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Rejuvenating France’s Choir School Tradition: An Interview with Mark Opstad Artistic Director of La Maîtrise de Toulouse

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Woven into the DNA of England’s choral identity are the traditions and contributions of its choir schools. These storied institutions—including Cambridge’s King College School, Oxford’s Christ Church Cathedral School, Cornwall’s Truro School, and St. George’s School at Windsor Castle—are often synonymous with our perception of the English choral tradition. Their curriculum have shaped generations of musicians—such as Christopher Tye, Henry Purcell, Herbert Howells, and David Wilcocks—and while they have responded to contemporary social and aesthetic issues, they have ensured the continuation of England’s cherished choral standing. The choir school tradition is by no means solely an English invention. Many countries have similar celebrated organizations: including the Thomasschule in Leipzig, the Vienna Boys’ Choir, and the Saint Thomas Choir School in New York. However, no country has carried on this musical training as faithfully as England.

When Mark Opstad, himself a product of England’s choir school tradition and Assistant Organist of Clare College at Cambridge University, accepted the Professor of Choral Music position at the Conservatoire in Toulouse, France, in 2006, he brought with him the English choral proclivities of his home country. It was only a matter of time before Opstad established the celebrated La Maîtrise de Toulouse—a choir school associated with the Toulouse conservatoire and partly based upon the English choir school model.

Since its founding, La Maîtrise de Toulouse has become one of France’s leading youth choral organizations. In addition to its robust music curriculum and training, La Maîtrise de Toulouse has garnered much praise for its musical sophistication and superb vocal tone. Accolades of their recordings appear in many noted publications: including *Diapason Magazine-France* (“Can a French Conservatoire Maîtrise compete with the English collegiate and cathedral choirs in the music of Fauré and Britten? The proof [is] yes…”), *La Dépêche du Midi* (“…the Maîtrise of the Toulouse Conservatoire signed a masterpiece.”), *American Record Guide* (“There’s probably nothing this choir couldn’t sing, and spectacularly well.”), and the *Choral Journal* (“Once again, La Maîtrise de Tou-
louse and Mark Opstad have demonstrated their superb musicianship and precision...”).

Given this French and English cross-pollination of choral traditions, music educators may be interested to learn of the environment Opstad created at the Maîtrise de Toulouse. What were the musical influences Opstad brought to France? What French choral traditions did Opstad adopt? Were there obstacles in bringing an English choir school tradition to France? How does this curriculum compare with similar choir schools?

The following interview was conducted on June 2, 2021, via Zoom, transcribed by Mrs. Alisa Millard, and edited by the author for publication. Through this dialogue, music educators gain insights into the workings of a successful international youth choral organization and learn of the methods Opstad employed in bringing a cherished choral tradition to a foreign audience.

**PORTER:** Who were your early musical influences—both as a young child and at Bristol Cathedral where you were a chorister?

**OPSTAD:** I grew up in a family where being a chorister was a tradition. My father was a chorister at Westminster Abbey and my uncle was a chorister at New College, Oxford. So, it was certainly something that was already present in my life from a very early age. I grew up just outside Bristol in the southwest of England, and that was obviously the nearest cathedral to where we lived. So, I was a chorister from the age of ten to fourteen. At that time, it was very different from what it is now...it was all boys and no girls in choir. Today there are two parallel choirs [for each gender]. And so, it was a very, very full workload. We sang about twenty hours a week. It was basically singing Evensong every day plus Eucharist on Sunday. Whereas today’s choruses, they share that workload between the boy’s and girl’s choirs. Straight from that very young age I was immersed in this huge choral tradition—English choral tradition—singing every day and, obviously, looking at the organ opposite me. That set off my huge desire to learn the organ as well. I loved being a chorister.

**PORTER:** Who were your primary influences or major teachers at Bristol Cathedral?

**OPSTAD:** During my first two years [at Bristol Cathedral], Malcom Archer was director, who would later become director at St Paul’s Cathedral. I didn’t see him again until I was about twenty, when I visited St. Paul’s. I saw him conducting for what must have been the first time since I had been a chorister, and suddenly I realized all I must have taken in subconsciously. The huge amount of my manner of conducting was just... I was watching him conduct in that same way. He was obviously a huge influence. But also, my uncle, Paul Spicer, is a leading British choral conductor. He’s obviously a conductor who had probably the biggest influence on me. At a young age, I remember going to London to sit in on recording sessions of his choir, the Finzi Singers; that was hugely influential as well.

**PORTER:** You were also an organ scholar at Balliol, a college at Oxford. Who were your musical influences/teachers there?

**OPSTAD:** So, as you might know, you have this system [at Oxford] where you’ve got both the choral foundations, where the organ scholar is sort of an assistant and plays solely the organ, and then the other colleges, as at Balliol, where the organ scholar has really a role of both directing and playing the organ. For me it was absolutely what I wanted to do, which was to be in front of a choir and not just sitting at the organ.

I had organ lessons with David Sanger, who sadly died. He was my main organ teacher throughout both Oxford and Cambridge. I also studied piano with Professor Raymond Fischer from the Royal College of Music. They were my main teachers. But without any doubt, the person who actually influenced me the most—while I never had a single lesson from him—was Edward Higginbottom at New College, Oxford. I think I would say that I probably learned at least 50% of everything I know just from watching him conduct and rehearse the choristers. I actually did a gap year as an assistant at New College School before I went to Oxford, and in that year, I chaperoned the choristers between the school and choir every day and went on
tour with them. I had a huge amount of time where I actually was just observing him. That was a huge influence on me.

**PORTER:** What ultimately brought you to France?

**OPSTAD:** From a very young age I was definitely a Francophile. My mum taught French and German, and we spent every summer in France. Both of my parents were absolutely besotted with French music, and still are. The music of Debussy, Ravel, Messiaen played in the house. I then became absolutely obsessed with Messiaen when I started to learn the organ. All that combined made me really want to go to France.

The other main reason is, obviously, when you are an English chorister, you are used to going to every cathedral and hearing these incredible choirs. Every summer we drove through Northern France and stopped off to visit these huge cathedrals—Avignon, Beauvais, Soissons, all of these incredible buildings—and for me at the age of ten, or twelve, or fifteen, it was just completely incomprehensible that none of them had any choirs in them. I think I could say that at that time, I told myself I’m going to go create a French choir school. Later, when I was at Oxford, I found out about a scholarship program where the French government funds about ten or twenty leading students to go to England, and the British government sends about ten or fifteen to France. I got one of these scholarships, so I was able to come to France as a student to study the organ. Immediately, I got involved in teaching in the choir school in Caen.

**PORTER:** You’re a product of the English choir school tradition. For our readers who are not familiar with either the system, the tone quality, or the repertoire associated with it, how would you describe it?

**OPSTAD:** I would describe it as unique in a “world” sense. Obviously, in America, you’re much closer to it than France, even though you’re much further away [geographically]. In France this tradition is still virtually unknown.

What is it? Well, because there are so many services to sing for, it means that the choirs have to be fast in their learning to get through such a huge amount of music. It creates choirs that are just incredibly fast at functioning, learning music, and that creates this sort of huge dynamic. It also means that the level and the standard is extraordinarily high. I think it all comes down to that, really; singing every single day is fundamental.

How would I characterize it? In some ways, it’s quite conservative. Generally, I wouldn’t say there’s much innovation in the repertoire as there is in, perhaps, France. It’s obviously changed hugely in the last twenty years. When I was a chorister thirty years ago there were only boy choristers in the whole country, there were no girls at all. And now, nearly everywhere there is a parallel girls’ choir.

**PORTER:** We know there were several high-quality choir schools in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. You alluded that this tradition is not as active as it is in England. Why was there a decline?

**OPSTAD:** In France, it’s very simple. It all collapsed overnight with the French Revolution. Until then, there were choir schools in every major cathedral and every major church. There were probably more choir schools in France than there were in England. They were the place where all musical education happened. There were no conservatoires like we have today. Choir schools were absolutely fundamental. For example, here in Toulouse, there were at least three. The interesting thing is that we have the music composed for these choir schools, and some of the pieces (which are featured on our CD *Motets français pour voix aiguës*) when you look at the complexity of the writing you realize the choirs must have been absolutely amazing to be able to sing it. So, they did have a really fantastic tradition. But this literally closed down overnight as the church had all its belongings confiscated by the state—including the choir, the musicians, the buildings where they rehearsed, the music that they sang.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some cathedrals did get choirs going again, but they were never
proper choir school structures like in England, where children received a full education and musical training at the same time. It was in the 1980s when the French government acknowledged what had happened and decided to encourage the recreation of choir schools. However, most of them are outside the church and, like mine, are based in a conservatoire and run by the state, as opposed to being in the cathedral.

PORTER: Was it a challenge for you to bring this idea of a choir school to France? You mentioned that in the 1980s there was a revival, but you were coming from an English choir school tradition. How different were the traditions, and was this difficult to implement?

OPSTAD: That’s an extremely interesting question. I thought it was going to be very easy at first. After two years being the assistant at Caen Cathedral, I was looking for somewhere to move on to. I actually wrote to all the major cities in France which didn’t have choir schools and presented the project of creating a choir school. It was the director of the conservatoire of Toulouse who responded and said, “This is an incredible idea, you must come and do this here.” I was basically given the job to create it. However, he didn’t tell me he was retiring.

So, I arrived in Toulouse, and his successor just did not understand at all what I was trying to do. The first three or four or five years were extremely hard, and I thought this just isn’t going to work. But at the same time, I couldn’t accept defeat. So, I kept pushing and pushing and eventually got it off the ground. Finally, when I was able to show them what I was talking about—when I got the structure in place where the children were singing every day—then from that point on it was just lift-off! When that director moved on a few years later, and a new director came who was an organist (organists always understand choir better), I was given basically all the means I needed to do what I wanted. I was able to prove what we were capable of doing.

Just when we thought things were really firing on all four cylinders, and just as we celebrated our tenth anniversary, suddenly the local education authority tried to close us down, accusing us of being “elite.” They couldn’t stand the fact that these children were doing something so extraordinary. It wasn’t the same for all of the children so it couldn’t be possible. And that involved a huge fight: including a petition with 6,000 [people in support of us], and influential people talking on the radio, and recruiting former government ministers to fight for our cause. We did actually manage to overturn that. So, to answer your question, it’s often been a huge challenge.

PORTER: So, factions of the community thought you were accomplishing too much? Or that the quality was too high?

OPSTAD: Yes, basically. The problem [in Toulouse] is that you have all these different parts of government [involved]. For example, the mayor of Toulouse is always supportive of our work. Yet, as we have a specific secondary school attached to the conservatoire wherein our choristers attend, we have a partnership with the local education authority; they have adapted [class schedules which] allow choristers to spend part of their day in the conservatoire and part of their day in school (this is actually vital to the functioning of our system). This is what the local education authority didn’t understand, because they saw it as “elite.” They were trying to say that we were only taking middle-class people and did not have enough social outreach; which is completely wrong because our primary school is out in the suburbs [of Toulouse] and allows us to bring in a lot of pupils who don’t come from privileged backgrounds. It was basically this fact that won our case—they didn’t actually have any idea who we were even. It’s the usual thing of not being, uh...is it an English expression?... It’s a French expression... “Nobody’s a prophet in their own land”...or something.... there you go. We were getting all this wonderful recognition from people like you, abroad, in England, and far away...and in our own town, these people had never even been to a single concert and were trying to close us down.

PORTER: Can you tell me about the structure of La Maîtrise de Toulouse?
OPSTAD: We have what we call the pre-Maîtrise, which are pupils in primary school who are seven to eleven years of age, and they sing two or three or four times a week. In England, these are what we call probations. The “real” Maîtrise starts at secondary school age; that’s when the choristers are selected. They have their timetables adapted so they can spend a substantial amount of time in the conservatoire rehearsing nearly every day. We have twenty-six secondary age choristers—that’s twelve to fifteen years old, boys and girls—and we really try to keep the mix as equal as possible. They’re really the heart of the Maîtrise.

When the boys get to around fifteen years old their voices usually break. The girls are allowed to continue in their high school years. The boys go into a group specifically for those whose voices changed, so they have a period where we’re dealing with their voice change.

And then there’s the lower voices of the Maîtrise—our tenors and the basses—who are made up of singing pupils from the conservatoire; old ex-choristers whose voices have developed. In addition, we usually have about two or three professionals reinforcing them. And when you put all of them together that makes the full choir about fifty-five.

PORTER: What else is covered in the Maîtrise’s music curriculum?

OPSTAD: In France—and this is a very big difference with England—there is a huge amount of attention on what used to be called Solfége, but now they call it Formation musicale. My choristers do somewhere between an hour-and-a-half to two hours a week with this; which is a huge amount, more than I ever did in England. Basically, [in England] we never really had set theory lessons. In France, it’s really a separate discipline, and I think that’s incredibly useful for my choir. It means that the choristers are really good readers and they are able to tackle complex music.

In addition to music theory, they all study an instru-
ment. Some of them will do a full instrumental course at the conservatoire on a chosen instrument. Any choristers who don’t do that will take “complimentary piano,” which is the basics of piano playing and harmony. Then some of the students—the ones who start to realize it’s music that they want to pursue—will go on and do other things like conducting classes, analysis, or whatever. The instrumentalists will also play in the conservatoire orchestras. All of the students will also learn about music history, as well, in their [regular] school. It’s a very full education.

PORTER: Do your students pursue any other activities outside of music or are they just primarily focused on singing?

OPSTAD: Oh no... it’s not like in England where, when I was a chorister, I literally had absolutely no free time. The beauty of this system is that a lot happens within the school day. They still have quite a lot of free time and many of them do sports. For example, we have the European Taekwondo champion amongst our choristers, just to give you an idea. Some of them are also dancers. There is definitely time for other hobbies.

PORTER: Is there much of a difference between what you’ve created at the Maîtresse compared to what you’re seeing in English choir schools today? Is your model a new or a hybrid creation?

OPSTAD: I haven’t modeled it 100% on England. I would say the difference is that in England it’s still very elite, in many senses. Nearly all their choir schools are attached to private schools. [La Maîtresse de Toulouse] is within [France’s] state system, so there is a huge amount of outreach and social mixing, which is really great.

Also, I would say that because we are not singing Evensong or Eucharist or whatever, our repertoire is far more adventurous. That kind of repertoire [is not sung] by an English cathedral choir. We are able to work and spend a huge amount of time on languages—getting to learn how to sing in Hungarian, or Russian, for example—whereas an English Cathedral choir would never do that, and never have the time to do so.

PORTER: What have you found to be very successful methods in recruiting for the Maîtresse?

OPSTAD: Recruitment is actually surprisingly hard because it’s not part of the [French] culture to sing. Whereas...in England everybody sang in schools. Here, it’s still not even compulsory in schools. So, the most important thing is to have the pre-Maîtresse in place so that we will be able to train up the people to enter the Maîtresse. But also, I think the fact that we’ve become better known, and we now have quite a big profile, has helped hugely in getting people interested. I also think that, as well as getting a first-class music education, the fact that they are getting this full education with everything together—the school and the music together—that’s very attractive to parents.

PORTER: Can you tell me about the financial structure of the Maîtresse? Do you have government assistance or do students pay most of the tuition?

OPSTAD: Students pay practically nothing. That’s the incredible thing about France. It’s not like England or the States. It’s really state funded. From the educational side, basically all our funding is within the conservatoire. For example [scores, materials, my salary, and other expenses], that’s all within the conservatoire, which is [funded by] the state. We then have an association for the Maîtresse, which basically covers everything else. If we are going to record a CD, the association will fund the CD. It also funds the professional voices that we [hire, or] travel if we go somewhere. The association basically takes over everything that’s not included in the state [funding].

PORTER: Is the association run by volunteers or is that a government-run organization?

OPSTAD: Volunteers. It’s a mixture of parents, ex-parents, and ex-choristers now.

PORTER: That’s great to keep former choristers involved.
OPSTAD: It is. I’ve always been slightly wary to get too many of the present parents involved. If ever there was some kind of problem, you could end up with a power struggle.

PORTER: How are your rehearsals structured?

OPSTAD: There’s basically two parts of the choir that rehearse separately. The choristers—the upper voices—rehearse separately every day within their school day. The lower voices rehearse separately twice a week. We put them together every Friday evening in the run up to concerts. Generally it’s all done [during] their lesson time. It also depends on their repertoire—how long it takes to learn one program—or we may be working on several programs at the same time.

PORTER: Is it a competitive process to become a probationer or chorister?

OPSTAD: To become a probationer, it’s not particularly difficult. [However], they don’t have automatic entry as a chorister. In a normal year there would be about twenty-five candidates for seven chorister spots. That’s quite competitive. Most of the candidates who will be [selected] have already been through some part of the conservatoire and had some music experience.

I’d say one more thing about recruitment, is that probably like everywhere in the world, it’s still a struggle to find good young tenors and basses, and that’s a continual headache. It’s something that stops me sleeping, because you’re always [planning] big projects for the following year and [don’t know] who you’re going to have singing. That’s quite hard.

PORTER: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Maitrise’s day-to-day operations? Has it hindered participation or altered your curriculum?

OPSTAD: It’s been completely a nightmare and I’m sure it’s been the same for everybody. We tried out the virtual choirs as you’ll see on our YouTube channel. Then we got into this ridiculous situation where we had many different directives and rules—where parts of the choir were allowed to sing and where others weren’t. Some parts of the choir, the younger ones, had to be distanced by one half meters while others by two meters… At one point I had forty-three out of the fifty who were allowed to sing, but seven who weren’t because they were over eighteen. Then we spent the whole of last year with one and a half meters distance between each chorister, and now [in June 2021] suddenly, just as things were getting better, they’ve changed it to two meters. We are about to give our first live concert since February 2020, and [due to distancing regulations] the choir will take up half of the church. Obviously, the distance from one end of the choir to the other is so huge that it’s going to be a real challenge.

PORTER: Have there been guidelines on the duration of rehearsals or performances?

OPSTAD: Not duration, no. The guidelines are mainly with [mask singing] and distance.

PORTER: Have you seen any decrease in participation with the Maîtrise because of COVID-19 restrictions?

OPSTAD: We did see a considerable drop in candidates [for the Maîtrise] in 2021. Nearly 50% fewer.

PORTER: You mentioned earlier when voices changed with your male singers, and it reminded me of a 2013 New York Times article about
the St. Thomas Boys’ Choir in Leipzig. This article stated that their chorister’s voices were changing at a younger age—earlier than just a few decades ago.

OPSTAD: It’s a fact that the voice change in boys is occurring earlier. Within the time that I’ve been working I haven’t seen the difference. But what I would say is that I’ve learned a huge amount about voice change through my experiences of the last fifteen years. When I started, I didn’t really know how to deal with a voice change. I’ve realized that each case is completely different, and you just have to treat each case differently; with intelligence, react to exactly what you see. It’s psychological as well; it’s preparing the boys for this traumatic moment.

Another thing I do is encourage them to keep singing in their head voice, to try and see if it will turn into a male alto voice. I think this is another thing lacking in France compared to England. It’s still not cultural to have countertenors in France...whereas in England every choir will have male altos.

PORTER: That’s interesting because I have always wanted to program one of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s Grand Motets, but then I realize that I don’t know anyone who could sing the haute-contre line! There must have been a time in France’s musical history where this practice of male altos/countertenors was accepted.

OPSTAD: For me, there’s a real distinction between singing alto when we are singing twentieth-century repertoire, which will go very high...a full, real alto voice.
Haute-contre, however, is really specific to French repertoire and it’s neither alto or tenor; it’s sort of somewhere between the two and it’s often a question of mixing the voice. And even the leading baroque choirs... don’t seem to have many people with that kind of voice character.

[One of our recent projects on the French Baroque] needed haute-contre in it. Looking at the tessitura I thought, “How are we going to do this? It goes right up to a top A and right down to a bottom F.” [To accomplish this], I ended up mixing high tenors and altos, and it created a perfect solution.

PORTER: Now that we are seeing the other side of the pandemic, what are your future plans with the Maîtrise?

OPSTAD: Well, we have a full concert season planned for next year and I’m just praying it’ll be back to normal. We’re going to be doing a concert in Versailles in the Chapelle Royale in April 2022, so that will be our first away concert. The main project is trying to get back into recording CDs. I have to say that recording CDs, for me, is one of the key parts of the choir’s life, and it really energizes the choir.

PORTER: It’s a tangible thing that they can really be proud of.

OPSTAD: But it’s also just the whole [experience of] preparing it and spending two days with the whole choir shoved in a church...it really brings out the best level of the choir.

PORTER: Finally, do you have any guidelines/tips/models that you could share from the English choral tradition that could be instituted in the American choral education structure?

OPSTAD: For tips and models, well that is a vast subject! You ask specifically about the English tradition—and obviously that is mainly cathedral and collegiate based choir schools—but in the US there are some cathedral choirs and, most notably, the choir school of St Thomas, New York. I don’t know enough about the situation locally, but I wonder why the St Thomas model hasn’t been imitated more widely in the US. There is surely potential for so many more cathedral choir models including girls’ choirs. But I would also suggest that if there is something to take away from my work in France, it is that this choir school model can also be transposed from the liturgical and sacred world into the secular world—conservatoires and music schools—and that there is a huge potential for building up this kind of musical education, which has such huge benefits for children: the musical ones are obvious, but the other transversal benefits are huge (discipline, concentration, search for perfection, team work to name a few).

NOTES


3 Haute-contre is a French Baroque vocal line for males with a very challenging range and tessitura, usually from C3 to D5.