Decline in Choral Mandate in Bonny Archdeaconry: Problem Identification and Strategies towards Improved Performance

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Abstract

Singing is a desirable art by many humans. It comes in divers' forms such as solo, duet, trio, quartet or chorus; it could also be instrumental. When singing involves a trained (formal or informal) group of persons, it is referred to as a chorale, chorus or choir. Mandate is an authorisation that someone has to execute an action. In Bonny Archdeaconry, there seems to be a total decline in choral mandate; hence, this study seeks to identify the reasons for the decline within the Bonny Archdeaconry, Diocese of Niger Delta, Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) and to instill some corrective measures that will rehabilitate the choral mandate using Ivan Pavlov's Classical Conditioning Theory. The study used direct observation and interviews to gather data. Findings revealed that choirs in the Bonny Archdeaconry lost their choral mandate due to inability of the leadership in upholding norms and values and concluded that every chorale has two statutory officers namely, choirmaster and organist whose functions and activities can either make or mare the choir; this implies that if these two personalities do not work in tandem, there is little or nothing that could be done to salvage the choir. It recommended that in a bid to avoid decline in choral mandate in the area of this study, every Church should do well to employ or appoint a choirmaster and organist for the choir because these two officers have different responsibilities which should not be taken for granted.

Keywords: Decline, Choral Mandate, Bonny Archdeaconry, Strategies, Performance.

Introduction

Singing is an art that is loved and cherished by many people irrespective of age and gender. Despite its appreciation by many, not everyone will be involved in the art due to innumerable interests, talent and time. Persons who come together for the purpose of singing are referred to as choristers or choral members. When the choristers or choral members gather as a team or group to perform, it is referred to as chorale, chorus or choir. It could also mean a group of singers giving public performance, a choral society, an assemblage of singers leading singing in a church, a part of a cathedral and monastery. This is further highlighted by Daugherty (1999) stating that:

> A chorale or chorus is a musical ensemble of singers. Choral music, in turn, is the music written specifically for such an ensemble to perform. A body of singers who perform together as a group is called a choir or chorus. The former term is very often applied to groups affiliated with a church (whether or not they actually occupy the choir stall) and the second to groups that perform in theatres or concert halls, but this distinction is far from rigid. The term "Choir" has the secondary definition of a subset of an ensemble; thus one speaks of the "woodwind choir" of an orchestra, or different "choirs" of voices and/or instruments in a poly-choral composition. In typical 18th to 21st century oratorios and masses, chorus or choir is usually understood to imply more than one singer per part, in contrast to the quartet of soloists also featured in these works (p. 224).

Obuoforibo in Nelson (2005) sees a choir as "a sacred group of people with Godly disposition, who sing to God's glory" (p. 18). Having looked at the various perspectives of the scholars above, a chorale or choir could be seen as an organised group of singers, singers and instrumentalist or instrumentalist for different performance purposes.

In the Anglican Church, the primary roles of the chorale includes: leading and stimulating the congregation in songs, singing to glorify God and to edify the congregation, making a broader repertoire available for a worship service, adding creative artistry and beauty to a worship service, etc. These roles have been a tradition right from the era of the colonial masters. However, these roles have become a thing of great concern that within the last twenty years, choirs in Bonny Archdeaconry, Diocese of Niger Delta, Anglican Communion seem to have lost her choral mandate which has resulted in: the choir not being able to lead the church in praise and worship anymore, power tussle amongst statutory officials of the choir, and the choir being known for indiscipline.

Statement of Objectives

This study intends to find out the causes to the seeming decline in choral mandate with the aim of proffering solutions to possible revitalisation of the chorales.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is the Classical Conditioning Theory of learning by Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849 - 1936). According to Rathus (2008) "Classical Conditioning is a simple form of learning in which an organism comes to associate or anticipate events. A neutral stimulus comes to evoke the response usually evoked by another stimulus by being paired repeatedly with the other stimulus" (p. 234). Peretomode in Uzoeshi and Iwundu (2014) defines Classical Conditioning as "a simple form of learning in which an originally neutral stimulus comes to bring forth the response usually brought forth by another stimulus" (p. 36). To Uzoeshi and Iwundu (2014), classical conditioning can also be referred to as Respondent Conditioning or Stimulus Response Association without reinforcement (p. 9). Atkinson, Atkinson and Hilgard in Uzoeshi and Iwundu (2014) declare that in classical conditioning, an organism learns that two stimuli tend to go together. For example, Car (one stimulus) is associated with Fuel (another stimulus) (p. 36).

In the words of Charles (2007), the theory talks about salivation in dog in response to being fed. Pavlov discovered that there are certain objects or events which his dog associates with food. For example, the sound of a clanged food tray by a laboratory assistant. His dog either hears the sound of a clanged food tray or sees

the laboratory assistant before being presented with food; therefore, the presence of the laboratory assistant and, or the sound of the clanged food tray would trigger his dog's salivation which is a significant scientific discovery. Pavlov, in his experiments, trained dogs to salivate when he sounded a tone. Pavlov termed these trained salivary responses "conditional reflexes." They were conditional upon the repeated pairing of a previous neutral stimulus (such as the clanging of a food tray) and a stimulus (in this case, food) that evoked the target response (in this case, salivation). Conditional reflexes are generally referred to as conditioned responses (Rathus, 2008, p. 234). While Pavlov used his dog, tone and laboratory attendant, this study is using the choir/choirmaster and a trophy.

In the area of this study, when choirs are mobilised for the purpose of a choral contest and, a trophy or cash award being exhibited for a winning choir, the trophy and cash award (stimulants) become the energizing or motivating force and all choirs tend to put in their best to ensure that they take hold of the first position as to be issued the trophy and cash award. This implies that if a choir/chorale or a choirmaster has a propelling force (stimulant), a resounding performance will be achieved. In another instance, a subordinate to the choirmaster, for example, the organist, receives higher stipends than the choirmaster. In principle, the organist becomes the head of the choir and it affects the choir's functionality and productivity and the choirmaster negatively. Also, a situation in which a layman is appointed as the chairman of the choir is like having a choirmaster without corresponding authority. According to the Classical Conditioning Theory, living things respond negatively or positively to stimuli. Therefore to get a good output/performance out of a chorale/choir, the choirmaster needs positive stimulation and motivation.

Methodology

Direct observation and interview were used to gather data in this study. Four persons (one choirmaster, organist, chorister, and clergy) from four Churches, that is, a total number of twelve persons in the Archdeaconry were chosen to participate in the study. The Churches are: St. Cyprian's (Ang.) Church Hospital Road, Port Harcourt, St. Andrew's (Ang.) Church Mile One Diobu, Port Harcourt, St. Peter's (Ang.) Church Hospital Road, Port Harcourt, and St. John's (Ang.) Church Bishop Johnson Street, Port Harcourt.

Discussion of Findings

Findings revealed that the relationship between the choirmasters, organists, and choristers in most of the Churches is above average but, the case is different in some churches, there is no cordial relationship between the choirmasters, organists, and choristers. There is power tussle between the choirmasters and organists. This tussle is seriously impacting negatively on the choirs. The churches that operate with a choirmaster as the organist are relatively peaceful since the problem of power tussle has not manifested in them but, there is the problem of searching for organists to accompany the choirs while the choirmaster conducts the choirs during choir ministration in the Church services or during special events and seasons.

In some of the Churches, the leadership of the Church appointed some persons choirmasters based on their interest in the choir. In some other places, a good voice was used to determine who the choirmaster would be while in others, experienced singers were interviewed and the best chosen and employed as choirmaster. Some choirs infrequently have public performances because the choristers tax themselves to put up such events even when the events are liturgical Church events. This has affected the cordiality that should exist between the choir and the Church authority.

The study also found out that in some of the churches (in the past), the choirs were headed by laymen (choristers) in the name of choir chairmen. The choirs collapsed in terms of choral mandate and numerically. The position of the chairmen were therefore reviewed, chairmanship position abolished and, choirmasters became heads of the choirs. Despite all said and done, it was observed that participating in divine worship as a chorister is a sacred responsibility which should not to be taken lightly or for granted. Choristers like other Church musicians, offer their God-given talents to the faith for a variety of reasons which include: stewardship (giving of their time and talents). Some others do it for the purpose of enjoyment and, to be in the forefront of the Church (better visibility) while to some others, it's a social outlet.

The choir leads the laity in responding to the liturgical dialogue as led by the priest. This act, places a sacred responsibility on them during religious activities.

They are said to be knowledgeable not only of the hymns and liturgical responses, but also about the correct order of all services. The choir is charged with the responsibility of participating in all services. Notwithstanding the importance attached to the choir, the principal and statutory officials are choirmasters and organists, and to a large extent, these personalities determine the strengths and weaknesses of any choir. A basic challenge between these personalities in Bonny Archdeaconry is their overlapping function especially, in the Churches where the choirmaster has little or no idea of how to play the organ, sight read musical score, and limited knowledge of interpreting musical signs. This situation paves way for the organist standing in the gap and in view of standing in the gap, occasionally usurps the choirmaster's position which has never ended well.

Some of the Churches see the organist's role as professional while the choirmaster's role is seen as voluntary. The Church goes further to implement this in the remunerations of these two statutory officers, thereby, making the choirmaster lower than the organist which is an abnormality. Further, the study also observed that the choirmaster as the name implies, is the boss and head of the choir while the organist is a part of the choir. Again, most choirmasters do not see improving their capability and potential as a priority; this attitude stagnates them while the organists improve daily as they (organists) intensively practice/rehearse to meet up with the contemporary demands of the choir and Church music. In this scenario, the Church and choir see the organist improving while the choirmaster is seen and believed to be stagnant and not making any progress. The belief that the choirmaster is stagnant to a large extent relegates the position of the choirmaster as the head of the choir to the background.

The inability of the choirmaster to take charge and control of the choir is another critical challenge. The choirmaster by virtue of his position should be able to organise the choir to achieve the aims and objectives. The ability of the choirmaster to organise the choir cuts across all the choir's aspects including administration and rehearsals. Rehearsal is a concept used to connote practicing an item before putting it up for an audience.

To strengthen the concept of rehearsal, Nwankpa (2013) described rehearsal as:

> A training exercise or a time spent practicing something, a piece of music or dramatic play, in preparation for a public presentation, outing or performance. It is a learning process of carrying out something, or a method of preparation with a view to achieving a purpose or goal (p. 180).

It is of necessity that before deciding on a rehearsal day and time, some researches should be made to find out when most of those who might be interested in singing can attend and when a venue for the rehearsal is available. Once an appropriate time and days are determined, then as a choirmaster, you will have to stick to it. It is also worthy of note that, some choristers may be lost at first, but in the long run the choir will benefit from a regular time and days of rehearsal.

Poorly organised or porous rehearsal is another challenge. One of the functions of a choir in the Church is to lead worshipers/congregation in praise and worship. But most choristers do not consider this, rather they look at the content and value of the rehearsals. As a result, it is critical that the choirmaster ensures that the rehearsals are rich, encouraging and interesting. Music selection is a two sided affair in a choir. It is the most inventive and gratifying element of leading a choir and at the same time, most challenging because, it is important to know the strength (numerical and vocal) of your choir, continue testing and developing the strength of choir with a range of repertoire. Overloading the choir with too much difficult musical compositions can be as demoralising as singing the simplest hymn arrangements week after week.

Finally, it was also observed that in some circumstances the choir is being sabotaged by the choristers. At the incipient stage, choristers display high level of commitment by being regular and punctual to and at rehearsals and as the date for a performance draws closer, they begin to drop out for no justifiable reasons. Practicing a system of inequality within the choir was also observed and it has eaten deep into the system to a point that choristers do not have confidence in some choirmasters.

Conclusion

From the findings of the study, the conclusion is drawn thus: in addition to appointed or elected officers, every chorale has two statutory officers namely choirmaster and organist. The functions and activities of these officers can either make or mare the choir and, it implies that if these two personalities do not work as a team, there is little or nothing that could be done to salvage the choir**.** Some of the churches see the organist's role as professional while the choirmaster's role is not. This attitude influences the performance of the choirmaster negatively. Most choirmasters do not see improving their capability and potential as a priority and, this attitude stagnates their growth bringing about a decline in choral mandate**.** Most choirmasters lack the ability of taking charge and control of the choir especially, when it has to do with discipline.

Recommendation

The study recommends that in a bid to avoid decline in choral mandate in the area of this study, every Church should do their best to employ or appoint a choirmaster and organist for the choir because these two officers have different responsibilities which should not be taken for granted.

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