.

3.2 The Interview Process: Ethna Barror

The interviews took place in Barror’s home, and the sessions were held regularly over an extended period of time. I was conscious of the importance of the researcher - informant relationship, and appreciated being in the position of having ‘insider’ knowledge, because of my own experience of working with choral groups in the dual roles of accompanist and chorus director. As a result, I believe that I approached the interview process with a certain
empathy for Barror in her role as conductor, and this helped me to establish trust with her. This is an important aspect of interviews of this kind, which have been described by Hitchcock and Hughes as being ‘highly collaborative’, and involving the ‘development of a dialogue between the subject and the researcher as well as the subject with themselves’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 88). My own experience also equipped me with the knowledge of the subject matter and an understanding of the terminology, which enabled me to participate in what can be described as an ‘informed conversation’ (Kvale in Cohen et al 2007: 154) with Barror.

Cohen and Mannion suggest that ‘central to the success of a life history is the researcher’s ability to use a variety of interview techniques’ (Cohen et al: 199). They point out that these may range from relatively structured interviews to informal, unstructured interviews. They also suggest that a possible interviewing strategy ‘involves a judicious mixture of participant observation and casual chatting, supplemented by note taking’ (Cohen et al: 199). These descriptions encapsulate the various approaches adopted in interviews with Barror, depending on the stage of the process and the topics being explored.

In the initial interviews, the questions were of a general nature, designed to encourage Barror to talk about her life and her career in music. Hitchcock and Hughes, in describing the life history approach, refer to how the technique ‘reconstructs, interprets and presents some of the main selected aspects of selected areas of a single individual’s life’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 188). These initial interviews gave insight into significant events in Barror’s life, that impacted on her musical career, on the growth and development of The Lindsay Singers, and on Barror’s success as a choral conductor; and this data provided the material presented in Chapter 1.

Later interviews focused more on Barror’s beliefs about choral conducting, and the pedagogical approach she adopts with her choirs. Initially, the questions posed could be described as exploratory, encouraging Barror to talk about the major elements of the pedagogical approach that shapes her practice, gradually moving from more general discussion to specific methods and techniques she uses in rehearsal. This data is presented in Chapter 4.

In her reflections, Barror brought up many of the issues that had been identified in the literature, as vital elements of choral conducting. These included matters relating to rhythm,
blend, diction, interpretation, rehearsal technique and communication skills. Like a jigsaw, when all the pieces come together, the final result is achieved. If one or more pieces of the jigsaw are missing, the picture falls apart, or, in the case of the choir, the listener is left wondering what is missing. From my own experience and observations, gained over the years working as an accompanist and chorus master with various groups, I was aware of these ‘building blocks’ (Hillis, 2002: 14), and we discussed musical and technical issues from her perspective as a teacher and conductor within this general framework.

Barror spoke freely of her work, and one could not but be struck by her enthusiasm and the sense of conviction she brought to the conversation. She is wonderfully clear and direct, and I soon became aware that her depth of knowledge was due to her practical experience of conducting, and to her continuous assessment of the techniques and strategies that she employs in her search for choral perfection, rather than the study of choral literature.

With Barror’s consent, I took detailed notes at each of the sessions, and recorded portions of interviews on questions that arose about technique. In order to illustrate technical aspects, the interviews occasionally included practical demonstrations in conducting gestures, breathing technique or playing the piano, often engaging the interviewer in the process. Following each interview, I reviewed the notes, and this enabled me to re-examine issues which required clarification at the next session. In rehearsal, Barror covers many musical elements. When we discussed diction, she might refer to rhythm, phrasing or interpretation, and so I extrapolated these nuggets from my interview notes, and organised the data under the headings in Chapter 4. The knowledge reveals the philosophy, methodology and discipline that Barror brings to her quest for choral perfection, along with insights into the personal characteristics which she brings to her art. Barror also gave me access to information from first-hand sources, including concert programmes, adjudicators’ reports and newspaper articles. The concert programmes proved very useful in documenting repertoire and dates of performances, which are provided in Appendix A and Appendix C.

As has been pointed out above, the interviews were held over a period of time, and as a result the organisation and analysis of the data was an ongoing part of the process. Hitchcock and Hughes have noted that ‘researchers have differed in the degree to which they have edited, ordered and reassembled the narrative materials’ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 188). In discussing this issue, they describe a number of possible approaches, including “naturalistic”, first person life stories’ where most of the material is in the words of the individual subject,
and ‘thematically edited first person life stories’, where the words of the subject are retained intact but the researcher organises the data under themes, topics or headings (Hitchcock and Hughes: 189). The approach adopted in this study fits best under what Hitchcock and Hughes describe as ‘interpreted and edited life stories’, where ‘the researcher sifts, distils, edits and interprets the words of the subject and, although retaining the feel and authenticity of the subject’s words, presents a written version of the life story . . .’(Hitchcock and Hughes: 189).

In discussing the issue of validity checks in qualitative research, Hitchcock and Hughes refer to the use of triangulation, re-interviewing and re-analysis. Given the nature of the interviews described above, it was possible to revisit themes and topics with Barror, and to check on data already collected, or to seek further information on particular issues already explored. I was conscious also, of my role as a primary research instrument, aided by written notes and audio recording, of a danger of bias, and I made every effort to remain objective in the organisation and analysis of data. When this process was completed, Barror was content with the manner in which her methodology and practice had been interpreted and presented. In relation to triangulation - which involves gaining data from a variety of sources and in a number of different ways - the Barror interview material was supported by documentary material, and by a further set of interviews, conducted with some of Barror’s peers and members of her renowned choral group, The Lindsay Singers.

3.3 Supporting Research
In parallel with these interviews, I visited the offices of Cumann Náisiúnta na gCór, in Cork, where I obtained a list of repertoire for SSAA choirs. I then consulted with Barror to determine the works that she had performed throughout her teaching career. With the information from both sources, I compiled the repertoire listed in Appendix A. As part of my research, I was granted access to the programmes in the Feis Ceoil offices in Dublin, and I examined the records of prize-winners as far back as the 1930’s, to verify awards and dates that arose in my interviews with Barror. The adjudicators’ comments included in the study are from Barror’s files, and I also visited the Dublin City Library & Archive, to locate Charles Acton’s music critiques in *The Irish Times*.

3.4 The Interview Process: Peers and Choir Members
The criteria for choosing interview candidates other than Barror, was based on selecting individuals who had known Barror over a lengthy period of time, who could offer perspectives on her life as a teacher and conductor. I was fortunate to have expert choral
conductors willing to participate in my study. Dr. Seán Creamer and Brian Ó Dubhghaill have both been involved in choral music in Ireland, since the 1940s, participating in all the major choral festivals in Ireland and abroad. Dr. Seán Creámer conducted numerous choirs, including The Celtic Singers and The Park Singers. He established the Dublin Secondary Schools’ Choir and the National Childrens’s Choir in 1985. Brian Ó Dubhghaill was a music inspector for the Department of Education, and he has influenced the development of the music curriculum at all levels. He was Musical Director of Corfhéile na Scoile, the non-competitive schools’ Choral Festival, and he conducts the Cantairí Óga Átha Cliath. He is an experienced adjudicator.

The third respondent, Dr. Albert Bradshaw, is an expert on the Kodály Method, and has many years of experience conducting. He has lectured on music education methods in Trinity College Dublin and the Dublin Institute of Technology, and he has published articles on music education and choral singing. Dr. Bradshaw has also adjudicated alongside Barror at choral competitions, and as a young conductor he had several opportunities to observe her conducting, both in rehearsal and in performance.

The interviews with Barror’s peers can be described as semi-structured interviews, and they centred on the respondents’ observations of Barror and The Lindsay Singers performing in concert or in competition. As the purpose of these interviews was to try to identify factors which contributed to Barror’s success, the questions were based on her technique, repertoire, and any distinguishing features the respondents identified in her performances with the choir. (See Appendix H for interview schedule). The questions were generally open-ended and included probes and prompts on various topics. Each of the interviewees was asked similar questions, although the order of the questions varied between respondents, as they occasionally pr-empted some of my questions. Simons has observed that ‘usually the issues the interviewer thought of will be raised by the interviewee if the interviewer listens carefully and refrains from asking questions too soon’ (Simons, 1996: 116).

I also chose to interview three members of the Lindsay Singers, on the basis of their first hand experience of Barror’s choral methodology. Two of the respondents, Gemma Cadwell and Gillian Butler, were with the choir from its formation. They have both won prizes for solo and ensemble singing, and because of their long history and loyalty to the choir, they were able to give valued insights into Barror’s practice. The third interviewee, Dr. Rhona Clarke, was a member for a number of years. Dr. Clarke studied music in UCD, and composition in Queen’s
University, Belfast, where she was awarded a PhD degree in composition. She is a lecturer in music in St. Patrick’s College in Drumcondra. These interviews were also semi-structured, and focused on Barror’s choral methodology, including her rehearsal management, and the standard of choral singing she sought to achieve. The questions for the three members were based on their experience of singing in The Lindsay Singers under Barror’s direction. (See Appendix H for interview schedule). The respondents describe her ability to teach, inspire and communicate, and they highlight the personal qualities, which enabled her to successfully direct choirs of varying ability over decades.

Both sets of interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents. This enabled me to give my undivided attention to the respondents and what they were saying, and to keep track of the topics and themes which were being covered. The interviews were transcribed in full. I then read the transcripts on several occasions, and carefully colour-coded the topics and issues that were discussed in the interviews. The members of The Lindsay Singers all spoke about Barror’s rehearsal management and pedagogical skills, and her ability to set goals to motivate the choir. The factors contributing to Barror’s success were highlighted in the interviews with Barror’s peers, including the standard of her work, the quality of her sound, her personality and her achievements. All the interviewees referred to Barror’s musicianship, and the standard of her choral performances.

As the purpose of the research is to unveil the factors that contributed to Barror’s success, Chapter 4 will focus on Barror’s philosophy and methodology, and Chapter 5 presents the observations of the members of The Lindsay Singers and Barror’s peers. The findings of the research are summarised in the Conclusion, which also considers the implications for future research into choral music education in Ireland.
Chapter 4

The Conductor’s Voice

The best conductors are innately endowed with musicality—a term that need not be defined because those that have it know what it means, and those who do not, will never understand it through definition (Green, 1969: 1).

This chapter presents Ethna Barror’s wisdom of practice. It examines the issues raised in the literature review in Chapter 2, in reference to the practical application of Barror’s philosophy to choir management.

4.1 Philosophy

Barror’s passion in life is to make music and to communicate her love of music to her singers and their audience. Her career as a choral conductor and teacher has enabled her to reach out and inspire students and audiences alike. Communication and the ability to connect with people, are qualities that she considers most important for a conductor and teacher. Enthusiasm for her work, discipline, imagination, technique, musicality and flexibility in performance are the ingredients that she feels have contributed to her success. According to her philosophy, the desire to have something to say, and the means to say it, should be cultivated from the conductor’s first experience, and this belief has been strengthened through her own practice over five decades teaching individuals and choral groups.

Barror loves teaching children and she points to the benefits of choirs in schools. She believes that children blossom in an atmosphere which encourages even the most timid singers to participate and improve. She emphasises the importance of nurturing children’s ability to respond to music, noting that teachers must work to stimulate their imaginations. As previously stated, Barror has huge experience of teaching and conducting childrens’ choirs. She is of the opinion that the experience of participating in choirs is vital for the musical development of children. It also teaches them discipline, and it feeds their confidence and self-esteem while acquiring performance skills. In her experience, schools that were aware of the benefits of choral singing reaped the rewards. Through their participation in choirs, children were given the opportunity to perform in public and to be involved in competitions, with all the added excitement of travelling together and performing in both the Feis Ceoil and the Cork International Choral Festival. However in other schools other activities were often allowed to impinge on choir time. Barror firmly believes that a school’s attitude to music and choir has a huge impact on the work of the conductor.
Barror applies the same teaching methods when working with children and adults. She has the enthusiasm and stamina to work for hours without feeling tired. She likes to get to the point quickly. She is very impulsive and likes a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to a question. She is a very strict disciplinarian when working with her choirs. She loves knowledge and is gifted with a unique ability to impart that knowledge, and to help singers to achieve their full potential. She is modest about this talent and sees it as ‘gift from God’. She would like to be remembered as ‘someone who has the ability to draw music out of a stone.’

3.2 Choir Management

A conductor stands in front of a group, with the purpose of making music... The role of the conductor is to get the best possible performance and interpretation from the choir (E.B.).

Barror has strong ideas on the role of conductor. She believes that:

- The conductor sets the standard and should have full artistic control
- The main priority of a good conductor is to have a strong definite beat
- The conductor should use facial expressions and eye contact to communicate with the choir
- Communication is important as is the ability of the conductor to memorise names, and that singers feel important if the conductor makes the effort to address them individually
- It is important to be mindful of the audience as they are the ultimate reason for a public performance and should be treated with respect

4.2 Rehearsal Management

Rehearsal time is of the utmost importance and it is where most of the work is done for any performance... Discipline is the basis for success when working with both adult and children’s choirs (E.B.).

Barror’s rehearsals are productive because she knows what she wants to achieve. She has the ability to clearly articulate these aims and she has the technical knowledge to support them. Barror has high expectations when it comes to rehearsing. She expects commitment and dedication. She believes that it is important to generate a team spirit in a group, and that with experience, you become aware of the various dynamics within a group: ‘It is amazing what you see without looking when you are taking a rehearsal’. Barror organises and plans for her rehearsals in advance and she approaches rehearsals with children and adults with the same meticulous attention to detail. However, she uses more movement and some rhythmical games to sustain interest with children’s choirs and to stimulate their imaginations. According
to Barror children love actions and words, and so she will always start with a familiar tune with which they can identify.

Barror’s usual rehearsal plan consists of working on three or four pieces at the same time in order to maintain interest. She combines new and familiar repertoire. She rarely starts rehearsals with meaningless exercises. If she uses exercises, they are usually developed from the current pieces that they are studying. There is no time wasting at rehearsals. All of her rehearsals are productive. She never leaves a piece in rehearsal when it is incorrect, but as soon as it approaches the standard she desires, she moves on, always mindful of maintaining interest. Barror’s rehearsals period is normally two hours and she does not believe in taking a break. She likes to start on time and finish on time. Barror believes that the ‘pace should be brisk’, as people appreciate when time is used efficiently. However, she states that there is ‘always a window of opportunity for humour at a rehearsal’ and that it is an ideal way of releasing tension, and it allows for social interaction.

In my discussions with her on rehearsal management, Barror suggests the following guidelines:

- Punctuality is important, therefore start rehearsals on time and finish on time if possible
- Greet each person as they arrive and where possible, memorise names, even in large choirs
- Ensure that each person has a copy of the music to be studied
- It is essential to keep the choristers focused on the music, even when they are not singing
- Create interest by changing the parts around e.g. ask the altos to sing another part
- Alternatively, ask all the singers to sing one line as this familiarises people with the movement and intervals of the other lines
- Introduce different routines to help choir members to follow the beat
- Occasionally allow members to conduct different passages in order to keep the singer mentally sharp
- Vary the tempo of a piece in order to create flexibility when following the conductor’s gestures
• Encourage choristers to listen

• Never leave a piece at rehearsal when something is incorrect

• Always try to finish a rehearsal on a positive note

4.4 Repertoire

When presented with a new piece of music, play it through a couple of times to get a musical impression of how it should feel and sound. Look at what you want to hear in the music… As you work with a piece, the composer’s intentions become apparent… It is important to listen to other choirs and to music written by different composers. (E.B.).

Barror loves to research new music for her choirs and admits to spending hours in Music Libraries delving through old scores looking for unusual repertoire for solo, duet and trios as well as choral music. She maintains that she knows immediately she sees or hears a piece whether it will suit a particular choral group. Barror states that becoming familiar with new music is the key to teaching it creatively and correctly. She uses images, analogies and stories to ‘trigger the imagination of singers and this is vital when teaching children’. From the first rehearsal, her aim is to present a vision of how the ultimate performance of a work should sound. All the elements e.g. intonation, sound, rhythm, diction, interpretation are interlinked and dealt with from the onset of learning new repertoire. Barror offers the following advice:

• Sight- read the piece through from beginning to end when possible in order to give the choir an overall idea of the piece and give experience in the skill of sight-reading

• Sing the text gently on a monotone to feel the rhythm of the words

• Clap or tap tricky rhythms

• Play each line separately three times, memorise it at the same time

• Ensure that the bass line is securely known.

• Add an accompaniment when teaching a cappella music as this shortens the learning time, particularly with children’s choirs

• Break down difficult passages into smaller sections to facilitate learning
Barror believes that the key musical elements that contribute to a quality choral sound include rhythm, diction, blend, intonation and interpretation. They are interdependent and each demands continuous attention and assessment.

4.5 Rhythm

Rhythm is the basis of all music. Good rhythm comes back to accents, and where or not to place them (E.B.).

Barror believes in the rhythm of life, observing that everything she does has its own rhythm. In her early schooldays, she accompanied the drill displays on the piano, and through this she developed an instinctive sense of rhythm. She loves to listen to brass and military bands. Barror counts in rhythm, when climbing the stairs and when walking. She finds herself doing it subconsciously. Rhythm for her is one of the most important aspects of music, and she believes that rhythmical security in a choir emanates from the conductor. She suggests that, in trying to achieve rhythmic vitality, the ‘upbeat is as important as the down-beat’ in influencing the rhythm, as it focuses on what is about to happen. Barror maintains that accents are essential; otherwise you end up with a whole lot of words going nowhere. When dealing with repertoire where the rhythm is difficult, Barror suggests that the meaning of the text will often help to get the feel of the rhythm.

She advises that conductors should:

- Always take time to teach the rhythm and note-values accurately
- Articulate short notes
- Semi-quavers must be heard
- Tap or clap the rhythm
- Speak the text in rhythm without singing
- Teach the rhythm while playing the piano in the background
- Occasionally ask singers to dance, to march, or to waltz, in order to feel the pulse
- Choose the tempo carefully for rhythmic clarity

4.6 Diction

It takes energy to get the words out and effort to get the meaning across (E.B.).

Barror considers that diction is most important, arguing that an audience quickly becomes
bored and switches off when they cannot hear the words in a performance. She emphasises the importance of enunciating the text and all the consonants must be sung simultaneously. She believes that this has the added effect of producing rhythmic clarity, just as concise rhythm influences pronunciation and interpretation. The words must be articulated clearly. The words must be on the lips e.g. ‘I am the very model of a modern Major-General’. In this song, singers need to “bite” the words in order to ensure that they will be heard. Barror has a vivid imagination and explores every aspect with her choir to get the right sound and meaning. She suggests the following:

- Use the upper lip to articulate words
- Sing on the vowel to produce a legato line
- Sing *aah uuh* sounds in rotary manner e.g. when pronouncing the word ‘God’, covering the teeth with the upper lip
- Pull the palate down and pull the chin in when singing “Ding Dong,” singing on the ‘ng’ of the note.
- Buzz the sound into the nose as you hum
- Suggest lip-reading as an exercise to illustrate the importance of using the lips
- Occasionally, sing a phrase staccato at rehearsals to lighten a phrase and improve clarity of diction

When it comes to memorising words Barror offers the following advice:

- Put actions to the words in rehearsal as they are an aid to memory and add humour
- Perform the actions without the words, and reverse the process
- When using music in performance, memorise the last two lines of the page in order to turn the page early.

4.7 Tone/Blend

Tone is the colour of the sound and blend is the merging of sounds… The conductor has the tone in the palm of her hand. You have to draw the tone from the singers with your hands… When you hear the sound you want, turn off the lights and ask the choir to sing it again. This focuses their minds on what they are doing at that moment and they can recreate the sound (E.B.).

Barror considers that tone and blend are the result of the combination of good vowels, correct breathing, intonation and diction. She works to get consistency of vowels, and listens section by section if that is required. As a trained and experienced singer, she has sung major roles
and won competitions for solo singing and interpretation. She understands the technical elements of vocal production and can demonstrate what is required at rehearsal. Barror emphasises to her choirs, how important it is for each singer to listen to the person on either side, both in rehearsal and in performance, maintaining that ‘if you are too busy singing your own tone, you won’t hear your neighbour on either side.’ Barror advises that the use of the facial muscles, and particularly the tiny muscles around the mouth, are of the utmost importance in forming vowel sounds and good diction. She describes sounds as ‘light’ or ‘dark’ or ‘churchy’ and experiments with different blends of voices until she hears the exact sound that she wants for a particular interpretation. In the process, Barror demonstrates that ‘the sound has to be going from you’, pointing out that if the ‘note sounds good to you it is not projecting’. When experimenting for blend and tone colour Barror suggests expanding the lower level of dynamics: ‘If it says pp, make it ppp’.

Barror offers the following advice:

- Prioritise rhythm, diction and clear chording
- Unify vowel sounds
- Sing on the vowel for a legato sound.
- Use the tiny muscles around the mouth
- Think forward with the sound when singing oh
- Raise the cheekbones to produce a white sound as this opens up the cavities in the face
- Go outside the door to hear the effect of an echo in a phrase
- Place singers at the back of the choir, or even apart from the main group to help achieve the echo sound
- Turn off the lights and listen as it focuses the mind and clears distractions
- Foster awareness of the movement of each voice in order to achieve tight chords
- Emphasise the importance of listening

4.8 Breath Control

If you cannot breathe, you cannot sing. One runs out of breath initially. Practice makes perfect (E.B.).

Barror maintains that it is impossible to underestimate the importance of learning to breathe
naturally, as this affects the blend and intonation of the choir. She often advises singers to observe how a baby breathes gently and naturally. This natural breathing is the basis of her breathing technique. It is essential to develop a natural breathing technique in order to maintain pitch and phrasing, and to give a musical rendering of a piece of music. She suggests that the ‘conductor should always lift the choir in at the start of a piece’. In achieving a natural breathing technique, Barro insists that singers must sit with feet, in the correct position, explaining that singers should be able to stand without adjusting their legs or feet if the correct sitting position is adopted. She offers the following tips that are successful with her choirs:

- Take in about six breaths one after another and get the breath flowing, quick breaths in through an open mouth
- Keep the tongue flat and put the tip of the tongue at the back of the teeth
- Sit in a chair and feel your back pushing into the chair
- Sit into the breath
- Pull in the tummy to support the breath
- Place the hands on the ribs, laughing naturally, and feel that natural sensation.
- Think- Support-Pull
- Alternately, stand against a wall and push against it
- Hold a piece of paper in front of the mouth and blow the paper evenly in order to get an even exhalation of air
- The breath must come first and the notes float out on the breath
- Sigh out the opening note in legato singing, avoiding pushing out the notes
- Pull in the chin when approaching a high note, and know that the higher you sing the more breath you need.
- Relax the shoulders
- Stagger the breathing in order to maintain the legato line when singing long phrases and notes
- Determine where and when the breaths occur, and assign singers to various beats
• Advise the singers to take a breath, not a break!

• Ensure that there is no ‘daylight’ between the notes in legato singing

4.9 Intonation

Good intonation means singing in the middle of the note. I dread listening to a choir singing out of tune. It is so unmusical (E.B.).

Barror believes that good intonation is the essence of all good singing performance. It is essential for a choral group to satisfy its own harmonic relationships, and intonation should be a high priority for any conductor. She is of the firm opinion that intonation is reliant on correct breathing, as flattening usually occurs through lack of breath or fatigue in singers. Barror places great emphasis on the tuning of chords. She believes that there is a distinct ‘pinging sound’ from a ‘genuine’ chord. Her choirs are renowned for their flawless intonation. To achieve this, she suggests the following advice for conductors and singers:

• Take in enough breath to sustain each phrase

• When you are tired, breathe properly because fatigue may cause flattening of pitch

• Think “up” when approaching a cadence and gently raise the eyebrows

• Avoid singing in a dull voice to avoid flattening the pitch

• Transpose the piece up a tone if there is a problem with intonation

• Be aware that the intervals doh-fah and doh-lah are difficult to pitch accurately

• Practise singing difficult intervals on the syllable ooh

• Pull in the chin to help accurate placing of notes

• Sing up on your toes, and pull in the diaphragm to support high notes and avoid flattening of pitch

• Sing chromatic scales to help master passages with semitone intervals, using scale passages from the current music that is being studied

• Practise singing chromatic scales using the following sentence: ‘I must practise my half-tones until I get them perfect’

• Practise singing intervals of a fifth and an octave in unison

• Pay attention to the tuning in chords, particularly the pitch of the third of the chord
which requires adequate breath

- Practice singing intervals of a major and minor third and sixth, and foster awareness of the changing intervals
- Singers must listen carefully to the tuning of chords and when required, be able to harmonically adjust

4.10 Interpretation

A lot of people sing everything note-perfect but there is no flexibility… You have to use your imagination and paint the words for your audience (E.B.).

Barror considers that interpretation is the key element in engaging with an audience, and she is renowned for her interpretational skill. For her, it sets apart one performance from another. Interpretation is a combination of diction, tone, tempo style, dynamics, imagination, understanding, emotion and facial expression. Style and diction are important, but you must back it up with the appropriate tone colour. She states that ‘each person has their own interpretation of a piece and life would be very dull if everybody had the same opinion’.

It is the initial emotional response to the music that Barror builds on, in her search to bring to life the composer’s intentions. She immediately has a sense of the overall shape of the piece, and from here she works through the detail of what is to be learnt and how to teach it. She believes that analysis is important, and that it allows for further insight into the musical and vocal problems that may arise. She analyses every detail of the music, and she likes to highlight changes in time signatures or melody, otherwise ‘why would the composer go to the bother?’ However, she maintains that ‘a performance can sound very technical if you only analyse’, and it is in the practice of ‘making music’ at rehearsal that provides more musical knowledge and a better understanding of the music. She firmly believes that a ‘conductor must work to make the choir flexible, so that in performance if the conductor feels the music differently and wishes to pull them around, the choir have the ability to follow’. For her, it is in the practical process that creativity flourishes. She lives with a piece of music in her head and new ideas spring to mind.

Barror advises that the choice of tempo is all important in rendering an interpretation of a piece, pointing out that ‘you cannot wander along at allegro tempo’. She maintains that the word allegro itself contradicts the notion of wandering. She uses imagery in seeking sounds: for example, when teaching ‘The Bluebird’ by Stanford, she looks for a ‘purple’ sound like ‘heather in the dusk’, and she paints in words the picture of the ‘solitary bird over the lake in
the evening’. The piece is written in the key of G flat major and she insists that this is the correct key, although it is low for the bass line. She believes that to transpose it up brightens the sound and changes the mood of the piece altogether.

During rehearsals Barror may ask the singers to conjure up pictures and she also suggests mood and style. She cites *O Lovely Peace* by Handel as a piece which requires a gentle calm quality. On the other hand, *The Dancing Song* by Kodaly requires a totally different style, with emphasis on rhythmic clarity and diction. Maconchy’s *Prayer Before Birth* is another example quoted by Barror. The interpretation of this piece by The Lindsay Singers was highly acclaimed when they performed it at the choral seminar, of the Cork International Choral Festival in UCC in 1972. Barror said that in rehearsal she was searching for a ‘vacuous, far-away, sound’ for the words ‘I am not yet born’ when they occur in the piece. With regards to interpretation, Barror counsels: ‘Remember that learning the notes and words is just the beginning of the process.’ She is always searching for ways to convey the composer’s intentions and this fine tuning work continues in her mind until the night of the performance.

In my discussions with Barror, she offers the following advice:

- Read the words over to get the sense of the text
- Apply the sense to the music
- Tone is important for interpretation, as is clarity of diction
- Singers should use the eyes and facial expression to engage with the audience, as the face conveys the meaning of what you are singing
- Lighten the mood by singing a *legato* phrase *staccato*, but drop the *staccato* articulation in performance
- Emphasise the changing note, be it melodic or rhythmical
- Memorise the music in order to focus on the conductor, and so best interpret the music.
- Be flexible

**4.11 Performing**

You have to respect your audience. They sometimes do not know what to expect… You must sell it to them… Confidence is essential (E.B.).

Barror has vast experience and strong beliefs on the subject of performing. It is in the
performances of her choirs, particularly The Lindsay Singers, that her discipline, attention to
detail and sheer hard work are evident. An important aspect of performing is in building
concert programmes, and Barror agonises over the final draft. She knows from experience
gained over the years that ‘choice of repertoire is vital’, and she believes that a programme
should have shape, with choices of style, character and language that provide a stimulating
and satisfying experience for the singers and the audience.

Furthermore she states that the ‘programme should flow, with climaxes in each half’. Barror
also believes that one should introduce elements of surprise to keep the attention of the
audience. She maintains that ‘audiences love movement and love to be involved’ and so she
occasionally includes pieces that audiences can sing, or she incorporates movement for her
choir into their lighter repertoire when appropriate. In so doing, she generates a ‘buzz factor’.

As previously stated, Barror’s other passion is sport, and she played hockey and tennis at an
advanced level. She coached hockey teams, and she tries to foster the same team spirit in her
choirs that is engendered in any team preparing to play or compete. They are psyched up
before performing and, if they are performing or competing away from their home base, they
stay in the same hotel and mix together to strengthen this cohesive spirit. Barror believes that
this process of ‘interacting and gelling’ helps influence the unity of spirit and thus the sound:
‘What one does, we all do’.

As the performance date approaches, she sets aside one rehearsal to work on the weak areas in
each piece, and she always has a dress rehearsal, preferably in the chosen venue. If that is not
possible, she tries to recreate the elements that will influence the performance. Barror
rehearses the entrance and exit of the choir. She personally takes care of all the background
detail attached to hiring a venue, such as sound, lighting, and the hiring of a piano when
necessary. Barror is unwavering in her opinion that the positioning of the piano on stage is
one of the most important aspects to be arranged, and she admits to many an argument with
stage personnel to get this correct. For her the accompanist is an intrinsic part of the
performance and is next in importance to the choir. She puts enormous time and research into
ensuring that every tiny detail is covered in order to minimise any stress for her singers on the
day of the performance.

Before you leave the dressing room, try to calm everyone… You have to be focussed from the
moment you leave the dressing room. A split second lapse in concentration can cause chaos…
There are no stragglers in the choir… Each singer must focus on the conductor during a
performance. (E.B.)
Barror maintains that through practice and experience over the years, The Lindsay Singers ‘move as with one voice’. Her advice to conductors is to ‘memorise the music, mentally organise, and stay one step ahead of the choir’. She believes that this gives you the freedom to make artistic decisions and it is the conductor’s role to gently draw the music from the choir with facial expressions and hand gestures. She states that as a conductor you ‘must have the ability to think on your feet’ and have the knowledge and skill to act accordingly, should an unexpected performance problem arise. Barror loves to entertain and perform. However, she considers it to be ‘serious business’, and as in all aspects of her work, she strives for perfection each time she sets foot on the stage. She quotes a sign written over the stage door of an old theatre in London: ‘This is a house of enjoyment, but not for the artists’. According to Barror, all the above elements are required in order to produce a performance of excellence. She believes that you learn from every teaching and performing experience, and you only grow old when you stop learning.

What became evident in the course of my interviews with Barror was that the techniques and practices that she employed were upheld in the literature that I had studied. Although no one author supported all of Barror’s methods, many of the choral experts suggested some of her methods for producing a special choral sound and high standard of performance. However, without recourse to the literature, she achieved success and cultivated her methodology in her own unique way, through her musicality, ‘trial and error’, work ethic and reflective practice.
Chapter 5
Ethna Barror: A Choral Conductor in Perspective

This chapter presents the observations and reflections taken from interviews with some of Ethna Barror’s peers, and a number of singers from her most renowned choir, The Lindsay Singers (see Appendix H). Barror’s own reflections tend to focus on musical and choral issues and rehearsal management, concerning her work as a teacher and choral conductor. The observations of her peers and choir members also demonstrate the personal and leadership qualities which contributed to her success over a long period of time. The reflections of the choir members are also valuable in presenting her method of teaching, as experienced by them over decades under her tutorship.

As previously stated, the conductors I interviewed, Albert Bradshaw, Brian Ó Dubhghaill, and Seán Creamer are all established in the field of choral conducting in Ireland. Brian’s Cantairi Óga Átha Cliath, and Seán’s Park Singers are successful choirs, and both conductors competed with Barror on occasions in competitions throughout the decades. Bradshaw conducted the Trinity Singers and is much sought after for choral workshops and as an adjudicator. He first heard The Lindsay Singers in the Feis Ceoil in the 1960s, and he recalls how ‘the great Lindsays burst on the International scene.’ His contact with Barror continued throughout the years when they were both invited to adjudicate at choral festivals and competitions. He was also present at some of Barror’s rehearsals with The Lindsay Singers.

Two of The Lindsay Singers, Gemma Cadwell and Gillian Butler, who were interviewed for this study, sang with the choir from its inception. The third member who sang with The Lindsay Singers, Rhona Clarke, is a composer and lecturer in music. Gillian still performs with the choir, and so some of the interview data is intermingled with past recollections and present experiences. The elements that come to the fore in the interviews are: i) Barror’s rehearsal management skills; ii) the quality of sound that Barror consistently delivered; iii) the standard of the performances of her choirs - in particular The Lindsay Singers; and iv) her personal qualities. Each of these elements contributes to the quality performances that she consistently produces.

5.1 Rehearsal Management
In my interviews with the choir members, they comment on the quality of Barror’s rehearsals, referring to her ability to maintain discipline, interest and enjoyment in her rehearsals.
I remember somebody saying that the mark of a great conductor is the ability to create tension. I am trying to think of the actual way that she did this, but she could create this feeling of the importance of getting every little detail exactly right (R.C.).

As a conductor she has an all-seeing eye and all hearing ear. She has everyone in her sight and hearing (G.C.).

She would go over it until she was happy that you were singing it correctly (G.B.).

She never wasted a minute of rehearsal. That was such a joy (G.C.).

People mostly respect that because they don’t want their own time wasted.’ (R.C.).

Rhona distinctly remembers the first rehearsal she attended with Barror:

She was immediately impressive and took command straight away. I can even remember the first song we learnt. It was *Come to the Fair*. I remember looking forward to next week already (R.C.).

From the interviews, it is obvious that Barror was always fully committed to the choir, and she expected this commitment and loyalty to be reciprocated. She was firm in her belief that, as a choir member, you could only be committed to one choir at any given time. Barror herself only missed two rehearsals in forty-seven years with The Lindsay Singers. However, she did not object to her choir members singing with their local church choir, except ‘obviously never on a Wednesday’, the day on which The Lindsay Singers’ rehearsals took place’ (G.B.).

All three members comment on the special commitment that was expected:

If you could not go to choir you would dread ringing. She is so dedicated herself and she would be so disappointed (G.B.).

Gillian, Gemma and Rhona all use the words ‘team’ and ‘loyalty’ when they describe Barror’s ability to motivate the group into a cohesive unit:

Mrs. B. is into sport and so am I. She has the choir like a team, everybody interacting, playing their part and blending together, not only in singing, but in other ways too (G.B.).

You certainly always did feel that sense of loyalty and commitment. I cannot remember instances, but I am sure that she would have verbalised the importance of that, and would have stressed to the choir that in not showing up, and in not pulling your weight as an individual, you are letting everyone else down (R.C.).

Commitment and loyalty are important to her. It didn’t work if you could not give the commitment (G.C.).

She ran us like Jack Charlton. It may be a silly comparison but it was a team effort and we were team members (G.C.).
Barror believed that discipline was important. She did not tolerate absences or unpunctuality and rehearsals began on time and finished on time. Gemma said that ‘Mrs. Barror arrived early and if you did not, you had to have a good excuse’ (G.C.).

Rehearsals largely depended on what the choir was working towards. According to Rhona, Barror believed in setting goals, and in the choir ‘we were always working towards concerts and competitions. When questioned about the format of the rehearsal, Rhona described it thus:

There did not appear to be any single system or formula. Some rehearsals were learning rehearsals and others were polishing rehearsals, and there was an equal amount of learning and polishing (R.C.).

When asked about Barror’s method of introducing and teaching new repertoire, Gemma recalls that Barror ‘played through the piece while we read the words. Then we read the individual lines.’ Gemma continued to describe how Barror worked on all the elements and how ‘blend, diction, rhythm and interpretation were especially emphasised.’ Gemma pointed out that many of the girls did not read music, and the choir ‘learnt by repetition, which was difficult for Mrs. Barror. We became used to it. We were spoon-fed but it worked’. Gemma tries to recall Barror’s rehearsal strategy:

…I don’t remember her saying things. They just happened. She worked gradually through the repertoire. We got it from her. It was not what you expected in other choirs. We learnt it her way, which was the correct way. We did not spend time correcting or re-learning. I cannot say we did this or we did that. We learnt it on the way. Mrs. B. always played the piano herself (G.C.).

Gillian believes that Barror maintains interest at rehearsals because everyone is involved and working.

She keeps things moving all the time. She moves onto another part, or if one part is having difficulty she asks the whole choir to sing. If a part is weak, and sometimes we have small numbers on a line, she will bring someone from another line to help out. I haven’t noticed that with other conductors. It is good because it makes you a team (G.B.).

According to Gemma, Barror was able to gauge the mood of a rehearsal, and ‘she keeps it moving all the time.’ Gemma describes how Barror tried to vary the choice of repertoire by introducing light music as well as the classical and contemporary works that were compulsory learning for competitions.

She tried to please us if it was possible. With competitions, you did not have a choice. The music was set. For our own concerts she tried to pick music we enjoyed singing, even if it was a challenge (G.C.).

Gemma states that ‘as a conductor Ethna Barror has everyone in her sight and ear’ and
describes Barror’s method of correcting a fault as follows:

She works out what and where the problem lies and corrects it without anyone feeling that they are to blame. She never isolates a person. You would already guess or the person next to you would nudge you. Again, it was down to listening. We listened to each other and we never sang too loud (G.C.).

All of the choir members bear witness to the enormous amount of work that Barror does in a two-hour rehearsal session:

There was no waste of time….It was down to business straight away. There were never boring times. She would break the back of a piece as she described it, while working on other repertoire. There were no lulls. She could gauge how long we could spend at a piece and she changed tactics (G.C.).

Gillian recollects the manner by which Barror draws the music from the choir. When questioned about this, Gillian described the impact of Barror’s hand gestures, explaining how if something went wrong in rehearsal she would:

…do something with her hands and we would sing it perfectly. It is the way her hands move. She brings it out. We totally depend on her. We are so used to doing exactly what she wants (G.B.).

Bradshaw was occasionally invited to attend rehearsals with The Lindsay Singers before performances, and he also testifies to the hard work done at rehearsals.

She would hear something that wasn’t exactly the way she wanted it and she would say ‘we will do it again and again and again and just once more’ until she got it right. It could be timing. It could be anything, but she knew what she wanted (A.B.).

He later commented on her work ethic:

The amount of work she does behind the scenes, her own work, sitting at the piano, working out what she wants to do with things and constantly doing it to the very last moment of preparation (A.B.).

In viewing Barror conducting concerts or in competitions, Creamer observes:

I think it has to be the work that she does in rehearsal and practice. She is the most undemonstrative conductor. She only makes small gestures. She always knew what everyone was doing. She fixed her eye on you and you did your best. She only raised a finger and something happened. She always wants the best performance and she draws it out (S.C.).

The interview data reveals that Barror instils in her choirs the importance of discipline at rehearsal and concentrating on the work in hand, of always watching the conductor, of listening to each other and not singing too loud. Gemma and Gillian testify to the fact that Barror was sensitive to the mood of rehearsals and often introduces humour when it is necessary to lighten the proceedings.

It was a much disciplined atmosphere, but there were great laughs. She has a great sense of humour (G.C.).
She is very witty. Even learning music, there is always a sense of humour. She has her own little rapport (G.B.).

The members speak about Barror’s ability to inspire the group, and to motivate them to give one hundred per cent effort at each rehearsal. Rhona believes that Barror was respected because she correctly maintained a distance at rehearsal:

That is essential in any authority figure. It was a professional relationship, and at the same time managing to relate individually and be friendly and personal…I would say that she related to the choir as a group, but she also managed to relate individually to people as well and that was part of the success (R.C.).

The interviewees recall that there were always goals to work towards and that the object of the rehearsal was always to work towards the performance. Rhona states that:

There were always events. We were constantly working towards concerts and competitions. There was always something to work towards (R.C.).

According to Gemma, Barror loves to entertain an audience, and at the final rehearsals before a performance she would offer the following advice:

Go out and enjoy yourselves. Look as if you are enjoying it. She was always keen for us to appear to enjoy singing. Of course we had to look at her. We didn’t need to be reminded. We were so used to doing that. She was so enthusiastic herself that you got the feeling of enjoyment anyway (G.C.).

Gillian describes the moments before performing when Barror would ask the choir to concentrate and how she always manages to lift the performance to another level. Gillian notes that: ‘Even if we had it perfect at rehearsal the night before a performance, she adds a dimension when we go on stage. She absolutely fine-tunes everything’ (G.B.).

5.2 Quality of Sound

The Lindsay Singers are renowned for many aspects of their performances. However according to her peers, it is the quality of the sound that Barror produces that remains in the memory of the listener. In the interviews, the respondents frequently refer to this:

When I heard The Lindsay Singers I said to myself this is what you have to do. It was their sound (S.C.).

In any of the early recordings she made, if you listen to certain works, there is some of the most perfect singing that you could literally require from any choral group anywhere. They are stunning (A.B.).

Creamer describes how it made a major impact on him:

You went and you listened and you were not the same. You say to yourself ‘That’s it’. It was the nearest thing I heard to being perfect. I was bowled over by the sound from women. I remember the altos (S.C.).
Bradshaw also singles out the alto line for particular mention:

It was stunning. That was the first time I heard a women’s choir of this calibre. It was to me just a huge shock (A.B.).

Creamor suggests that perhaps Barror achieves this quality sound because each member of the choir was specially picked. He believes that Barror chose voices that would blend, and the blend was the result of good alto voices and good vowels pronunciation commenting that ‘She had those in perfection.’ He recalls the first time he heard the piece Prayer before Birth sung by The Lindsay Singers:

It was in 1971 in Cork. I have been to Cork many times, but I have limited memories of it. I can remember this experience, hearing the performance of this piece’ (S.C.).

Ó Dubhghaill comments:

One of the reasons that The Lindsay Singers had such a wonderful sound was that they were all individual singers, put together as a choir. I couldn’t be sure, but that is the general impression always (B. Ó D).

He also suggests that, perhaps because the choir members were all trained by the same teacher, it meant that they would have the same breathing technique and this helped the blending process. He ponders that ‘maybe that is how the sound evolved because they were trained by the same person.’ When I asked him to describe Barror’s sound, he said that he found it difficult to describe a choral sound, but that he felt that ‘they had developed a feminine sound’, observing that ‘it was by no means a children’s sound.’

Although the sound that The Lindsay Singers produced undoubtedly had a unique quality, it would appear that Barror was also able to achieve a wonderful sound with other choirs she trained. Bradshaw remembers the occasion when he heard a choir from Holy Faith Convent Clontarf, another of Barror’s choirs, producing what he describes as a ‘sound to shake the chandelier’ when singing the Sanctus by Villa-Lobos. In his interview, Ó Dubhghaill recalls that it was with the boys’ choir from O’ Connell’s School that he first saw Barror conducting, recalling that ‘she had them for a long time and they were beautiful too.’

As a conductor, composer and former member of the choir, Rhona Clarke also comments on the sound quality that Barror produces:

What defines Ethna Barror’s success is the quality of the sound she achieves. It is not just the music that is well sung it is the timbral quality that she achieves regardless of the change of personnel. She did not like a fruity sound; a sound that would be heavier in harmonics. She preferred what she called a ‘thinner sound’ (R.C.).
From Rhona’s work with electronic music, she believes that the sound was ‘definitely non
vibrato, with fewer harmonics.’ Rhona considers that the sound was achieved through what
she describes as a ‘high head voice rather than a chesty sound.’ She observes that Barror liked
to have in the choir ‘voices that were not too developed, especially in the upper register.’
(R.C.).

In relation to the type of voice that Barror chose for her choir, Gemma emphasised that ‘you
did not have to have a big voice to sing with the choir, pointing out that it was more important
‘to have a tuneful voice and a good ear.’ Gillian also confirms that Barror ‘chose certain
voices, and she knows what she wants.’ Gillian also observed that when choosing voices
‘Ethna loves the pure sound of choir boys.’ She draws attention to her use of imagery and
facial expression in achieving the sound, and she recalls that Barror has her own vocabulary
for describing tone colours:

She will say I want that white or I want that ‘churchy’. We know what she means. She teaches
how to achieve that sound. We pull faces, wrinkle our noses, and do breathing exercises. We had a
totally unique sound in the sixties, seventies and eighties. Nobody else had that quality. We still
have it (G.B.)

Gemma refers to the emphasis Barror placed on blend:

She taught us to blend as one voice. We learned a piece so well. We learned to sound like each
other. That was fairly unique at that time. Mrs. Barror was one of the first people to get that effect.
The voices were very tight sounding together’ (G.C.).

In discussing the sound that she produced, Bradshaw suggests that while she knew exactly the
sound she wanted and how to get it, she found it difficult to describe the process.

I have spoken to her about intonation and breathing. She may not know how she gets the sound but she will
try anything. It may not be orthodox. She does things that are extraordinary (A.B.).

He describes how it was it was something that seemed to evolve in rehearsal, noting that
Barror was constantly listening and evaluating and learning from her teaching and her
experience.

The choir has incredible technique….Ethna’s rhythm in everything is riveting. She has got ears
like a lynx. She misses nothing…. I remember the first time I heard her perform Havelock
Nelson’s The Girl with the Buckle on her Shoes. Now the first thing you realised was the way she
set the rhythm. The very opening danced along. There is no such thing as hazy rhythm. It was
sharp. It was accurate. She would just turn her hand and she would get these wonderful turns of
phrases (A.B.).

Bradshaw believes that correct breathing, good intonation, proper vowel sounds, precise
rhythm and interpretation were the ingredients that she worked on consistently to achieve her
sound quality. All the elements were important and merged to get the sound that she sought. He emphasises their intonation and the manner in which Barror controlled and lifted it when necessary.

The intonation was flawless. She always got them to raise their eyebrows before singing and to lift the diaphragm and look the part and be ready, and they were. I have heard her pull up the intonation by doing this. When Ethna is conducting and there is no difficulty, she is just listening. You always watch Ethna’s hands’ because the moment something starts to slip, the hands signal change. Instantaneously, I mean it is instantaneous (A.B.).

He describes the ‘stunning’ sound he heard on an occasion when the choir performed in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin.

She gave one of the most perfect choral recitals I have ever heard. She started with Purcell’s Rejoice. The sound went down the cathedral: ‘Rejoice Rejoice’. It was unbelievable. It is a very difficult thing to sing, as there is only one word. It was stunning (A.B.).

Creamer points to Barror’s ability to produce quality sound in a variety of choral styles, and comments on her interpretation of these diverse styles:

She is equally at home in difficult choral music and easy choral music. Have you heard The Lindsay Singers sing Tea for Two? It is like hearing Shostakovich. I also remember her choir sing Christmas Carols in the NCH. It was thoroughly enjoyable, unless you were mad jealous, as I was, of her ability to get this sound (S.C.).

In relation to musical styles, Gillian confirms that Barror is brilliant at teaching and directing musical comedy:

She had marvellous timing and she did the movement and overlooked the costumes. Her attention to detail was great (G.B.).

Bradshaw also emphasises the knowledge and ability she brings to ‘lighter music’, recalling his experience of adjudicating alongside Barror:

If it has anything to do with light music, anything to do with the stage, Ethna knows by instinct why a thing hasn’t worked. Now I mightn’t understand as a performer why a thing hasn’t worked with movement on the stage. I would be looking at it from the musical side of it. She would be looking at it from the total side. She would say ‘such and such didn’t work because’ and she would know what the ‘because’ was (A.B.).

He states that while he does not always agree with some of Barror’s interpretations (for example her interpretation of madrigals), it does not take away from her artistry and expertise.

The way she does madrigals is Victorian. Now, I am not being rude in any sense. She does them her way and they have a stamp that says Ethna Barror. I have flung things down and listened in sheer joy to what she does. I can truthfully say that I never came away from a concert or a rehearsal that she gave where I didn’t learn something (A.B.)

Bradshaw also observes how she would ‘just turn her hand and you would get these wonderful turns of phrases noting that:
Every member of the choir knew how the other breathed, and they dove-tailed the breathing flawlessly (A.B.).

Both Gemma and Gillian emphasise the importance that Barror places on interpretation:

Mrs. Barror won’t accept anything unless it is exactly what she wants. Interpretation is huge. We have seen it in competition, where we are singing the same piece as other competitors, how her interpretation is so much better (G.B.).

When asked to describe how her interpretation differs from other choirs Gillian continues:

Emotion, and the way the music flows. Obviously our diction and other details are very good, but I wouldn’t notice that as much as the way the music flows (G.B.).

Rhona Clarke’s *Suainтраoi Gráinne* was specially commissioned for The Lindsay Singers. As a former member of the choir, she was familiar with their strengths. When I asked her if the experience of singing with the choir had influenced her when writing the work, Rhona singles out the quality of tone:

I think, having sung with The Lindsay Singers, it was bound to influence the work, and because of course you know the parameters. I cannot think of anything very specific except the tone quality, maybe a desire to make that sound shine more than writing a piece that is rhythmic or based on extreme dynamics or anything like that (R.C.).

5.3 Standard

It is evident from my interviews with Barror’s peers that she set a new ‘high’ in terms of choral performance standards, in particular with The Lindsay Singers.

They set the standard by which others were judged, and mercilessly so (A.B.). Since hearing The Lindsay Singers, no matter what I do, I try to achieve that standard (S.C.). I don’t recall any other female choir in the country being of that standard (B.Ó D.).

All three choral conductors comment on various aspects of her work and endeavour to describe the performances that they have heard at various times. Creamer felt that Barror’s consistency in turning out quality performances was to be admired and envied.

She raised the bar for all of us. From the time I heard The Lindsay Singers I asked myself when working, is that as good as The Lindsay Singers? (S.C.).

He refers to the occasions when his choir were in competition with The Lindsay Singers and he emphasises that Barror was a ‘great competitor’:

Twice, I beat The Lindsay Singers, once in Killarney at a Pan Celtic competition and once at a festival in Dublin….She was a great competitor. She wanted to win, and she did not like coming second. She would be very kind when you beat her, and she was a good lose to me anyhow. However, I knew it was a fluke when I beat her. In 2004, I felt I achieved that ultimate performance. When we finished singing, the audience was totally still and I knew I made it on that occasion. All the things we wanted to get in rehearsal came off that day (S.C.).

When questioned as to whether, in his opinion there was a difference in her approach to
concerts and competitions he replied: ‘No, they were perfect every time. She is the greatest choral conductor’ (S.C.). Creamer maintained that Barror’s performances greatly influenced him, stating that ‘when I heard The Lindsay Singers my standard was never the same after that.’ (S.C.). He also acknowledged Barror’s ability to give positive criticism and to diagnose problems:

I never adjudicated with her. People often didn’t like her adjudication. However you would be certain to get honesty from her. If she spots something wrong, she says it. She notices everything. For example she might say. ‘You have two second sopranos that you can do without’ (S.C.).

Rhona believes that her own musical career was influenced by her membership of The Lindsay Singers. She describes how she would have applied the same detailed polishing to her own piano music, and how she was introduced to contemporary choral music through her involvement with Barror and The Lindsay Singers. In discussing what had motivated her to stay with The Lindsay Singers, she spoke about the fact that there were always goals to be met and ‘there were always events’, and the ‘standard of singing was always high’.

Gillian comments that Barror strove for perfection at every performance, although she acknowledged that perhaps there was less tension before a concert than a competition. She recalls how Barror would say:

This is not the Feis Ceoil. I want you to enjoy yourselves. It is not a competition. At the same time, she would still have it perfect. For a competition, she would have it double, double perfect (G.B.).

In discussing the issue of standards, Gillian stressed the point that ‘joining The Lindsay Singers ruins you for any other choir, unless it is up to that standard.’ When questioned about the method that Barror employed to reach the high standard of singing, Gillian recalled that she was ‘so particular about every little detail.’ She recalled how the choir worked on phrases ‘until Ethna was happy that they were singing it correctly’. Gillian points out that, although Barror repeated sections until they were correct, she kept the rehearsal interesting by moving from one part to another and enlisting the support of the entire choir to help sing a difficult phrase in any given part. Gillian considers that this aspect of Barror’s rehearsal technique is unique to her, and it is something that she has not experienced with other conductors. She believes that ‘it is good because it makes you a team’ (G.B.).

Bradshaw emphasises the importance of Barror’s discipline and organisation in achieving her success and high standards:

She had total discipline in everything, the way the girls dress, the way they put their hair, everything. There is no such thing as having your hair down over your face if you are singing. The performance started before you left the dressing room. You were disciplined and organised. You
arrived on stage knowing exactly what was expected of you and just total concentration while you were on stage (A.B.).

What is most interesting to observe is that while each interviewee recognised Barror as a strict disciplinarian, it becomes evident that this strict discipline, which she not only imposed on her choir, but also on herself, is one of the main keys to her success. According to Gillian discipline was one of the aspects that her choir members respected in her, rather than resented.

She was so used to discipline in her life. She taught a great many school choirs. You had to have discipline to be successful. You would be dead tired after a rehearsal but you knew it was worthwhile (G.C.).

Bradshaw recalls the occasion when The Lindsay Singers won the International Trophy in Cork. He was on the adjudicating panel, and he singles out one particular piece for mention:

I think it was the Tucapsky, and it was well nigh flawless. I know one of the adjudicators next to me at the end of the piece checked the intonation and it was absolutely flawless. The others performed in some ways more exciting things, but a performance of that calibre! The three of us knew how difficult that work was, and it just sounded like any school choir could walk up and sing it. It was transparently beautiful (A.B.).

Ó Dubhghaill mentions that Barror’s choir was the first female choir to be invited to sing at the prestigious International seminars in Cork linked to the Cork Choral Festival. He remembers that they sang Prayer before Birth written by Elizabeth Maconchy which was commissioned for the Choral Festival.

I don’t recall any other female choir in the country being of that standard….Even though it was an equal voice choir that she worked, I think it raised the standard for all types of choirs that that is the standard that can be achieved (B.O D.)

In his opinion:

She introduced a standard of repertoire, as well as vocal technique, because such a choir that has such a standard of technique can tackle a lot of music that other choirs couldn’t attempt. For repertoire it means a lot to have choirs like that on the scene, because they become exemplars for repertoire as well as vocal technique. They can tackle so many different types of music (B.O D.).

5.4 Personal Qualities

The interviewees suggest that the success that Barror has achieved throughout the years can be attributed to her innate musicality, her integrity of purpose, her discipline, her commitment to the task in hand, her generosity of spirit in sharing her knowledge and talent, and the ability to communicate her extraordinary love of music through her teaching and conducting. I know that our group was and is successful. However she has taken groups of all abilities and brought them to success. I am not sure that I know what her secret is. She wants a group to do well. She loves music and the piano. She loves the piano so much that she cannot pass it. She wants everyone to enjoy it. Even with old people she has a way. She does great work with old people in nursing homes. I don’t know what it is. She wants them all to sing (G.C.).
Her three peers comment not only on her musicianship, but also on her power to inspire and motivate people and her generosity of spirit:

If Mrs. Barror rang you and said “come back and sing”, people would jump to do it. I honestly couldn’t say that I could get people to do that for me. I think she inspires people with the way she works and what she gets out of them. It’s an inspiration to work with her (S.C.).

She was so generous to me. At final rehearsals I would ring her and ask if I could come along and listen. She could make the trees sing. She has got that quality which transcends anything that she is doing. As you can gather, I think the world of her. She has taught me more about choral conducting and choral work than anybody else (A.B.).

She is phenomenally gifted...She has so much talent....She is the best around… some people have done this for fame, for this that and the other. Ethna has given tirelessly to charity, all her life with her gifts. I mean, it is a unique contribution I am sure, the amount of money that she has given to charity, concert after concert, donation after donation, from this imperious group (A.B.).

She was extremely generous to me and to other people, I am sure. She was never mean with her music in so far as many is the piece of music that she gave to me that I would not have been able to find elsewhere. She never hesitated to do that if you ever asked her. In that way she was very generous and not all conductors are like that (B.O.D.).

In discussing her particular personal qualities as a choral conductor, Ó Dubhghaill jokingly considers:

Patience and perseverance made a bishop of his reverence! I suppose a lot of dedication to the task in hand and dedication to the young people involved, and of course a love of young people and a love of music…..As happens in a lot of organizations where somebody like Ethna gives a lot of her time and is generous to the children, people have a high regard for that. I have known a couple of parents who had children in The Lindsay Singers and they were just in awe of it all. It was a wonderful thing in their lives (B.O.D.).

Creamer believes that Barror’s greatest quality is her ability to teach people and to get that level of performance on a regular basis. He goes on to extol the personal qualities she brings to her work:

She is an amazing woman. It is her strength of character, her mental alertness, her ability to hear everything. There is nobody like her. She must be the woman everyone looks up to in choral singing (S.C.).

In Bradshaw’s opinion Barror ‘is born and bred a practical musician,’ and he attributes her success to:

... artistic integrity, integrity of purpose. From the very first moment I ever heard them there was this incredible stamp of almost perfection (A.B.).

All three choir members speak about Barror’s personality, her teaching and what it is that enables her to motivate people and command loyalty and commitment over the years.

From a psychological point of view nobody felt unimportant or left out with any group. She was always aware of everybody (G.C.).
It was a way of life. It was very important because she was who she was, you wanted to please her. I don’t know what it was about her. She had some hold. That was her secret. I felt that she really cared about me. She was a very important part of our lives….She has a dual personality. Choir was choir and serious stuff. Away from it, she was great company. My husband got to know her and she loved sport so much and she loved talking sport. She is a big person in the nicest possible way (G.C.).

Gillian and Gemma refer to the fact that Barror is able to bridge the generation gap and communicate with people of all ages:

She holds the interest of young people. I coach hockey and I work with young people. It is great to observe how she can hold their interest. I know that we were young when we joined, but this is a different generation and she still does it (G.B.).

Gemma maintains that Barror’s ability to communicate stems from her love of music and her desire to share it with people:

She loves music and the piano. She loves the piano so much she cannot pass it without playing it. She wants everyone to enjoy it. Even with old people she has a way. She does great work with old people in nursing homes. She wants them all to sing (G.C.).

Gillian attributes Barror’s ability to inspire people to her personality and ‘not accepting anything but the best’, suggesting that ‘she gets what she wants’ Gillian describes the impact that Barror and the music has on her life:

I feel the choir has been a big part of my life for forty-two years. She has given me something in music that I would never have had. I always loved music but she has given me a love and appreciation of music that I could not have got in any other choir. We have been so lucky (G.B.).

Gillian also comments on the friendships that were forged through the choir describing how she had gained a ‘group of lovely friends that will be friends for life…. I also have a good friend in Mrs.Barror. She has been part of my life for all of my life and my husband’s. I have gained friendships and a great appreciation of music’ (G.B.).

When questioned about the quality required to maintain a choir for so long, Rhona attributes it to:

Stamina, and she had that in abundance mentally and physically, and of course the desire to do it. To be able to maintain enthusiasm in yourself is wonderful (R.C.).

Rhona singles out Barror herself as the distinguishing factor between The Lindsay Singers and other groups with which she had performed:

Mrs. Barror’s personality, for a start. She is quite unique. She is not like anybody else. She is a very strong well defined personality and with regard to choral rehearsing, she has a very definite idea of what she wants to achieve. We spoke of stamina earlier. This energy that comes out is critical to what results. She is a great communicator and she is very imaginative in the way she can communicate. In a very direct and simple term, she tells the choir what she wants them to do (R.C.).
Rhona comments on Barror’s creative approach, observing that when teaching she was always experimenting and pushing the boundaries. Rhona stresses that Barror’s approach is never purely theoretical, and is enhanced by the creativity she brings to her work.

No matter how much theoretical knowledge you have, things are always different in practice and one idea begets another and so they develop. So her approach is a creative approach rather than a purely theoretical approach. Not that there aren’t theories behind it because I am sure that there are. The creative approach has great energy. It is something that is tried and tested and works forever (R.C.).

Having attended a performance by The Lindsay Singers under the direction of Barror, many conductors left with the aspiration to try to attain the same standard within their own choral work. Words and phrases such as: ‘impressive’, ‘integrity’, ‘extraordinary high standard’, ‘stunning sound’, ‘genius’, ‘inspiration’, ‘national treasure’, ‘phenomenally gifted’ were used by the interviewees in their efforts to describe Barror’s musicianship and her work. Whether in competition or concert she sought and attained ‘perfection’ in the quality of her performances. As Seán Creamer stated: ‘What you hear in her performance, she has heard twenty times in rehearsal’. There were never any surprises for Barror in performance; the only surprise was for the audience, that a simple choir could deliver such a magical sound and performance.
Conclusion

Of course, not all music educators see the world alike. They too see things in many ways, differing not only from educator to educator, but from context to context, from morning to night. What the world looks like depends on which music educator, in which place, at which time, and in what state of bliss (Stake, 1994: 31)

When I started this project, I was extremely fortunate to have Ethna Barror available as my primary source. Throughout the project, she was generous both with her time and her knowledge and she gave freely of her wisdom gained from her many years of experience. As I have previously pointed out, our paths crossed on occasions over the years, when I accompanied her choirs at concerts, festivals and other occasions. From my seat at the piano, I had a wonderful view of both the conductor and her choirs in action. Even as a young pianist, I was keenly aware of her as a great musician, teacher and conductor.

While reading books on the methodology and writings of eminent choral conductors such as Shaw and Garretson, it occurred to me that no similar study has been undertaken in Ireland. A review of the choral literature identified factors perceived to be necessary for success in the multi-faceted art of choral conducting. However it is not possible to examine all the elements that contribute to successful choral conducting. Many authors, for example Finn and Eskelin, place emphasis on choral tone and blend. Other conductors consider conducting gesture and technique to be the dominant issues in extracting a quality performance from a choir. Kaplan’s work is an example of this. Emmons and Chase point to communication and leadership skills as being essential ingredients. As previously stated, while the writers were not always in agreement on all the elements, a picture emerges overall of the effective conductor possessing knowledge which includes musical talent, rehearsal management skills and communication/leadership qualities. I was able to use this as a framework in which to examine Barror’s philosophy and methodology, and to discover the possible reasons for her success.

It is clear that Barror’s pursuit of excellence throughout her musical life, whether in solo, duet, trio or choral singing, has helped frame her modus operandi in the genre of choral singing, both in rehearsal and in performance. She is constantly listening and evaluating every note and every phrase. She gives attention to detail, running and re-running passages until her choir attain the sound she wants. When she achieves the desired result, she reinforces it through constant revision, often using a simple technique which enables the singers to focus on the sound quality and the process through which they have achieved it. It becomes almost
an issue of self discovery. She is not making the sound; the singers are producing the sound. She becomes the conductor of that sound, almost like a metal rod becomes the conductor of electricity. She maintains that she continuously assesses and reflects on the results both in rehearsal and in subsequent performances.

Barror is passionate about her subject and she firmly believes that exposure to choral music is enormously beneficial for children and young adults. She strongly recommends that singing should be taught in every school, pointing out that for some children, choral singing may be their only creative outlet at various stages of their schooling. Barror believes in setting goals. She considers that competitions raise all aspects of performance standards, as they afford the participants the opportunity to travel, to perform, to listen to other choirs, and to learn new repertoire.

Her philosophy regarding rehearsing, commitment, punctuality and discipline is legendary, as illustrated by the members of her choir. She is unwavering in these demands, but although rehearsing is ‘serious work’, Barror is renowned for her humour. In my interviews with the members of The Lindsay Singers, they testified to her own assertions that discipline, hard work, study and dedication are all essential for successful choral achievements, but they also firmly stated that, while it was a highly disciplined atmosphere there were also ‘hilarious moments’.

While Barror firmly believes that you can learn from the writings of others, it is the creative and practical experience that makes the difference between success and failure. She adds that ‘some people are knowledgeable, but they cannot transfer this knowledge. If you have gone through the process, you can tell how you got the results. You learn it through trial and error.’ Barror knows the sound and the overall result that she wants to produce. If one could combine Shaw’s passion for rhythmic clarity, Davison’s belief that diction is all important, Garretson’s search for tonal quality and Swan’s philosophy on teaching, interpretation and performance, one would arrive at a conclusion that these are the elements which produce the choral sound and standard of performance that Barror has continuously sought to achieve.

Barror always creates solutions to problems as they arise in rehearsal or performance, and so her methodology derives from perceived need and from the experience of knowing what will produce results. Rhona Clarke maintains that Barror manages to bring it all together, imparting the knowledge in ‘very direct and simple terms.’ That is her gift, the essence of her talent. Her musicality, her passion for music, as for everything she does in life shines through
in this research. It is the discipline of her life, and her upbringing, which all come together in her music. Barror lives music and so she can bring it alive. As Apple rightly pointed out, ‘a choir is built on the personality of its conductor.’ (Apple, 1974: 30)

In my interviews with the conductors, they all referred to the quality of sound and the standard of excellence that Barror produced. Bradshaw said that he was fortunate to attend some of Barror’s rehearsals over the years. Stating that ‘she is capable of producing this standard regardless of the ability of the group’; he claims that ‘she could make the trees sing’. Creamer acknowledged that ‘what you hear in performance Ethna has heard twenty times in rehearsal.’ Ó Dubhghaill, Creamer and Bradshaw also paid tribute to her generosity and influence on other choral conductors. Barror was one of the first to introduce the works of Kodaly and other contemporary repertoire to choral singing in Ireland and Ó Dubhghaill acknowledged that ‘she was extremely generous in so far as many is the piece of music she gave to me that I would not have been able to find elsewhere’, and in this way she also the shared new repertoire. During the course of the interviews with her choir members, and her peers, words and phrases such as ‘musical integrity,’ ‘phenomenally gifted,’ ‘intelligent’ ‘integrity of purpose,’ and ‘enthusiasm for her work,’ were used to describe Barror and her work.

The purpose of this research has been to document the life and career of Barror, and her choir The Lindsay Singers, and explore the factors contributing to her success over a long period of time. In documenting Barror’s methodology and philosophy, the aim of this research has been to provide a model for students and choral conductors illustrating the factors that contribute to successful choral conducting. Through this insight I hope to have provided a valuable source of knowledge for students of choral conducting, and in so doing to make a contribution to the history of choral conducting in Ireland.

Barror is one of a handful of choral conductors who have influenced choral singing in Ireland in the 20th century. In the process of interviewing other distinguished conductors, I was keenly aware of the potential for building on this study by exploring and recording the careers and techniques and contributions of other conductors. This knowledge would provide a valuable resource for future students and choral music educators. It would also acknowledge their contribution to the art of choral singing in Ireland.

This research has cast light on additional issues which could be considered in future research on the contribution of choral conductors to choral singing in Ireland. Just as the oral interview
has added to written documentation, the future use of the video recorder could add a new
dimension to research on conductors. When used at various stages of the rehearsal process,
through to the actual performance, it has the potential to provide valuable insight into the
various styles of rehearsal techniques, gesture, and rehearsal vocabulary. It could also allow
the viewer to observe the communication and leadership qualities of the conductor in action.
In the literature on effective conducting, these qualities are considered to be as important as
musicianship.

Some of the best evidence in support of Barror’s influence on the development of choral
music comes from the members of The Lindsay Singers. The musical and social benefits
enjoyed by members of successful choral groups have been well documented. In the future,
the use of extended interviews with choir members of other successful choral groups could
provide further information on the musical and social benefits of belonging to a choral group
along with insight into the impact of various methods and approaches of conductors as
experienced by choir members.

According to Barror, the contribution that accompanists make to a performance is vital and
this is also supported in the literature. I believe that this is another aspect worth exploring.
Accompanists have a ringside view of the proceedings and can closely observe the
communication and leadership skills of the conductor. They receive the same signals as the
choir members receive from the conductor and their perspective on the conductor’s
management of rehearsal time and the effectiveness of the conductor’s technique is
invaluable.

My research identifies Barror’s success in the field of choral conducting as a product of her
musical abilities and her unique personality. From an early age, she exhibited unusual talent
in sight-reading and improvisation at the piano, and she was also an accomplished singer and
performer. She excelled in sports and was a high achiever in both these areas which required a
strong level of discipline and commitment. Her love and passion for choral music was a
driving force in her pursuit of excellence and her search for a quality choral sound. She
brought this aspiration to every choir with which she worked, whether it was with The
Lindsay Singers or a children’s choir. It is noteworthy that she developed her own
methodology over the years from her own practical experience and reflective practice. Her
techniques and rehearsal strategies pre-date much of the choral repertoire performed by her
choirs, yet her methods are supported by them.
There are no third-level full-time choral conducting courses available in Ireland today. Apart from some modules in undergraduate and postgraduate music courses, and Association of Irish Choirs workshops, there is little provision for the development of young choral conductors. The Arts Council Report, *Raising Your Voice: Towards a Policy for the Development of Choral Music in Ireland*, which was launched on 8 October 2008, states:

> Currently there is an absence of initial training and education for choral conductors in Ireland. Choral conducting is not perceived as a priority in teacher training or teacher education courses.  
> (Arts Council Report: 2008, 8)

The research reveals that choral trainers should have the opportunity to develop the wide range of skills required for the demanding task of capturing the interest of young singers in order to ensure future growth in choral singing. ‘Engaging young people in the process of music-making and learning provides relevancy, personal investment, and ownership that may well keep them connected to choral music throughout their lives’ (Stegman, 2000: 20). There is considerable potential for university music departments and other third-level institutions to remedy this deficiency by offering choral conducting as an option in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Part-time courses for primary and secondary teachers could also be provided.

Barror firmly believes that the best experience is gained through conducting a choir. Most music colleges have choral societies, and this resource could be used to great advantage by providing a platform for student conductors. It would help their understanding of the role of verbal and non-verbal instruction and the singers’ perception of gestures. Again, if the visually appropriate moments are chosen, the use of video recording would offer vital feedback to students in examining and assessing the effectiveness of their rehearsal techniques.

Cross-disciplinary studies in colleges, combining areas of choral conducting with the psychology of leadership, motivational skills and group dynamics would offer additional understanding of the role of the conductor. Choral conducting classes would enable students to apply the knowledge they have gained, and to develop skills, rehearsing and conducting a work with an ensemble, whilst under supervision. In this way progress could be assessed and evaluated.

The main findings of this study on Barror, including her philosophy and methodology, are presented in the research. These clearly demonstrate that Barror’s success is a composite of a
natural musical talent, intelligence, discipline, imagination, enthusiasm for the art of choral singing, artistic integrity and an inspirational ability to communicate and teach. As outlined in this study, a thorough understanding of music and an ability to lead others is essential in order to be a successful choral conductor. Conductors ‘must indeed be pillars of strength and founts of knowledge’ (Glenn, 1991: 248).

Over a period of sixty years, generations of musicians in Ireland have been influenced by Barror’s teaching, performances, and workshops. Among her peers, other choral conductors pay tribute to her enormous influence and contribution to the choral scene over the years in Ireland. According to Ó Dubhghaill, ‘any choir that reaches that extraordinary high standard has to contribute a vast amount to the choral scene’. In Creamer’s opinion ‘she is the greatest choral conductor.’ Bradshaw stated: ‘I can truthfully say that in my mind’s eye and in my musical ear, I will always view Irish choral music as pre-Lindsay and post-Lindsay’.

In concluding my study, I believe that Barror leaves a lasting musical footprint on Irish choral life. Her influence is like a musical web spreading out in different directions. She is indeed, as Bradshaw described her, ‘a national treasure.’
Bibliography


## Appendix A: Repertoire

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<td><em>Blow, Bugle, Blow</em></td>
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<td>Barber, Samuel</td>
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<td>Berlioz, Louis Hector</td>
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<td>Caplet, Andre</td>
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<td>Clarke, Rhona</td>
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<td>de Regge, Earnán</td>
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<td><em>Nach Aoibheann do na hÉinini</em></td>
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<td>De Victoria, Tomas Luis</td>
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<td><em>Ave Maria</em></td>
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<td><em>O Swallow, Swallow</em></td>
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<td><em>O Can Ye Sew Cushions?</em></td>
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<td>“<em>I Have a Bonnet Trimmed with Blue</em>”</td>
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87
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<td>Gypsy Song</td>
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<td>Evening Song</td>
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<td>Koskar,</td>
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<td>Blow, Blow Thou Winter Wind</td>
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<td>It was a lover and his Lass</td>
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<td>Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred</td>
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<td>Rondo (Eine Kleine Nacht Musik)</td>
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<td>Kitty Magee</td>
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<td>The Hills are Asleep</td>
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<td>Dark-Eyed William</td>
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<td>O! No! John</td>
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</table>
The Fiddler

The Quiet Land of Erin

An Ulster Lilt

Come Down, O Love Divine

Neaum, Michael

I Got a Robe

Long Time Ago

The Water of Tyne

Virgin Mary had a Little Baby

I Gave My Love a Cherry

Winds Through the Olive Trees

Nees, Vic

Ave Maria

Novello, Ivor

Rose of England

Shine Through my dreams

We’ll Gather Lilacs

I Can Give You the Starlight

Waltz of My Heart

Nuts, Gaston

Onomatopee

Nystedt, Knut

Hosanna

Arr. Ó Baoghill, Breandán

Deirín Dé

Palestrina, Giovanni

Motets

Poulenc, Francis

La Petite Fille Sage

Le Chien Perdu

Read, Gardner

Sister, Awake

Redman, Reginald

Silver

Rees-Davies, E

Close Thine Eyes

The Shepherdess

Reger, Max

Abendgang im Lenz

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<td>Standchen</td>
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<td>Strobach</td>
<td>The Handsome Butcher</td>
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<td>Tallis</td>
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<td>Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilich</td>
<td>If You Love Me</td>
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<td>The Crown of Roses</td>
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<td>Tucapseky, Antonin</td>
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<td>Stanford, C.V.</td>
<td>The Battle of Jericho</td>
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<td>The Blue Bird</td>
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<td>Trois Chansons</td>
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<td>The Organ</td>
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<td>Charler</td>
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<td>Dilin Ó Deamhas</td>
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<td>Villa-Lobos, Heitor</td>
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<td>Vine, John</td>
<td>The Dandlin’ Song</td>
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<td>Wagner, Richard</td>
<td>The Spinning Chorus</td>
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<td>Waldteufel, Emile</td>
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<td>Willis, Richard</td>
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<td>Wills, Arthur</td>
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Appendix B: Awards

Cork International Choral Festival

International Trophy Competition A Section 2 1973-1988

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Winners of International Competition A/A1 1954-2003

1989

National Competition for Youth Choirs 1994-2003

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Youth Choir Competition H/H Maximum age 18 years 1980-1993

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Youth Choir Competition H Section 2 Maximum age 25 years 1982-93

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National Competition for Youth Choirs Maximum age 24 years 1994-2003

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National Competition for Equal Voice Choirs Open 1988-98

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Premier National Trophy for Chamber Choirs

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School Competitions 1966-1989

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Festival International Awards Dorothy Mayer Memorial Trophy 1975-2003

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Schumann Europe Trophy 1992-2003

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Seán Ó Riada Trophy 1972-2003

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<td>Rhona Clarke; The Lindsay Singers</td>
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<td>1996</td>
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International Competitions for equal voice choir from 1988-98

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International Trophy Competition C for female voices 1954-1987

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Belfast Musical Festival
1967  Peter Stuyvesant Award
1968  Peter Stuyvesant Award

Navan Choral Festival
1995  National Choir of the Year
1996  National Choir of the Year

Feis Ceoil
Personal Awards
1939  Solo Sight Singing
1941  Wallis Cup
1942  Wallis Cup
1942  Mezzo-Soprano
1943  Ladies Vocal Duet
1944  3rd  Mezzo-Soprano
1945  Mixed Quartet
1944  Mezzo-Soprano
1944  Ladies Trio
1946  Amhrán Tríréd
1948  1st  Mezzo-Soprano
1948  Wallis Cup
1949  Wallis Cup
1950  Geoghegan Memorial Cup

Choral
Female Voice Choir
1965  The Lindsay Singers
1966  The Lindsay Singers
1967  The Lindsay Singers (won outright)

Preparatory Unison
1971  1st  The Linnettes
1973  1st  O’Connell’s School, Dublin
1974  2nd  The Linnettes
1976  1st  The Linnettes
1979  1st  The Linnettes
<table>
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**Bewerunge Memorial**

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<td>1975</td>
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**PostPrimary Schools Choir**

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**Secondary and Vocational School**

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**Junior Unison**

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<td>The Linnettes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
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**School Choirs Unison**

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<th>Year</th>
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Florence Culwick Cup
1981  The Lindsay Juniors

Cor Aon Ghuth
1984  1st  Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf, Dublin
1985  2nd  Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf, Dublin
1987  1st  Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf, Dublin
1988  1st  Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf, Dublin

Plain Chant Cup
1973  Loreto College, Leeson Lane, Dublin
1977  Loreto College, Leeson Lane, Dublin

A.I.M.S. Trophy
1984  Group: The Lindsay Singers
1985  Group: The Lindsay Singers
1986  Group: The Lindsay Singers
1987  Group: The Lindsay Singers
1991  Group: The Lindsay Singers
1993  Group: The Lindsay Singers

Welsh Eisteddfod
1969  The Youth Choir
1969  The Female Choir
1969  The International Women’s Competition
1973  Female Voice and Folk Song
1974  Children’s Competition-Junior Lindsay choir
1975  BBC *Let the People Sing* International competition
1975  Teeside International Festival
1976  Madrigal
1976  Female voice choir
1976  Open Competition

Manx Choral Competition
1973  Under 18 Choral Competition
Appendix C: Concerts

RDS

Annual Christmas Concerts: The Young Lindsays, The Linnettes

National Concert Hall

1 Annual Christmas Concerts: Carols for Fun
2 *Elijah*: Tallaght Choral Society and the Dublin Baroque Players 1979
3 Silver Jubilee Concert, 20 May 1984
4 NSO, Debussy *Nocturnes* and Mahler: *Symphony no.3* 1989
5 Friday Night is Music Night: RTÉ Concert Orchestra, 1989
6 *Savitri*: Gustav Holst: RTÉ Concert Orchestra
7 Carol Concert with RTÉ Light Orchestra.
8 *Theatre Nights*: RTÉ Concert Orchestra, 1992
9 *Elijah*: The Guinness Choir and Orchestra, 1993
10 *The Apostles*: Our Lady’s Choral Society and the NSO, 1995
11 *Elijah*: Our Lady’s Choral Society and the National Sinfonia, 1996

Regular performances in:
The Abbey Theatre
St. Ann’s, Dawson St.
National Gallery of Ireland
Royal Hospital Kilmainham
Bank of Ireland Recital Series
Metropolitan Hall
The Dublin Central Mission
St. Patrick’s Cathedral
St. Audeon’s Church

St. Peter’s Church, Phibsborough

National Botanic Gardens

**Radio/TV**

1. BBC/RTÉ: A Tribute to Seamus Heaney

2. Premièred *Four Poems* by Seamus Heaney set by Michael Holohan

3. Guests of honour on two occasions on the BBC programme ‘Friday Night is Music Night’

**BBC Radio 3**

Programme: ‘Let the People Sing’, Joint winners of the Equal Voice Section
Appendix D: Recordings

2 CDs

Ethna Barror’s Lindsay Singer 2001

Christmas with The Lindsays 1987

Recordings

_Hail Mary_ - The Lindsay Singers, producer Philip Green

_Sean Ceoil agus Up Ceoil_, featuring Liam Devally, Aedín Ni Choileáin and The Young Lindsay Singers.

_Let all the Children Sing Songs for Christmas_, featuring The Young Lindsays
Appendix E: Interviews

Interview Questions: Members of The Lindsay Singers

General
At what age did you join The Lindsay Singers?
How did you hear about the choir?
What was your musical background?
Can you recall the first lesson or rehearsal?
What was your first impression?
What motivated you to stay?
Did you perform with any other group?
The choir is fifty years in existence. What kept it going for this length?
What were the learning outcomes?

Rehearsals
Can you describe a typical rehearsal?
Did the rehearsals follow the same format each week?
How did E.B. maintain interest and pace at rehearsals?
Is choice of repertoire important?
How did E.B. achieve the tone or blend for which the Lindsay’s are famous?
How did E.B. relate to the choir?
How would you describe her teacher/pupil relationship?
What was your relationship with E.B.?
Commitment and loyalty are important to E.B. Can you comment?
What was her approach to discipline i.e. punctuality etc?
How does she achieve a spiritual and musical unity?
What particular qualities are needed to maintain a choir for this duration?
Did she have a different approach to concerts and competitions?
How did she motivate the choir before competitions?

Teacher/Conductor

E.B. is perceived as being a successful conductor/teacher. What defines her success?

What are the contributing factors to her success?

What have you gained musically from participating in the choir?

What other benefits have you gained?

Do you have any other comments?
Interview Questions: Conductors

When did you first meet Ethna Barror?

What were your first impressions of her as a conductor?

Did you hear her choirs at concerts or in competition?

Do you remember any performances in particular? If so why?

What makes her choirs different? What are the distinguishing features of their performances?

If you could pick only one quality in her choirs, what would you select?

Technique

How would you describe her conducting style?

Is there any aspect of her conducting technique that is unique to her?

How does her technique compare with other choral conductors?

Repertoire

Which period/style do you think suited her best? Was she an innovator?

Did you notice any changes in her approach over the years?

Adjudicator

Did you work with her as an adjudicator?

If so, what were her likes/dislikes?

What did she look for in a performance?

In a panel of adjudicators, how did she relate to the other adjudicators?

General

She is acknowledged as an expert in the field of choral conducting. What, in your opinion, are her outstanding qualities?

What, in your opinion, is her main contribution to the development of choral music in Ireland?
Appendix F: Opening Address by Ethna Barror

Cork International Festival 28 April 1994

My Lord Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pride and much pleasure that I am here tonight for the opening of the forty-first Cork Choral Festival. Pride: because of the honour conferred on me by the committee, in inviting me to open the Festival. Pleasure: because this is The Lindsay Singers twenty-fifth consecutive year competing at the Festival and I am delighted to be celebrating our Silver Jubilee in the City Hall, where it all started for us.

Looking back over twenty five years at the achievements of the Festival and the benefits many of us have derived from it, one realises the importance of the Festival, not only to Cork, but to the whole country. Two things are worth mentioning. The impact on the social and cultural life of the community has been widespread. Choral singing was not one of the country’s strong points, but now almost every village and town can boast of at least one choir. Secondly, the contribution the Festival has made to the choral repertoire of the country has been invaluable. At one time, the highlight of many a choral festival would have been the performance of a piece in three or four parts, like ‘All in the April Evening,’ but those days are gone, and now we all aspire to greater things, to more difficult works by composers which include Mahler, Bruckner, Monteverdi and our own Dr. Victory.

Up to quite recently, this was the only International Choral Festival in the country and so it became a sort of ‘launching pad’ for many choirs, including our own. It provided us with opportunities which at the time did not seem possible.

The opportunity to compete at International level against world class visiting choirs

The opportunity to have our performances assessed by adjudicators of International reputation

Through the various competitions, it gave us the opportunity to hear music, new choral works and introduce us to new composers. As a result, our repertoire expanded significantly.

When we first came to Cork, our repertoire was very limited and very modest, but now, thanks to the Festival we include many major works in our programmes. I suppose if we couldn’t, after twenty –five years, it’s a poor lookout.

One cannot speak about the Cork Choral Festival without mentioning its founder, the man who had the foresight to recognise its potential. I refer, of course, to the late Professor
Fleischmann, a man of many talents, with great charisma, great charm and a wonderful sense of humour, but above all a man of great humility. There is no doubt, that to him, we all owe a great debt of gratitude.

On the way to City Hall this evening, someone said to me: ‘After twenty-five years, what memories do you have of the Festival?’ I said thousands! but some are more vivid than others. I remember this hall being packed to capacity afternoons and evenings, stewards moving through the crowds on the aisles holding aloft placards which read in big black print: ‘Silence Please’, and in smaller print – ‘or else.’ We never found what the threat was.

I remember with great affection, over twenty-five years the outstretched hand of greeting from our own M.C. Dan Donovan, as he appeared from his dug-out behind the stage and with the now familiar words said: ‘You are very welcome’, and of course, who could forget the hospitality and friendliness of the Cork people. They are quite unique in this respect. Nothing is too much trouble for them. Everything is a pleasure and ready to help in every situation. On our first visit to Cork, we stayed in a hotel across the river. For convenience sake, we put all our costumes in one bedroom on the third floor. Going to collect them, we heard the key to the room could not be found. As time passed, things became slightly panicky. Then the manager said: ‘Ring for the Fire Brigade’. They did, and it came. The firemen ascended the ladder, forced the window open and entered the room. Moments later they emerged, clutching, not a Lindsay Singer, but the costumes of The Lindsay Singers, which they very graciously returned to us. This could only happen in Cork.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need this festival. It needs us, and it needs and deserves our unqualified support. I would like at this point, to wish its new director Mr. John Fitzpatrick and his committee, every success for the future – and, in their capable hands, we know it will be a very bright future.

And so, with the greatest possible pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, I declare the forty-first International Festival of Cork now open and May God bless all those who participate in it.

Thank you
Appendix G: Correspondence and Reviews

12 May 1998

Dear Mrs Barrow,

I write to express my continuing admiration for your achievements with the Lindsay Singers. Such singing is very rare and your performances in Cork last week gave so much pleasure to all who were present.

Your singers were the highlight of my previous visit to Cork - as it was again this year.

In Albert Bradshaw and I, you have a loyal 'fan' club.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Ray Bohan

(from the Chantry
Wannaft
Cardiff CF 5 2NN)
18 May '72

Dear Mrs. Barrow,

I was suddenly assailed by doubt in the middle of last night — did I write to you? or, as sometimes happens, did I merely write the letter in my head? If I did write, just tear this letter up! but in case I did not, I must send my most sincere and heartfelt thanks to Jim and Jean Lindsey for the lovely performance of 'Prayer Before Battle'. It was a really beautiful, sensitive, intelligent performance — what we most wished for, but does not often get. A special word of thanks to Jim, daughter for her brave singing of the difficult solo (it did not seem quite as difficult as she sang it!) as well as to the other excellent soloists and to all of you for the exacting and hard work. I'm all set with it.

I appreciate it more than I can say.

We came away the morning after I saw the performance, I have been having a lovely holiday — more about it in West Cork and Kerry — glad you enjoyed it. With best wishes and 1000 thanks for the letter, + yourself especially —

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]
Reviews

Winning voices

YOU'VE MOST likely heard of the Lindsay Singers one way or another, but in fact there's more or less a multiplicity of them. There are the Singers themselves, the Lindsay Juniors and the Linnettes, who are under-12.

Around the fringe are the O’Connell Boys’ School Choir and the girls from Maryfield Convent, and Loreto, Ballymena, and the whole lot are trained by Mrs. Edna Barrow.

And the choir kept winning prizes. At the Isle of Man Festival which is just over, the Juniors won first prize in their class and the Linnettes not only first in theirs but also won the supreme Shield for the best choir in the festival.

The Maryfield under-13’s came second and Loreto under-15’s did the same at the recent Cork Choral Festival, Loreto also being runners-up in the schools’ section of the television contest “Let the people sing.”

At this year’s Feis Ceil, the O’Connell Boys took a third prize and from amongst them all came winners of several solo prizes, including the Rachmies and Eucharis Cups and the A.I.M.S. Cup.

Now they’ve set their sights on the Welsh Eisteddfod in July —the juniors’ sights, that is, because the Singers themselves have been there before and did very well.

With a view to expenses, as well as to give pleasure, there had a concert last night in the Metropolitan Hall, 1r Abbey Street.

June 10th, 1972.

Dublin choir wins £100 prize at Belfast Festival

THE Lindsay Singers from Dublin were on Saturday awarded the most valuable monetary prize of the Belfast Musical Festival—the £100 Peter Stuyvesant Foundation prize for choral competition.

The choir and their conductor, Edna Barrow, left Dublin at 8.30 a.m. to travel by road to Belfast. They competed against 10 other choirs in the Wellington Hall in the afternoon and were adjudged to be one of the three finalists to appear at the last session of the festival. It was nearly midnight before they started on their triumphant way home.

The adjudicator, Dr. Douglas Hopkins, said he had been most impressed by their performance; their words had come alive and there was a real musical quality to their work.
He hopes angels will sing like Lindsay Singers

When I get to the next world I hope to hear the angels sing as this choir did, said adjudicator, Dr. Havlock Nelson, when he awarded first prize to the Lindsay Singers at the Feis Ceoil.

The singers, one might say, have to be "heard" to be believed. In their short existence of four years they have won scores of trophies.

When I met their conductor, Mrs. Ethna Barror, the other day she told me that their full strength is 26 members and the average age is about 20. They are a great team of girls, she said.

The singers have grown, as it were, in easy stages. First they came to Mrs. Baror as individuals then followed duets, trios and quartets. They got to know one another and as a result the nucleus of a choir was formed.

"They are wildly enthusiastic," she told me. "Many are keen on opera and other music, but the choir comes first. They would not give it up for anything. They never miss the weekly rehearsals, even though a couple may sometimes have to get baby-sitters."

In addition to their achievements at the Feis Ceoil, they also won an award of £100 in Belfast recently. Next year they will be eligible to seek other awards as they have now won the cup outright at the Feis Ceoil.

BY JOHN HONohan

They hope to compete at next year's Cork Choral Festival and at some English festivals.

Mrs. Baror is herself an expert singer, and as Ethna Graham won many major awards at the Feis. In addition, she was well known as a hockey international and also as a tennis player. Her husband, Cecil, has made a name for himself both as singer and actor with the Rossmore L automatic and Rathgar Musical Society.

WAS AMAZED

"Did he help in forming the choir?" I asked. "No," said Mrs. Baror, "but he was amazed when he heard them for the first time in their Feis triumph."

Two of their family of six-Ann and Pauline-are in the singers.

Mrs. Baror is also very proud of the choir in Marine Vocational School, where she has been teaching singing for the past three years. In their short career they have already won a number of prizes at the Feis Ceoil.

Lindsay Singers jubilate
By Charles Acton

IT SEEMS extraordinary that Ethna Barror has been running her Lindsay Singers for 25 years, no less; it also seems remarkable that there was ever a time without them, so firmly has she implanted them in our hearts and so strikingly high a standard has she brought them to from just about the beginning. Every choir thinks that it aims for perfection; hardly any achieve it, but then Mrs. Baror is unique.

She and her Lindsay's celebrated their silver jubilee in the National Concert Hall last night, though their actual quarter century was achieved last year. They led off with the Gloria Sanctuary and Agnus Dei of Stradivarius's exciting setting of the Mass, Missa beatae Virginis, immediately notable for their extraordinary accuracy of intonation, the tone quality with which we are so familiar and their typical care to project the work to the audience so that every word is always clear.

They went on with madrigals by Festa, Lassue and Morley, Verdi's "Virgo Madre", and a wide lot of immensely varied items which I have not space to enumerate, but all sung as we are used to them.

Irish choir shares top award

"Sunday Independent" Reporter

The Lindsay Singers, comprised of 28 pretty Dublin girls, last night shared the top award with a Bulgarian choir in the International Radio Choral Competition, "Let the People Sing", promoted by the B.B.C. The awards were announced on the B.B.C. Third programme and the Dublin choir, in place of tough competition from choirs from eighteen countries, shared the award in the Equal Voice section with a choir from Sofia.

The founder and conductor of the Lindsay Singers is Mrs. Ethna Barror and A.T.E. sponsored the choir in the competition. Producer was Miss Jane Carty of RTE.

In all thirty-four choirs took part in the three sections of the competition and following various heats run off over recent months the choirs left in the Equal Voice section were those representing Bulgaria, Great Britain, Hungary, the Netherlands and Ireland.
Appendix H

Transcripts of Interviews

Interview with Dr. Albert Bradshaw (June 2004)

Dr Albert Bradshaw is an expert on the Kodaly method and has had many years experience as a choral conductor, and adjudicator at national and international music festivals. He taught generations of students as music teacher in Mount Temple Comprehensive, Malahide Rd. and acted as examiner and consultant for the Department of Education and Science. He has lectured on music education methods at Trinity College Dublin, and the Dublin Institute of Technology, and has published scholarly articles on music education and choral singing.

Q. When did you first meet Ethna Barror?

A. About 1964 or 1965. That was my knowledge of The Lindsay Singers. That was when the great Lindsays burst on to the International scene. I still remember it was the Metropolitan Hall. It was a Feis Ceoil competition. They were singing and Havelock Nelson was adjudicating. Havelock became a great friend of Ethna over the years. They sang something. I have no idea what it was, but I will never forget the alto line. It was stunning. That was the first time I ever heard a woman’s choir of this calibre. It was to me just a huge shock. I can truthfully say that in my mind’s eye or my musical ear, I always view Irish choral music as pre-Lindsays and post Lindsays. They set the standard by which others were judged and mercilessly so, when you consider ‘Let the People Sing,’ when you consider Teeside, when you consider the Welsh Eisteddfod.

To get an insight into Ethna, at a slighter later date when I got to know her better, I am sure it was early eighties. She had the Junior Lindsays in Cork. They were dressed in blue. I happened to turn on the radio to Radio 4. Roy Bohana, Head of the Welsh International Choral Festival was being interviewed on BBC. They made some comment to the fact that he had just come back from Cork. He was asked how he had enjoyed Cork? His comment came: ‘Oh stunning experience. What I will always remember is a group of young girls coming on to the stage and standing. Suddenly they started to sing’. And the ingredients he said. ‘You put highly trained beautiful voices onto the stage and match them, but the one ingredient they
had was that they had a genius in front of them’. About twenty minutes later, the phone rang
and it was Ethna and she said to me. ‘Were you listening to that’ and almost child-like she
said ‘they are talking about me’. Her name was not mentioned. They referred to the Junior
Lindsay and everybody knew who they were talking about. I was just so delighted because
you know people have done this for fame, for this that and the other, but Ethna has given
tirelessly to charity all her life with her gifts. I mean, it is a unique contribution I am sure, the
amount of money that she has given to charity, concert after concert, donation after donation
from this imperious group.

Years back, Colin Mac Kenzie and I asked her if she would come to the school and give a
concert. The Lindsay Singers were at the top of the tree at that stage and she found an evening
when she could come. I had a huge number of kids singing in the school. I had maybe three
hundred youngsters in the gymnasium. I could hear some of the boys making comments about
the girls as they came onto the stage, all dressed in their gold and green. They started to sing.
Well the children were mesmerised. They were just mesmerised. They had never heard
intonation of this calibre, and well, The Lindsay Singers just sang and the kids wanted
encores. They were chanting the encores and they wanted more. It is the old adage. If you
have something good enough you will attract everybody. That is exactly what she was doing.
She was so generous to me. Final rehearsals I would ring her up and ask if I could come along
and listen? She let me into rehearsals, particularly if I could not attend the concert. That
happened for instance in Patrick’s Cathedral where she gave one of the most perfect choral
recitals I have ever heard. She started with Purcell’s *Rejoice*. The sound went down the
cathedral: *Rejoice, Rejoice*. It was unbelievable. It is a very difficult thing to sing. There is
only the one word. It was stunning.

Q. It has been said that she does light music. Can you comment?

A. She does everything. Of course she does light music, and she does music going back to the
twenties, musicals that nobody has ever heard of, and she has a vast knowledge of them. She
is a national treasure. I don’t think that we are going to see many like her again. She is
phenomenally gifted. People ask her about her technique. I don’t know honestly if Ethna has a
technique. She knows exactly what she wants and how to get there. But if you ask her on a
one to one basis, I have asked her and she says: ‘I don’t know until I hear it’. I have spoken to
her about breathing and intonation. She may not know how she gets the sound, but she will
try anything. It may not be orthodox. She does things that are extra-ordinary. I remember one
year she wanted to take The Linnettes to Cork. *Now is the Month of Maying* was being performed, I am almost certain. She became very unhappy, because there was someone not singing perfectly in tune. I got my instructions to go up to the rehearsal room. I was to switch on the light on the outside of the room and she would know that I had arrived. I was to sit and listen. Right enough, the intonation was not her intonation. She called me in. It was supposed to be a surprise. The girls spotted it a mile away. When I came in, she introduced me formally to the girls. We listened and I conducted them. She separated all the girls and she walked around listening to every single line until she found the culprit and she fixed it instantly. They were back up and the intonation was flawless. That was what she wanted. But you see, she knows what to do. In the RDS, I was playing for her on one occasion and she wanted to change one of the carols. She came over to the piano and she said to me that there wasn’t enough bass. ‘Bring out the bass’. I was playing double octaves and I played down an octave but it still wasn’t enough for what she wanted. She came straight across and said ‘go play at the top’ and she played the bass. We got the end of a verse and she said ‘up a semitone, jump up’, and she changes and again ‘up a semitone jump’, and she did this three times. She would never notice that that might put the cat among the pigeons on the RDS stage doing it live. She would never think about that. She has so much talent. The perspiration was rolling off me. She didn’t even notice. People forget this about her. I have heard comments she only picks the best voices. Why shouldn’t she? She is the best around. She has every right to.

Q. Do you really think that she is the best around?

A. Oh yes, I think that there is something so special about her. Now, I totally disagree with some of the things she does, totally. I mean, to me the way she does madrigals is Victorian. Now, I am not being rude in any sense. She does them her way. They have a stamp that says Ethna Barror and it is just, I mean I have flung things down and listened in sheer joy to what she does. I can truthfully say that I never came away from a concert or a rehearsal that she gave where I didn’t learn something.

She would hear something that wasn’t exactly the way she wanted it and it would suddenly change. She would say ‘we will do it again and again and again and just once more’ until she got what she was looking for. It could be timing. It could be anything but she knew what she wanted.

Q. What makes The Lindsay Singers different?
A. Ethna

Q. To what do you attribute her success?

A. I think integrity, artistic integrity, integrity of purpose. Even from the very first time I ever heard them, there was that incredible stamp of almost perfection. I was lucky in Cork because I was the one of the adjudicators when they were given the highest marks to any choir ever given in Cork. I was on the stage. I was literally shaking. I have never heard singing like it. It was stunning. Now I remember her choirs like Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf doing the Villa-Lobos Sanctus, stuff like that shaking the chandeliers, but this group on the stage stood apart. They were flawless and I was just lucky to be there. I can say that I could go around the world ten times and never hear a performance to equal it by any choir. It was just stunning. But that is Ethna. One of the most exciting performances I ever heard The Lindsay Singers do was in the Aula Max in Cork during the Festival when they were dealing with commissioned works. The work that she had been commissioned to do was the three songs by Gerard Victory. I rarely spoke at anything like the seminars. One of the speakers stood up and said that he wanted to congratulate the composer on writing such an easy piece. I jumped when I heard the word ‘easy’ and Professor Fleischmann, whom I thought the world of, saw me and said to me: ‘Mr. Bradshaw, would you like to say something’? I suddenly was on my feet before I realised it. I said that I would like to take issue with my colleague. I said I have just listened to a supremely difficult piece, a choral piece performed by one of the world’s greatest choirs, and I said it sounds easy simply because of them. Now could I cheat and ask the girls if they found it difficult. They all said ‘yes’, and I felt justified. It is little things like that that make you smile.

When The Lindsay Singers had their twenty-first re-union, they had three guests. ‘Uncle’ Havelock Nelson, Professor Fleischmann and I were guests of the choir that night, and I can truthfully say it was one of the greatest honours that I have ever had. I was overwhelmed that I was invited and I was thrilled. In Ireland, I still remember the night that they performed the Victory work for the first time in the festival. It was electrifying, but there wasn’t even a bouquet of flowers for them. It was just accepted. ‘Oh The Lindsay Singers’, I just don’t know. We seem to have just accepted them. I mean, their achievements are legendary. Certainly Ethna did light music, but she did it her way.

Q. I have been told that she raised the standard of singing in Ireland. Was that because people
tried to achieve that standard?

A. Oh yes, and in every variety of music. The choir had incredible technique. You mentioned the word ‘rhythm’ earlier. Ethna’s rhythm in everything she does, is riveting. She has got ears like a lynx. She misses nothing. I tried to get her to come to hear a choir I had, but she was too busy. So I entered them for a competition that I knew she was adjudicating, simply to get her to listen to them. That was the sort of shenanigans you had to get up to, and of course she didn’t like some of the things that I was doing. She told me so very definitely. She has got wonderful language that I have used many times when I am adjudicating. She gets this big portmanteau, her handbag under her arm and she struts across the stage, puts it down and she turns to the audience and she says: ‘Well there is only one choir and one conductor here tonight who is going to like me’. That is the way she starts adjudicating. I just fell around laughing. Everyone was laughing. I have quoted her so often, and with equal results, I might add.

Q. When you say technique, does that include tone, diction, rhythm?

A. Yes and intonation. There are two questions there. It was a concert in the NCH I heard The Lindsay Singers and the intonation was flawless. I was just bubbling, because when you do a work like Palestrina or some of the early works, they are as dull as ditchwater unless the intonation is flawless, because the harmonics don’t sound. Ethna had the octaves and fifths flawless. They were singing away and the next minute the piano came in and you heard the choir adjusting to the piano. In other words, the choir started singing out of tune with the piano. I was going down the stairs afterwards and Dr. Joseph Groocook called me. I waited for him at the bottom of the stairs. He said to me: ‘Albert, could you tell me how many people in the hall realised that the choir were so perfectly in tune that they made the piano out of tune?’ I said to him: How many people would say ‘ooh straight away that this was lack of intonation on the part of the piano?’ I tackled Ethna straight away. She was unaware of Mean-tone tuning per se. She would be hammering the notes on the piano, and the choir were good enough to make the adjustment. The intonation was flawless. She always got them to raise their eyebrows before singing and to lift the diaphragm, and look the part, and be ready, and they were. I have heard her pull up the intonation by doing this up, up. When Ethna is conducting and there is no difficulty, she is just listening. You always watch Ethna’s hands because the moment something starts to slip, the hands signal change instantaneously I mean, it is instantaneous. That used to amuse me because I could always tell.
I heard a person who is a venerated musician in Ireland screaming at a group at which Ethna and I were sitting listening. He was screaming that you must use a stick when you conduct. Ethna looked across the room at me and the eyes dancing as much as to say ‘oh please, shut up’. She is absolutely merciless and she has a sense of humour second to none. I was to give a course in Kilkenny and to my horror, I discovered that she was coming down. I tried everything to say to her ‘get lost’! She said ‘if I wouldn’t take her down that she would get someone else’. We went down in the car and we laughed the whole way down. I had prepared the stuff. Ethna is interested in anything to do with rhythm. I had rhythm games. I taught them a tune quickly and, when I put harmony to the tune, I then started with rhythm. Ethna was sitting near the front. They then clapped and tapped. I made them count and use the foot on a certain beat and clap on another beat or do silly things. Ethna, in a loud whisper, said to somebody near her: ‘I have one hand free' and the person said ‘not for long’ Ethna let out a wheeze of laughter and I looked at her and I had to leave the hall. The audience thought I had lost it. I had. I was standing outside shaking with laughter and I couldn’t speak. It was all her fault, this infectious laughter. She said ‘I did nothing.’

On one occasion, the RDS asked us to do drama, movement and choral work. They advertised the fact that I was doing it and, of course Ethna being Ethna, I proceeded to get six of The Lindsay Singers to join the group. At that stage, I had voices from at least four of the best schools in Dublin, a group of beautiful voices. These Americans came in. I had had the group for about an hour at this stage and we had learnt something very quickly. I think it was a Britten song. This imperious sound was going down the Concert Hall in the RDS. The Americans came and asked if they could sit for a while. I said ‘Not at all, we have only just started.’ Suddenly I launched in and they started to sing. It was like heaven. There wasn’t a single weak voice. They were absolutely beautiful. The Americans were all over me like a rash. They thought they had discovered a genius, you see. Well, I said to the girls: Don’t you dare tell I am glorying in this. Well, that was the fun when you got people of that calibre from Ethna. It was just unreal.

Now to give you an idea of my impertinence, when I was in my twenties, I rang Ethna and asked could I come and talk to her. I said that I was starting a mixed renaissance consort and would she have any people with good voices who would like to sing. The next thing Ann Barror was sent up. Now Ann was singing second soprano. Catriona Yates was singing second soprano. They were flawless. I had a line of sopranos second to none. Denise Kelly was singing first soprano. We had a list of absolutely superb singers.
Q. Does that fit in with her discipline?

A. Yes, total discipline in everything, the way the girls dress, the way they put their hair everything. There is no such thing as having your hair down over your face if you are singing. The performance started before you left the dressing room. You were disciplined and organised. You arrived on the stage, knowing exactly what was expected of you, and just total concentration while you were on stage.

Q. Do you think that she influenced only female choirs?

A. No, because no matter what she did, very probably less on all male choirs. But certainly S.A.T.B. choirs she influenced everything to do with choral music in Ireland. Anybody who heard her just knew what they were up against.

Q. Do you think that she made a big contribution?

A. Vast, and those of us who learnt from her have used her technique all our lives. It was the way she did things. I remember an awful lot of the light stuff she performed. That was not my forte. I was happier in the Renaissance or dealing with Bartok than I would have been, say, taking a light arrangement of a folk-song and doing something with it. But I learnt more. I remember the first time I heard her performing Havelock Nelson’s *The Girl with the Buckle on her Shoes*. Now, the first thing you realised was the way she set the rhythm. The very opening danced along. There was no such thing as a hazy rhythm. It was sharp. It was accurate. She would just turn her hand and you would get these wonderful turns of phrases. Of course that didn’t grow on a tree. She learnt it and the choir learnt it over three years. Every member of the choir knew how the other breathed, and they dove-tailed the breathing flawlessly. You mention Maconchy. Now, any of the early recordings she made, if you listen to certain works, there is some of the most perfect singing that you could literally require from any choral group anywhere. They are stunning.

Q. Would you rank her internationally?

A. I would, certainly. In the heyday of The Lindsay Singers, they were one of the foremost choirs in the world. I wouldn’t have the slightest hesitation in saying that. I remember the professor of music from Ann Arbor University, a very fine musician, brought over a choral
group, and they were very good. They were up against Ethna. They sang beautifully. Ethna
went on and her performance exploded. The students were so disappointed. Every year, they
came across and they met The Lindsay Singers, and The Lindsay Singers took the prizes. I
remember some of them coming up to me and saying. ‘This is not fair. They are all talented
voices etc’. I said ‘yes’. But you come across and you get into a competition and a major
international choir explodes in your face, a superb performance. You can’t win against that,
you just can’t. You have young voices. The boys were in their early twenties. Their voices
were not rich enough to match and that sort of thing. I remember the last time I adjudicated in
Cork and The Lindsay Singers won the International Trophy. I know one of the major reasons
that they won. They did one piece. I think it might have been the Tucapsky and it was well
nigh flawless. I know one of the adjudicators next to me, at the end of the piece, checked the
intonation and it was absolutely flawless. The others performed, in some ways, more exciting
things, but a performance of that calibre! The three of us knew how difficult that work was
and it just sounded like any school choir could walk up and sing it. It was transparently
beautiful. I still remember that was the chief reason they won. There were voices of dissent.
People were saying it was ridiculous etc. That was an honest reaction. When you adjudicate,
listening to choirs, you try to the very best of your ability to be objective, but if you hear a
choir that performs something that is like your dreams, you can’t but swayed by it. You
look, and you say. ‘This is not my style’, but you look at it objectively. On one occasion in
Cork, when The Lindsay Singers were beaten, I was a member of the adjudicating panel. The
composer was there on the panel.’ Such and such a choir, that is the way I want it performed’,
he said. Well, you can’t argue with the composer. You can’t. You can say: ‘Well, there were
mistakes.’ If the composer says ‘I don’t care, that is what I want’, that is a composer who
wants a thing performed that way, at that particular moment in time. Ethna would be the first
to say ‘you win some, you lose some.’

Q. You have adjudicated with her on a panel. Is that interesting?

A. Oh yes, very particularly if it is anything to do with light music, anything to do with the
stage. Ethna knows by instinct why a thing hasn’t worked. Now, I mightn’t understand as a
performer why a thing hasn’t worked with movement on the stage. I would be looking at it
from the musical side of it. She would be looking at it from the total side. She would say:
‘Such and such didn’t work because’ ….and she would know what the ‘because’ was.
Q. You obviously hold her in.

A. Awe

Q. Is there anything you would like to add?

A. As an adjudicator, she is very to the point. She doesn’t mess around. In the thirty seconds she has been listening, she knows exactly the level the choir has got to. She listens with her ears. She has been at it all her life. She knows in ten seconds how far a choir has climbed up the ladder. What irritates some folk is that she is born and bred a practical musician. What she does is always practical. While her madrigals are Victorian, she does it with such panache. I could say: don’t put in that *rallentando* there. It is not marked. There is no speed indication. But that is her. It is her artistry. It is like saying to a painter: Here don’t put that colour on that canvas. It is her canvas’.

Q. What are her most outstanding qualities?

A. I said artistic integrity. That would certainly be it. The amount of work she does behind the scenes, her own work, sitting at the piano, working out what she wants to do with things, and constantly doing it over to the very last moment of preparation. I think people think her artistry grows on trees. They don’t see the amount of work that she has ever done, which is enormous, or she could never have reached the heights she has. Maybe this is a nice thing with which to end. I went to Hungary to study in the early seventies when very few were allowed in. There were about sixty people there and I was the only Irish person. The head of the course, which was held in Essendorm, sent one of the organisers to find ‘the Irish man’. I was summoned to her room. This was Professor Sonjie. She won the *Prix de Rome* the same as Debussy, she spoke nine languages, and she had heard The Lindsay Singers in Teesside. I think she came up with the famous one-liner: ‘If angels sing, they sound like this’. Professor Sonjie said to me: ‘Do you know The Lindsay Singers?’ I said ‘Yes, I have known Ethna for a number of years. She sent me some voices and her daughter sings with my group.’ She just said: ‘Oh wonderful’. Instantly, I was on a totally different plateau from any other student in the group. You just realised abroad that one of the world’s great musicians had me on a platform, simply because of my connection with Ethna Barror.
Interview with Dr. Seán Creamer, Conductor Park Singers (December 2006)

Dr. Seán Creamer has been involved in choral music since 1948. He was appointed as Music Inspector of National Schools in Sligo before moving to Dublin where he conducted numerous choirs including Celtic Singers, Cantairí Avondale and The Park Singers. He established the Dublin Secondary Schools’ Choir in 1985 and the National Children’s Choir in 1985. In 2006 He was conferred with the degree of Doctor of Laws by the Higher Education Training Awards Council for his commitment to Music Education.

Q. When did you first come in contact with Ethna Barror?

S. I heard The Lindsay Singers in 1960. They gave a concert in the Abbey Theatre.

Q. What was your first impression on hearing them?

S. This is the standard. This is what we all have to do. I had just revived an oratorio in Sligo. I thought I had a great choir singing, but when I heard The Lindsay Singers, I said to myself, this is what you have to do. It was their sound.

Q. Can you describe the sound?

S. It was the nearest thing I heard to being perfect. I was bowled over by the sound from women. I remember the altos.

Q. How do you think E.B. achieves that sound?

S. Everybody was picked. She chose particular voices that would blend. I met E.B. personally in 1971. It was the year that she performed ‘Prayer before Birth’ in Cork. I met her on the train. She had come through the teaching process of this piece and we spoke about it. I have been to Cork many times over the years, but I have limited memories of it. I can remember this experience, hearing the performance of this piece.

Q. Did you notice changes in the way E.B worked over the years?

S. No. She always knew what everyone was doing. She heard what everyone was doing. She
fixed her eye on you and you did your best. She only raised a finger and something happened.

Q. Was there a difference in their performances when singing in competition or in concert?

S. No, they were perfect every time. She is the greatest choral conductor.

Q. What makes her so?

S. Her results, her sound, her repertoire. She is equally at home in difficult choral music and easy choral music. Have you heard The Lindsay Singers sing ‘Tea for Two’? It is like hearing Shostakovich. I also remember hearing her choir sing carols in the NCH. It was thoroughly enjoyable, unless you were mad jealous, as I was, of her ability to get this sound.

Q. This sound or blend, in your opinion, what constitutes it?

S. Good altos, good basses, good vowels. She had good altos and vowels. She had those in perfection.

Q. Did you ever adjudicate with her?

S. I never adjudicated with her. People often didn’t like her as an adjudicator. However you were certain you would get honesty from her. If she spots something wrong, she says it. She notices everything. For example, she might say: You have two second sopranos that you can do without’.

Q. What qualities do you think are necessary to be a good conductor?

S. You have to be all things to all men. Her idea is to be a dictator. I would be totally wrong. I would try to encourage everyone.

Q. Why do you think people had such huge loyalty to her?

S. If Mrs Barror rang you and said ‘Come back and sing’, people would jump to do it. I honestly couldn’t say that I could get people to do that for me. I think she inspires people with the way she works and what she gets out of them. It’s an inspiration to work with her.
Q. What do you think is her contribution to choral singing in Ireland?

S. Standard. She raised the standard on choral singing. She raised the bar for all of us. From the time I heard The Lindsay Singers, I asked myself when working, ‘Is that as good as The Lindsay Singers’?

Q. What is her secret?

S. I think it has to be the work that she does in rehearsal and practice. She is the most undemonstrative conductor. She only makes small gestures. She always wants the best performance, and she draws it out.

Q. Did you meet her in competition?

S. Not too often. Twice I beat The Lindsay Singers, once in Killarney at a Pan Celtic competition, and once at a festival in Dublin. She was a great competitor. She wanted to win and did not like coming second. She would be very kind when you beat her, she was a good loser to me anyhow. However, I knew it was a fluke when I beat her.

Q. What quality would you single out as her greatest?

S. If I was asked for one quality, I would say it is her ability to teach people and to get that level of performance on a regular basis. What you hear in her performance, she has heard twenty times in rehearsal. In 2004 I felt I achieved that ultimate performance. When we finished singing, the audience were totally still. I knew I made it on that occasion. All the things we wanted to get in rehearsal came off that day.

Q. How does she do it?

S. I wish I knew. She is an amazing woman. It is her strength of character, her mental alertness, her ability to hear everything. There is nobody like her. She must be the woman everyone looks up to in choral singing. When I heard The Lindsay Singers, my standard was never the same after that. I compare it to the time I went to a lecture given by Fr. Enda McDonough on a social issue. You went, and you listened, and you were not the same. You
say: ‘That’s it!’ Since hearing The Lindsay Singers, no matter what I do, I try to achieve that standard. I adore what the woman does. Only she wouldn’t accept it, I’d be inclined to bow to her. I am very pleased to pay tribute to her.

Interview with Briain Ó Dubhghaill, Conductor Cantóiri Óga Átha Cliath (February 2007)

Briain O Dubhghaill has had a lifelong involvement with music education and choral training in Ireland. In his work as Music Inspector with the Department of Education and Science he has influenced the development of the music curriculum at all levels, as well as teacher training, through lectures, seminars, and inservice courses. He was Musical Director of Corfhéile na Scoile, the non-competitive schools’ choral festival. His choir, Cantairí Óga Átha Cliath (the Young Dublin Singers), won acclaim at competitions at home and abroad, and he has acted as adjudicator at Feis Ceoil and other music festivals.

Q. When did you first meet Ethna Barror?

B. I think I probably would have met her for the first time at the Feis Ceoil, which was when I started conducting the choir Cantairí Óga Átha Cliath. I took over from Prionnsias Ó Ceallaigh and I entered the Feis a couple of times, and it was around that time that I met her. She was a great supporter of the Feis Ceoil. She took children for individual singing lessons and she put them in for the Feis, as well as her choirs.

Q. Can you recall if it was The Lindsay Singers or a school choir that she was conducting when you met her?

B. Now that you remind me, my very first time in meeting her would have been in connection with a school choir and it was a boys’ choir. She used to take boys’ choirs in Christian Brothers schools in the old days. That would have been in the late seventies, I suppose, and it was the time the John Charles McQuaid Trophy started up. I was working in the Department of Education as a music inspector and John Charles gave this beautiful trophy to the Department to be competed for in the Primary schools of the Arch-Diocese. The first competitive gathering for this was held in O’Connell’s School on the north side, and Ethna had the boys’ choir in O’Connell’s at that time. She had them for a long time and they were beautiful too. That was my first time ever to meet her.
Q. What was your first impression of her?

B. I wouldn’t remember that. She was so good at her job that she was quite formidable, you know. But I wouldn’t have known her personally well at that stage. A lot of my contact over the years would have been in connection with competitions, you know where we were competing against each other.

Q. Did you ever compete against The Lindsay Singers?

B. Yes, many times, yes indeed, The Lindsay Singers would have been the choir that I knew best.

Q. It is said that The Lindsay Singers had a particular sound. Would you agree with that statement?

B. I think that it would be right to say that The Lindsay Singers had their own particular sound. I suppose that every good choir has their own particular sound, but I think one of the reasons that The Lindsay Singers had such a wonderful sound was that they were all individual singers, put together as a choir. I think that is true anyway. I couldn’t be sure, but that is the general impression always.

Q. Would you be able to describe the sound?

B. Oh well, I don’t know really. It is very difficult to describe a choral sound. I think that they had a developed, feminine sound. It was by no means a children’s sound.

Q. In your opinion how did E.B. get the sound? Is it because the children were trained by her?

B. I think so. Normally, in most choirs, you would have a mixed bunch in various parts and you would have the weaker ones helped along by the leaders. In a choir where the vast majority is solo singers, you would have quite a different type of sound, you can imagine.

Q. Would you know how did the sound evolve?
B. I don’t know much about the way Ethna worked. I was never at a rehearsal. Perhaps they were trained individually. There wouldn’t be the same difficulty in getting them to breathe properly. They were a choir of individual singers who were blended together, individually trained and blended. Maybe that is how she got the sound. Maybe that is how the sound evolved, because they were trained by the same person.

Q. Did you hear The Lindsay Singers perform in concert as well as competition?

B. Oh, I would have heard them in concert, yes certainly, probably at some of Ethna’s Christmas concerts. She put on Christmas concerts in the NCH.

Q. Did they sing differently in concerts, compared to competitions? Would the same detail be evident?

B. They would sing much lighter music in concert. Ethna was a very fine pianist and she conducted them from the piano. She would sit and play for them, and it was different to a conductor standing in front of them getting everything spot on at a competition, and it was a different type of music as well.

Q. What qualities do you think it takes to be a good choral conductor?

B. My goodness! Patience, you need a lot of it, when you are dealing with young people anyhow. You know the old saying “Patience and perseverance made a bishop of his reverence” I suppose a lot of dedication to the task in hand, and dedication to the young people involved, and of course, a love of young people and a love of music.

Q. Was there anything about her conducting technique that was different?

B. It is hard to say, because every conductor has their own quirks. Some are flamboyant. I think that she was quite reserved in her movements.

Q. Do you think that most of the work is done at rehearsals?

B. Oh yes, it has to be if you are looking for perfection, which you always are.

Q. What was it that was special about Ethna Barror?
B. I think that The Lindsay Singers came at a time, when a choir of such outstanding quality was rare. I think that is what made them so well known, liked and regarded. Ethna herself, I didn’t know personally, in that I wasn’t much in her company or met her socially, but I must say that she was always extremely generous to me and to other people I am sure. She was never mean with her music, if you know what I mean, in so far as many is the piece of music that she gave to me that I would never have been able to find elsewhere. She never hesitated to do that if you ever asked her. In fact, at one stage, she was clearing out music and she asked if I would come and take it. I took a few boxes and there was quite a lot of music I hadn’t come across before. In that way, she was very generous, and not all conductors are like that.

Q. Some of the original members are still in the choir. Can you explain that?

B. As happens in a lot of organizations where somebody like Ethna gives a lot of her time and is generous to the children, people have a high regard for that. I have known a couple of parents who had children in The Lindsay Singers and they were just in awe of it all. It was a wonderful thing in their lives.

Q. Do you think that E.B. made a contribution to choral singing in Ireland?

B. Oh yes, of course. There is no doubt but that she must have made a huge contribution. I am thinking of specific things and pieces. For instance, I know that The Lindsay Singers sang long before we came to that stage of being able to sing at the seminars in Cork. Ethna was one of the first, maybe the only female choir that ever sang at the seminar attached to the Cork Choral Festival. I remember I later came across the piece ‘Prayer before Birth’ which I think was the piece they sang at the seminar.

Q. Did you hear them sing at the seminar?

B. Oh no, I had no contact with Cork at that stage, but later Ethna very kindly gave me a copy of that piece which we sang abroad in several places and competitions.

Q. So you think that The Lindsay Singers were the first female choir to rise to that standard?
B. I think so, off the top of my head. I don’t recall any other female choir in the country being of that standard. Any choir that reaches that extraordinary high standard has to contribute a vast amount to the choral scene. They become the exemplars for a lot of people. In that way, she certainly would have had a tremendous effect on the choral scene.

Q. It has been said that she raised the bar?

B. Yes, exactly. Even though it was an equal voice choir that she worked, I think it raised the standard for all types of choirs, that that is the standard that can be achieved. Also you have to take into consideration that such a choir, that has such a standard of technique, can tackle a lot of music that other choirs couldn’t attempt. For repertoire, it means a lot to have choirs like that on the scene, because they are exemplars for repertoire as well as vocal technique. They can tackle so many different types of music.

Interview with Gillian Butler, Member Lindsay Singers (November 2006)

Gillian Butler studied singing with Denis Noble in the College of Music. When he retired she continued her studies with Ethna Barror and was a Feis Ceoil prize winner. In 1965 she joined The Lindsay Singers, and is over forty years performing with the choir. Gillian also sings with the church choir in Whitechurch, Rathfarnham under the direction of Mark Dexter. Gillian shares Ethna Barror’s passion for sport. She played hockey all her life, and she coaches hockey in a number of schools including Wesley College.

Q. At what age did you join The Lindsay Singers?

G. I was twenty years old.

Q. How did you hear about the choir?

G. I was studying singing in the College of Music with Dennis Noble. When he retired I was searching for a teacher and I saw Ethna Barror’s name in the paper, winning all the Feis competitions. It always said c/o 86 Lindsay Road. My friend and I rang and attended an audition. She was very friendly and immediately put me at my ease. I started singing lessons with Mrs. Barror and she suggested that I join her choir. I was quite happy to do so. I started off singing in second sopranos. I sang second sopranos for a few years. I gradually moved
down to first and second altos.

**Q.** You have been a member since that year. What motivated you to stay?

**G.** I loved the good singing. Joining The Lindsay Singers ruins you for any other choir unless it is up to that standard. I have rarely come across any other choir as good. Mrs Barror is so particular about every little detail. I really got on well with all the other girls. We were really good friends. When Mrs. Barror is looking for new members, she is always particular in choosing people who will get on with each other. It is like a team. She is into sport and I am also. She has the choir like a team, everybody interacting, playing their part and blending together, not only in the singing, but in other ways too. When a friend of mine wanted to join the choir, Mrs. B. asked me: ‘I take your word she can sing, but will she fit in?’ Later my friend remarked that she could not believe how nice all the girls were and there was no competition for solos etc. We sometimes joke about it, but everyone accepts Mrs. Barror’s decision because they know it is for the best.

**Q.** Did you sing with any other choirs?

**G.** I sang in school choirs in Rutland High School and in church choirs in Glasnevin, and now I am in Whitechurch Choir, Rathfarnham. John Dexter takes the choir now. We have had a fantastic choir in Whitechurch over the years. We had Mark Armstrong at one time and he was excellent as well.

**Q.** How long are you a member of that choir?

**G.** Since 1976

**Q.** The Lindsay Singers are fifty years in existence. To what do you attribute this?

**G.** Mrs. Barror, her commitment, dedication and determination. She never looks for anything in return. She is so musical herself and she gets such pleasure out of us doing something right.

**Q.** Can you describe a typical rehearsal?

**G.** We arrive at eight o’clock and she starts promptly. After about twenty minutes, she has a
chatting time. She gives comments and news. She is very witty. If we had performed, she would discuss feedback. There is always a sense of humour. Even learning music, there is always a sense of humour, sometimes with comments about the piano we use, with notes missing. It is very sub-standard.

Q. Do the rehearsals follow the same format each week?

G. They do, basically. If we are learning new music, she will do the parts separately. This is really good. I can sing music that I learned thirty or forty years ago. I can still sing it without music, because I learnt it so well. We never sang with music, ever.

Q. How often would you go over a phrase?

G. She would go over it until she was happy that you were singing it correctly. Two weeks ago, the sopranos were singing a line and she went over it ten times until she was happy that it was up to the standard that she wanted.

Q. Is it difficult for you to maintain interest if there is repetition?

G. No, it is not difficult at all, because she keeps it moving all the time. She moves onto another part, or if one part is having difficulty, she asks the whole choir to sing. This is something that I haven’t noticed with other conductors. If a part is weak, and sometimes we have small numbers on a line, she will bring someone from another line to sing and help out. I haven’t noticed that with other conductors, asking someone to help out. It is good because it makes you a team.

Q. How does she maintain interest?

G. She has her own little rapport. She holds the interest of young people. I coach hockey and I work with young people. It is great to observe how she can hold their interest. I know that we were young when we joined, but this is a different generation and she still does it. She asked us this year if we wanted to continue with the choir every week. I answered ‘this has been my life and I would miss it very much’.

Q. Is choice of repertoire important?
G. I think it is important, and it is another thing that makes her unique. She takes such time to choose and deliberate over a program of music, and she gets a lovely blend of styles. We did a Christmas show every year. Originally, she put it on in her house, and then we moved to Claude Hall. She was also brilliant at musical comedy. She had marvellous timing, and she did the movement and overlooked the costumes. Her attention to detail was great.

Q. The Lindsay Singers are known for their blend. How does she achieve that?

G. She chooses certain voices and she knows the sound she wants. She will say: ‘I want that white or I want that churchy’. We know what that means. She teaches how to achieve that sound. For example, we pull faces, wrinkle our noses and do breathing exercises. We had a totally unique sound in the sixties, seventies and eighties. Nobody else had that quality. We still have it. She never introduced men into the choir. I always hoped she wouldn’t, because you could not have had that lovely blending of voices, like choir boys. She always loved the pure sound of choir boys. She took some boys for singing.

Q. She also had a very successful choir for years in O’Connell’s School.

G. Yes, she did.

Q. How does she relate to the members?

G. She relates very well and she has a great sense of humour. However, if you couldn’t go to choir you would dread ringing. She is so dedicated herself and she would be so disappointed. There was an unwritten rule that you would not sing with any other choir. Church choir was different, obviously. However, I would never have wanted to sing with another choir.

Q. Did she not mind you singing with a church choir?

G. No. Not at all.

Q. How would you describe the teacher- pupil relationship?

G. It was very good. She has the ability to get you on her side, but there is always, I won’t say ‘barrier’, because that is too cold. She is a very warm person, but a very private person. There
is a boundary that you don’t cross. Boundary is a better description.

Q. Did she prepare the choir differently for a concert and a competition?

G. Yes, I think so. Before a concert, she would say to us: ‘This is not the Feis Ceoil. I want you to enjoy yourselves. It is not a competition’. At the same time, she would still have it perfect. For a competition, she would have it double, double perfect.

Q. How would she motivate you before you go on stage?

G. We would always have a rehearsal, if possible. If we were singing at two, we would rehearse at eleven. We would go over everything. If there were any mistakes, she would thump the piano and say: ‘Come on, let us get this right’. When we were queuing up to go on stage, she would ask us to concentrate. I would do that with my hockey teams. I would say to them: ‘This is a league match, concentrate’. All eyes would be on her at all times in rehearsal and in performance. I couldn’t sing without doing that. I cannot sing with music when I am singing with her.

Q. She maintains that flexibility in a choir is very important. Can you comment?

G. Yes. If she decided to do something different to the way we rehearsed, perhaps quicker or slower, then we would be with her. If she asked us to stand on our hands for ten minutes before we sang, we would do it. Her way of conducting gets us to do things.

Q. How?

G. I am not sure. In rehearsal, she would say: ‘That wasn’t right. I did not like that’. Then she would do something with her hands and we would sing it perfectly. She would say: ‘How did you do it right this time?’ I always wanted to say: ‘Well you made us do it’. I can’t do the gestures. It is the way her hands move. She brings it out. We totally depend on her. We are so used to doing exactly what she wants.

Q. Would you not be able to do it anyway because of the work that is done in rehearsal? Is it her conducting technique or the preparation that works?
G. I am not saying that we could not sing without her, but it would never be as good without her. Even if we had it perfect at rehearsal the night before a performance, she adds a dimension when we go on stage. She absolutely fine-tunes everything.

Q. She is perceived as being a very successful teacher and conductor. What defines her?

G. Her personality and not accepting anything but the best. She gets what she wants. She won’t accept anything unless it is exactly what she wants. Interpretation is huge. We have seen it in competition where we are singing the same piece as other competitors, how her interpretation is so much better.

Q. What is different about her interpretation?

G. Emotion, and the way the music flows. Obviously our diction and other details are very good, but I wouldn’t notice that as much as the manner in which the music flows.

Q. What did you gain from membership of The Lindsay Singers?

G. I feel the choir has been a big part of my life for forty-two years. She has given me something in music that I would never have had. I always loved music but she has given me a love and appreciation of music that I could not have got in any other choir. We have been so lucky.

Q. What other benefits did you gain from your membership?

G. A group of lovely friends that will be friends for life. I also have a good friend in Mrs. Barror. She has been part of my life for all of my life, and my husband’s. I have gained friendships and a great appreciation of music.

Interview with Gemma Cadwell, Member Lindsay Singers (November 2005)

Gemma Cadwell started her singing career at the age of sixteen with Ethna Barror. At the age of seventeen she joined Glasnevin Musical Society. She played various roles with the society and also with Terenure Musical Society. She won many duet and trio competitions. However, her talent for comedy was quickly discovered by Ethna Barror and Gemma won the
Rathmines and Rathgar Trophy in the Feis Ceoil on three occasions. She was a member of The Lindsay Singers for over forty years.

Q. What is your musical background?

G. I was always able to sing from a young age. The nuns discovered when I went to school that I had a voice. When I went to secondary school, I became involved in shows, The Quaker Girl, The Mikado. I loved these. I was also a member of the special choir which took part in competitions such as the Sarto Cup in the Feis Ceoil.

Q. What school did you attend?

G. Holy Faith Convent, Corpus Christi, and Holy Faith Convent Glasnevin.

Q. What parts did you play?

G. I did male parts and female parts. I had a low voice. I played Pooh-Bah in the Mikado. I also played Gerry in Haddington Rd. School production. It was a comedy part. Later on I think it was that ability to do comedy that Mrs. Barror spotted in me.

Q. When did you meet Ethna Barror?

G. A friend asked me to make up a place in a trio. She already attended Mrs. Barror.

Q. What was your first impression?

G. I thought she was strict, but she had a lovely way with her. I realised in going to her that there was more to singing. After the Feis, I went back to her and we did a Christmas show. Those involved were all neighbours and friends. I remember the show well. It was held in the dining room. Mr. Barror did the lighting and he helped out generally. I was involved in many trios and duets over the years. I then competed in the Rathmines and Rathgar competition in the Feis Ceoil. I won this competition three or four times. Mrs Barror could pick out a piece that would suit me.

Q. How long were you a member of The Lindsay Singers?

Q. Did you belong to another music group?

G. I was in the Aer Lingus and Glasnevin musical societies during that time. Glasnevin was very important to me. Mrs. Barror was very indulgent. She did allow me to participate in these....Normally she preferred that you would not be in two choirs at the same time. The shows were different; they did not go on throughout the year.

Q. That brings us to commitment. Was it a big commitment?

G. She was so committed and enthusiastic. I remember doing a concert and having a baby a few days later. Many of the girls gave that commitment. There is a nucleus still there. I don’t think that you could be committed to two choirs and she never wasted a minute of rehearsal. That was such a joy. In other places you got used to wasting some time, but that was only because it was a social occasion. In some groups you would sit around while others worked.

Q. What would you describe as the learning outcomes?

G. Musically, I learned to listen. Mrs. Barror forever said: ‘Listen to the person next to you’. I learned that you did not need to have a big voice. It was more important I learned to have a tuneful voice and a good ear. She taught us to blend as one voice.

Q. Was blend a big issue?

G. We learned a piece so well. We learned to sound like each other. This was a great thing with The Lindsay Singers. I have listened to our tapes. The blend was fairly unique at that time. Today, more and more groups aim for that sound, but Mrs. Barror was one of the first people to get that effect. The voices were very tight (sounding together).

Q. You worked with other conductors in Glasnevin Musical Society?

G. Yes, I worked with Father O’Brien and Terry O’Connor. Robert Daley was chorus master and Ciaran Lalor helped out on occasions.
Q. How would you describe Ethna Barror’s conducting technique?

G. Mrs. Barror hardly had to conduct us. We did so much work at the rehearsals. We were so well schooled. We did so much groundwork that she could conduct from the piano with her head. Obviously, at concerts and competitions, she stood and conducted us. She used the very minimum of movement with her hands and eye. If she looked at you a certain way, you would shut up fast! She would say that herself.

Q. Describe a typical rehearsal.

G. For a start, you would arrive on time, and if you didn’t you had to have a good excuse. Really, there was no waste of time. Mrs. Barror arrived early. Everything would be ready and she sitting at the piano. You got a lovely welcome when you came in. She might kill you by the end of the night, but you got a lovely welcome when you arrived. She greeted everyone by name. It was down to business straight away. There were never boring times. She would ‘break the back of a piece’, as she described it, while still working on other repertoire. There were no lulls. She could gauge how long we could spend at a piece and she changed tactics. She ran us like Jack Charlton. It may be a silly comparison, but it was a team effort and we were team members. There were people who sang solos, but maybe two or three sang a line. There were no prima donnas ever. Obviously, some people stood out but it wasn’t her way. It was a team effort and nobody got any ideas that they were soloists. She changed people around. She thought like a trainer. You would be dead tired after a rehearsal, but you knew it was worthwhile. The secret in the early years was to keep variety and interest at rehearsal. Not more that two or three could read music at the start. We learned by repetition, which was difficult for Mrs. Barror. We became used to it. We were spoon-fed, but it worked.

Q. Did choice of music help to keep the interest?

G. Mrs. Barror tried to please us, if it was possible. With competitions, you did not have a choice. The music was set. For our own concerts, she tried to pick music we enjoyed singing, even if it was a challenge.

Q. Did she approach teaching a new piece in the same manner?
G. She played through the piece as we read the words. Then we did individual lines. Blend and diction and rhythm were emphasised. I don’t remember her saying things. They just happened. She worked gradually through the repertoire. We got it from her. We learned it her way. It was not what you expected in other choirs. We learnt it her way which was the correct way. We did not spend time correcting or re-learning. I cannot say that we did this or that. We learnt it on the way. She always played the piano herself.

Q. Did you take a break during rehearsals?

G. No. Mrs. B. felt that it broke the continuity of the rehearsal. I think it was wise. The rehearsal never went on for more that two hours; she was always thoughtful about people driving long distances.

Q. How did she prepare or motivate you for a competition?

G. At the final rehearsals, she always said to ‘Go out and enjoy yourselves. Look as if you are enjoying it’; she was keen always for us to appear to enjoy singing. Of course we had to look at her. We didn’t need to be reminded. We were so used to doing that. She was so enthusiastic herself that you got the feeling of enjoyment anyway.

Q. Musically what did she emphasise?

G. Blend, diction, interpretation. She was always fussy about us knowing what we were singing about.

Q. Was she strict?

G. She was strict. It was a much disciplined atmosphere but there were great laughs. She has a great sense of humour. She was so used to discipline in her own life. She taught a great many school choirs. You had to have discipline to be successful. She carried that into our choir, but she did lighten up with us.

Q. How would you describe her role as choir director?

G. She was like a mother. She was always genuinely concerned about ‘her girls’ as she called
us. She was very motherly, but that wouldn’t always show until you got to know her.

Q. To what would you attribute her success?

G. I know that our group was, and is, successful. However, she has taken groups of all abilities and brought them to success. I am not sure that I know what her secret is. She wants a group to do well. She loves music and the piano. She loves the piano so much that she cannot pass it. She wants everyone to enjoy it. Even with old people, she has a way. She does great work with old people in nursing homes. I don’t know what it is. She wants them all to sing.

As a conductor she has an all-seeing eye and all-hearing ear. She has everyone in her sight and ear. She can hear any note that is off, and she can work out where it is at and correct it without anyone feeling that they were to blame. She never isolates a person. You would already guess, or the person next to you would nudge you. Again, it was down to listening. We listened to each other and we never sang too loud. From a psychological point of view, nobody felt unimportant or left out with any group. She was always aware of everybody. Commitment and loyalty are important to her. It didn’t work if you could not give the commitment. The only awkward times were when she asked people to attend extra rehearsals and they weren’t available. They were the only tensions. I hated when I had to miss a rehearsal. I hated making the phone call. I loved it when Mr. Barror answered the phone and took the message.

Q. What events are memorable?

G. We always loved the Cork Choral Festival. We enjoyed Sligo. Going away was a great novelty. We had little time at rehearsal, and so it was great socially to get away. Mrs. Barror always organised things well, we stayed in lovely hotels and had lovely meals. I also enjoyed the Christmas concerts in the RDS and the NCH. I didn’t enjoy the recordings so much as they were more stressful.

Q. What has it meant to you to be a Lindsay Singer?

G. It was a way of life. It was very important because she was who she was, you wanted to please her. I don’t know what it was about her. She had some hold. That was her secret. I felt that she really cared about me. She was a very important part of our lives.
Q. She comes across to people as authoritative.

**G.** She has a dual personality. Choir was choir and serious stuff. Away from it, she was great company. She was great with men. My husband got to know her and she loved sport so much and loved talking sport. She is a big person in the nicest possible way.

**Dr Rhona Clarke, Member Lindsay Singers (November 2006)**

**Rhona Clarke** was born in Dublin. She studied music in UCD and continued her studies in composition with James Wilson and John Buckley and in Queen’s University, Belfast, where she was awarded a PhD degree. Her compositions have been performed in Ireland and abroad. Rhona sang with The Lindsay Singers for about eight years. She composed *Suaintraoi Gráinne* for the choir, for which they were awarded the Seán Ó Riada Trophy in 1984 at the Cork International Choral Festival. Rhona is a lecturer in music at St. Patrick’s College Drumcondra.

**Q.** At what age did you join The Lindsay Singers?

**R.** I joined in 1973. I was fifteen years old.

**Q.** How did you hear about the choir?

**R.** Mrs. Barror had come to teach at Maryfield and I was at school there. I was in second year when she came and we had been told by one of the nuns that we were going to have a new teacher who would stand for no nonsense, and I was thrilled because I was so interested in choral singing even at that age.

**Q.** Were you interested in singing at that stage?

**R.** Yes, I was interested from a very young age, and through work that she was doing with the class, putting on a production with excerpts from shows, she asked a couple of us to join the junior choir.

**Q.** Can you recall the first rehearsal you attended?
R. Yes, I can. She was immediately impressive and took command straight away. I can even remember the first song we learnt. It was *Come to the Fair*. I remember looking forward to next week already.

Q. How long were you a member of the Lindsays?

R. Pretty soon after that I was singing with the seniors while continuing to sing with the juniors. I know I left in 1981. I was finding it difficult to get to rehearsals. I was living in Tallaght, and I was teaching out that area as well. I returned subsequently, but I cannot remember for how long.

Q. What motivated you to stay with her?

R. I think the standard of the singing was always high. That was certainly one factor. There were always events. We were constantly working toward concerts and competitions. There was always something to work towards.

Q. Did choice of repertoire have an influence on why you stayed?

R. I certainly enjoyed that there was a choice of repertoire, though always had a preference for the more serious work, madrigals, and the new work. There was a piece by Verdi, *Lauda a La Virginae*. I really enjoyed the rich harmonies. I always loved singing in the second soprano, first alto lines because I was in the thick of the harmony.

Q. Did you perform with any other group?

R. Yes, I was a member of UCD choir while I was a student there. I sang with a chamber group called Gaudete. Later at Queen’s University with the Queen’s Choral Society and the chamber group, the Queen’s Consort.

Q. They were mixed?

R. Yes, they were mixed. The Choral Society performed standard choral works, the Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven masses were the main part of their repertoire. With the chamber groups, again it was a more intimate sound, with more variety, and quite a preference for older music,
16th century Palestrina, Purcell.

Q. Did you study an instrument?

R. Yes, I studied piano from the age of six and I was used to three-part choral singing from primary school.

Q. Can you describe a typical rehearsal with The Lindsay Singers? Did they follow the same format each week?

R. I think the rehearsals very much depended on what we were working towards. I would say that there was no single system or formula. Some rehearsals were learning rehearsals, learning new music and others were polishing. I would say that there was almost an equal amount put into the polishing as the learning, the finishing.

Q. Sometimes, when you are polishing it can be become, for want of a better word, tedious, unless there is an end in sight. How did E.B. maintain pace and interest at these rehearsals?

R. I remember somebody saying that the mark of a great conductor is the ability to create tension. I am trying to think of actual ways that she did this, but she could create this feeling of the importance of getting every little detail exactly right.

Q. What was her approach to punctuality and discipline?

R. You just had to be on time. There was no excuse really for being late and people were very seldom late. She certainly didn’t tolerate lateness or absences. I think that in any group, people mostly respect that. They don’t want their own time wasted. People are quite happy that someone in such a role doesn’t accept slap-dash behaviour.

Q. How did she relate to the choir?

R. I would say that she related to the choir as a group, but she also managed to relate individually to people as well, and that was part of the success.

Q. Yet she was able to maintain a distance?
R. Yes, the distance was there absolutely, and I think that that is essential in any authority figure that things never get too close. It’s a professional relationship and, at the same time, managing to relate individually and be friendly and personal.

Q. How does she motivate the choir before competitions?

R. With competition work, there was more focus on a couple of pieces, maybe two or three. There was finer detail there, compared to concert work where there would be a large body of music. I remember discussions about certain critics and things that were said previously, and I remember in competitions in Wales knowing who one of the adjudicators was and their preferences.

Q. So E.B. obviously did background research?

R. Yes, she knew the arena. Well, if we knew any such detail, obviously she knew a great deal more. There was a great sense of competition when we entered, and we would have known with whom we were competing in a lot of cases, especially in relation to Cork. We would have known many of the choirs from previous years, and we would have listened to them when we had the opportunity to be in the hall.

Q. Commitment and loyalty are important to Ethna Barror. Can you comment?

R. Yes. You certainly always did feel that sense of loyalty and commitment. I cannot remember instances, but I am sure that she would have verbalised the importance of that, and would have stressed to the choir that, in not showing up or pulling your weight as an individual, you are letting everyone else down.

Q. What particular qualities are necessary to maintain a choir for so long?

R. Stamina, and she had that in abundance mentally and physically, and of course, the desire to do it. To be able to maintain enthusiasm in yourself is wonderful.

Q. She is perceived as being a successful conductor/teacher. What do you think defines her success?
R. It is the quality of sound that she achieves. It is not just the music that is well sung. It is the timbral quality that she achieves from the choir, regardless of change of personnel.

Q. Would you have experienced that in Maryfield, that she was capable of getting a sound out of any group?

R. Absolutely. Now that’s not to say that that was the standard. But she had very little time. It would have been a group of sixty, two classes brought together for two forty-minute periods. Forty-minute periods are never forty minutes. It’s too short to do very much with, but considering what she had! We were also brought to Cork; that was my first experience of Cork with these two classes.

Q. Did your experience with The Lindsay Singers influence you as a musician/conductor/teacher?

R. Yes, definitely. It influenced me. In relation to my own piano playing, I would have tried to apply the same detailed polishing to my piano music and I had an introduction to contemporary choral music. We sang James Wilson, who subsequently became a good friend, Gerard Victory, but the most striking for me was Elizabeth Maconchy’s ‘Prayer before Birth’. I had been drafted into the senior choir to sing this for a competition in Teeside. My initial reaction was shock, but I subsequently grew to love the piece as I got to know it. It struck me as being a very powerful work.

Q. You wrote ‘Suantraoi Gráinne’ for The Lindsay Singers. You were familiar with their strengths. Does the piece reflect your view of The Lindsay Singers’ musical and technical capabilities?

R. I think, having sung work with The Lindsay Singers, it was bound to influence the work, because of course you know the parameters. I cannot think of anything very specific apart from knowing the pitch limitations. I cannot think of any other thing except the tone quality, maybe a desire to make that sound shine more than writing a piece that is rhythmic or based on extreme dynamics or anything like that.

Q. You referred to her sound on a couple of occasions. How did she achieve that sound?
R. I know that E.B did not like a fruity sound. I mean, a kind of sound that I think would be heavier in harmonics. She preferred what she called a thinner sound. I can say from working with electronics that it was definitely non vibrato, no vibrato, with fewer harmonic.

Q. You conduct choirs. Can you tell how she produced that sound?

R. I think it was through a high head rather than a chest sound. The kinds of voices that she liked in the choir were voices that were not too developed, especially in the upper register.

Q. Did the interpretation match what you had in mind?

R. I found it difficult to hear it at first because I was singing it. You hear differently when you are singing. It was only when I heard a recording of it that I heard it properly. Yes, it was the kind of sound I had in mind, and I was happy with the interpretation.

Q. Had you an input at the rehearsals?

R. I cannot remember. I remember feeling very responsible.

Q. What impact had the performance on you as a composer?

R. It actually won the Ó Riada award in Cork. I found it so encouraging. It was only the second piece that I had written, so it was hugely encouraging.

Q. You have experience of singing in choirs and conducting choirs. What is different about The Lindsay Singers?

R. Mrs. Barror’s personality, for a start. She is quite unique. She is not like anybody else. She is a very strong, well-defined personality, and with regard to choral rehearsing she has a very definite idea of what she wants to achieve. We spoke of stamina earlier. This energy that comes out is critical to what results. She is a great communicator and she is very imaginative in the way she can communicate. In very direct and simple terms, she tells the choir what she wants them to do.

Q. E.B. maintains that all of her knowledge is practical, based on trial and error and
experience. Can you comment?

R. If you think of any creative work, there has to be an element of trial and error. No matter how much theoretical knowledge you have, things are always different in practice, and one idea begets another, and so they develop. So her approach is a creative approach, rather than a purely theoretical approach. Not that there aren’t theories behind it, because I am sure that there are. That creative approach has great energy. It is something that is tried and tested and works forever.

Q. What events or memories are important to you?

R. There are several. Performances in Wales and visits to Cork, were always exciting. I always loved performing in Cork, and also singing at the seminar. It was a work by Gerard Victory.