"So, They Aren't Always this Angelic?" An Ethnographic Study on Being and Becoming an All Saints Choirboy

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This article was developed from the prize-winning paper of the 2010 Hewitt Pantaleoni Prize for outstanding student paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology (MACSEM).

Introduction

In the winter of 2008, a poster hung on the wall outside the sanctuary at All Saints Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. In bold font with the tone of an advertisement, it read: “Raise a Renaissance Boy in the Modern World.” A close-up photo showed the face of a young choirboy—an anonymous blond any-child with his mouth open in silent song. He seemed to sing of the eternal child who resists modernity to recapture the pure human essence idealized in modern imaginings of the Renaissance. He seemed to sing of High Church and High Art, wedded, as they once were when the great artists and composers of Western culture roamed the earth.1

In this essay, I offer an ethnographic study of the choir advertised in the poster, the All Saints Choir of Men and Boys. The story is one of social formation and ritual transformation in the musical-liturgical context of an Episcopal church community. Led by their choirmaster, who becomes the primary character in my narrative, boys learn the choirboy *habitus*, taking on a series of dispositions that allow them to enact a social, musical, and religious way of being.

I focus on the experiences that were most revealing, following in chronological order four vignettes that place my own observations in dialogue with the knowledge and perspectives communicated to me by members of the ensemble. In this way, my methods are grounded in the active interpersonal dialogues of performance ethnography. As described by Kisliuk, this approach integrates positioned and participatory field research, detailed and empathetic description and analysis, and rich narratives that develop understandings of human experience and socio-aesthetic cultural meaning in and through musical performance. This brings to the fore and makes explicit the interpersonal moments that lead to understanding and shape interpretations (2001:12).2

I approach this as a study of ritual transformation and the authoritative language of worship. I frame the choirboy ethos as one that is built on social models, behavioral expectations, and disciplined learning. In so doing, I draw on Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and the performance of authoritative language in liturgy. In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu describes habitus as the “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” that “enable agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (1990:53). These dispositions are generated by history, collective experience, and communal behavioral and social consciousness. The habitus sets up parameters for behavior: what to do or not to do, what sorts of actions are possible, which of those actions are acceptable. For Bourdieu, the habitus is unconscious, “a product of history” that “produces individual and collective practices . . . in accordance with schemes generated by history” (54). This history becomes an embodied collective consciousness, one that is “internalized as a second nature” (56). This is particularly meaningful in ritual contexts where symbolic stimulations can function only when participants are conditioned to receive them (76). This is central to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power and authoritative language in liturgy (1991), a concept to which I return at the end of this essay.

The Choir of Men and Boys: History and Historical Consciousness

Positioning choirboys at the center of the religious and musical life of the community is one way in which All Saints parishioners create and perform their historical and religious consciousness, placing themselves within socio-religious narratives that place a high premium on boys’ choirs as the most authentic, appropriate, and traditional form of Anglican worship.3 The All Saints Choir of Men and Boys—hereafter called the choir—provides music weekly for the Sunday service and performs concerts locally, nationally, and internationally throughout the year. Their repertoire is primarily Western classical choral music with particular emphasis on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British composers who wrote extensively for male-voice liturgical choirs: Tallis, Purcell, Gibbons, Byrd, Tomkins, and Weelkes, for example.

The choir was founded in 1899 at a time when the number of male-voice liturgical choirs increased notably in the United States. This growth, beginning in the Episcopal church during the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing through the beginning of the twentieth, was called the “boy choir movement” and followed in the path of liturgical reforms that radically changed worship in the Church of England during the Victorian period.[4] Part of a large-scale choral revival that began in the early nineteenth century, the revival of male-voice choirs,[5] surpliced and leading the congregation in psalms and hymns from choir stalls on either side of the chancel, became part of a new kind of worship that reimagined and reclaimed Anglican traditions (Luff 1973:1055).[6] According to Rainbow’s study of the nineteenth-century choral revival, the male-voice choir is now accepted as a “distinctive traditional feature of Anglican parochial worship” even though it was unknown in England outside of the cathedrals prior to the early nineteenth century (1970:3). In addition, the choirs became a primary marker of High Church Anglicanism often associated with the Oxford Movement and its supporters’ desire to introduce elements of Roman Catholic ritual and theology to Anglican worship.[7]

All Saints is this kind of High Church Episcopal community—formal, conservative, and positioned as strictly traditional. The choir supports and reflects this ethos. I first encountered the choir through my husband, who was an All Saints choirboy when he was young. In the winter of 2007, we visited for the annual Christmas Lessons and Carols performance. Having never seen or heard a boys’ choir live, I was struck by the experience. This formal, highly trained, surpliced choir, singing in the chancel of a vast stone church resonated with the issues I was grappling with in my work as an ethnomusicologist: musical-liturgical performance, American religious culture, and children’s musical experiences as socio-behavioral formation.

The choir offered an unexpected opportunity for field research in my own backyard and, almost as soon as my husband introduced me to Andy Koebler, the long-time choirmaster, we recognized our shared interests and began making plans for my visits. In what follows, I describe four of those visits. The first is a Sunday service where my experience of the “rules of worship” caused me to consider the careful choreography of ritual and the hazard that children can pose, unless the children are choirboys. The second is an interview with Andy, in which we discussed his understanding of the social and musical processes that make boys into choirboys. The third is a recruitment event and rehearsal in which I observed these processes at work and began to understand how the choirboy habitus is collectively learned and applied. The fourth is the Easter Service, through which I examine the transformation from boy to choirboy using Bourdieu’s theory of authoritative language in liturgy.

All Saints Sunday Service, February 3, 2008

Pews are not comfortable. I understand this as part of their *raison d’être*. The pews in the sanctuary of All Saints Episcopal Church seemed to be more awkward than most on the Sunday morning of my first field research visit. I had never been to an Episcopal service before, but somehow all I could think about as I took my seat was the sharp forty-five degree angle that was forcing me to sit perfectly upright.

As I sat in this uncomfortable position waiting for the service to start, I considered the ways in which many Western Christian traditions, particularly those of a High Church persuasion, place great emphasis on the rules of ritual, the commandments of worship that prevent grave errors or unsanctioned actions. Blending in with the cultural insiders in the congregation marks a participant as a meaningful part of the context that makes the ritual effective. As Bell suggests in summarizing Geertz, if “culture is the set of meaningful terms for interpretation and guidance” and the social system is the form in which this takes place, then an effective ritual depends upon informed participants who know the rules of the cultural and social game (1992:33).

The rules for worship set forth the terms of participation: the appropriate times to stand, sit, and kneel, when to respond aloud, what to say, when and how to sing, who are the leaders, who are the followers. There are also more subtle, often unwritten regulations that create the appropriate environment and bring the worshiping bodies into alignment: do not slouch, do not rest your backside on the pew while kneeling, do not slam the kneeler against the floor, do not fidget, and so on. It is a choreographed articulation of membership in a religious community, built on the systems of belief and standards of behavior that govern that community. It is an articulation of the local socio-religious habitus.

Children can create hazards for effective ritual in this formal High Church context. These under-initiated beings move in and out of the accepted models, perhaps getting some of the choreography of worship right, yet violating the written and unwritten rules from time to time. As I waited for the service to begin, people all around me took their seats. To my left, I heard a group of three children whisper as their family looked for a pew. They whispered in a way particular to children, such that the whisper was louder than a normal speaking voice. An airy shout: “MOM!

Should we sit here?" These same children became antsy, bored, and increasingly noisy as the service progressed. The older brother pinched his sister during a silent prayer, trying to evoke a reaction. The sister, perturbed, elbowed her brother. The youngest, a girl who looked no older than three, fell asleep.

Enter the counterpoint. As the service began, the choir processed down the aisle in two straight lines, led by a dozen young boys no older than ten. The blaring organ and the voices of the congregation accompanied them. Wearing long red robes and white surplices, the men and boys looked formal and professional. Their voices rang out above those of the parishioners. When the hymn ended, the choir was positioned prominently between the congregation and the clergy in the chancel along the left and right walls.

As the service continued, the choir participated along with the congregation, joining in on communal hymns and prayers, until they stood to perform the offertory anthem. They moved to the front steps of the chancel, the youngest boys in the front, the older boys and teenagers in the middle, and the men in the back. They performed a piece by Palestrina, the young boys on the treble parts, the teenagers and men singing tenor, baritone, and bass. Their voices moved in and out of tight dissonance and wide-open consonance, winding around the ebb and flow of the dense counterpoint. The uniform timbre of an exclusively male ensemble was strong. Their intonation was, for the most part, impeccable, and I heard no mistakes as the voices filled the large church, reverberating around the brick walls. Their performance carried an intensity that was entirely absent from any of the other music in the service, and I felt myself listening with unblinking, rapt attention. When the high sopranos added their characteristic descant, I heard the aesthetic that signifies this kind of ensemble, and I was taken in by the cherubic imagery as goose bumps appeared on my arms. The timbre was open and pure, and the tone was high and steady. It was the sound of choirboys, and I could hardly believe it was coming out of these young children. When the choir finished singing I had to actively remind myself not to applaud as the minister resumed the service.

Beyond their excellent singing, I noticed that the choirboys seemed to have impeccable behavior throughout the service. They sat very still in their pews, never slouching or sleeping, never whispering or interacting with the boys around them. They stood with equal poise when they performed their carefully prepared anthem. In my time working with them, I never saw a choirboy giggle, squirm, or otherwise act distracted or bored during the service. This set a stark contrast to the children in the pew next to me. Far from creating a ritual hazard, the choirboys seemed to define the experience not just for themselves, but also for the entire congregation. Somehow these boys were different, or had become different, on important socio-musical levels.

I am not alone in noting this disconnect between everyday boys and choirboys. In his study of the young male voice, Martin Ashley remarks that singing boys, particularly choirboys, are "in most other aspects of their life true-blooded, risk taking, sport playing, mischievous boys" (2009:1). Yet, they are not when they sing in choir. They are able at once to be everyday boys and choirboys, taking on the angelic persona and distinctive singing voice that goes along with it at the appropriate moments. And so, as I continued my work with the choir, I wondered at this process. How do the boys learn to be choirboys?

Interview with Andy Koebler, February 16, 2008

During my first meeting with the choirmaster, Andy Koebler, I was immediately struck by his demeanor. He was enthusiastic, excited, and energetic. He welcomed me with a broad smile and began our conversation even before we were in the same room, talking animatedly as he strode down the hall to welcome me into the church. He walked briskly as he led me upstairs to the choir room. He spoke at a rapid-fire pace, mixing answers with questions throughout our conversation. He seemed to be moving, talking, and thinking at top speed. I felt myself struggling to keep up. As we conversed, Andy fired questions at me. He wanted me to explain what I wanted to do, what I was after, what I wanted to know, and how he could help me. I wanted to know whatever he thought I should know, but that answer felt evasive. His demeanor made me feel like I needed to give detailed, correct responses. He wanted to know something, and I should tell him. I was positioned as the interviewer, yet I was afraid to disappoint Andy with my answers. His personality was open and endearing, but with an intensity that kept me on my toes. Perhaps I was getting a bit of insight into the inner workings of the choir.

During our conversation, Andy asked me what I thought of a video he had given me of a public television special that aired in the early 1990s and featured the choir prominently:

> You know, we tend to give that out to parents from time to time when we are recruiting. The parents like that sort of thing. And we always need to recruit new boys for the choir because they grow up and move on.

> You know, I've probably had a couple hundred boys go through this room in nineteen and a half years. And in all that time, I've only had to ask maybe two or three boys to leave the choir because of behavior issues or whatnot. Sometimes they leave because the music is too hard or they just don't develop a good tone or what have you, but behavior is just not an issue. These are some really fine young boys.

From Andy's perspective, there is a certain kind of child and perhaps even a certain kind of parent who is drawn to this sort of ensemble. He did recognize, however, that ready-made choirboys do not arrive on his doorstep:

> So, how do you teach these kids that are (pauses) feral street boys, who usually in their third grade music classes are, you know, shouting and screaming? You do it by getting one decent note. And then you build on that. And then, once a boy begins to hear somebody around him making a beautiful tone, he can imitate it. My teacher, John Bertalot, used to say: singing isn't taught, it's caught.[8]

This told me something important about Andy's teaching philosophy: learning to sing is a communal activity. Singing is "caught" by the boys through a process of modeling: older boys for younger boys, advanced singers for beginners, adults for children, children for adults, Andy for the entire choir, and so forth. They build a habitus by participating in it together, demonstrating for one another the appropriate ways of being. The youngest boys learn the choirboy disposition from experienced members. For Andy, this disposition is both musical and behavioral. Social expectations are modeled just as music is modeled, often in a dialectic relationship. Good musical behavior results in good music and good behavior, each being dependent on the other.

As our conversation continued, Andy expanded upon his observations that his boys seem predisposed to thrive in the choir environment, perhaps because they often come to the choir with a good musical disposition, or a beautiful voice, or perhaps both:

> I had a boy singer once, years ago, and now I can't remember at all how good he was musically, but I do remember that he had one of the sweetest, purest voices of any kid that I've had. See that—There's a difference, too. I think that there's two separate parts to my young boy singers. One is how good they are musically. Can they audiate? Can they hear things and quickly interpret notes into produced sound? Yes? But they may not have the most beautiful voice. Conversely, I've had kids with absolutely heartbreakingly gorgeous voices that just aren't that good musically. Hopefully they balance each other and the kids that are more musically erudite pull along the ones that are lesser, but I also find that in hearing better sound they improve their own voice somewhat.

As he returned to the topic of modeling and catching singing skills from other members of the ensemble, I was left with the impression that there are ways in which the musical aspects of the choirboy might already exist in some capacity within the boy, perhaps fostered by his experiences, family background, and upbringing. After this interview, I began to suspect that the transformation from boy to choirboy that I sought might not be a grand movement from everyday, fidgety, shout-singing little boy to angelic choirboy; but is rather a slower process of social formation built on modeling and interpersonal interactions that look to a communally agreed upon set of standards for behavior and discipline.

Recruitment Event and Rehearsal, February 28, 2008

I walked into the church a little before 6:00pm, making my way through the empty corridors to the fellowship room where the recruitment event was already beginning. The large banquet-hall style room was bustling with activity: young boys of various ages were running around, laughter and loud talking filled the room, a small group of parents stood together looking unsure of their surroundings, a middle-aged blond woman moved quickly between the attached kitchen and the hall setting up food and drinks, two teenage boys threw balls of yellow crepe paper at one another as they put the finishing touches on the table decorations.

To the right of the door, a middle-aged woman sat at a table surrounded by blank nametags, markers, and informational materials. As I introduced myself to her and wrote out a nametag for myself, Andy came swiftly to the table and whisked me into the room. He chatted as quickly as ever, telling me about his plans for the event. Just as

he was beginning to talk about a very challenging new *Ave Maria* the choir was learning, the blond woman let out an abrupt and very loud bellow in an effort to get the boys' attention. I jumped. Andy laughed. It was time for pizza.

With the volume and precision of a taskmistress, the woman, who called herself a "professional choir mother," managed to get a room full of boys—about thirty in all—seated at the U-shaped tables. She had no trouble raising her voice above the din; clearly she had done this many times before. She called the boys up to the buffet in groups—guests first along with their hosts, then probationers, then novices, then choristers. When some sly older choirboys tried to cut in line, they were sharply reprimanded; as punishment for their impatience they were made to wait until everyone else had been served.

The Choir Mother barely held on at the brink of chaos. The boys were wild, running around, yelling, laughing, throwing decorations, teasing each other, and making a tremendous racket. Had I not recognized them from my Sunday visits, I would never have guessed that these children were the pristine boys' choir. "So," I thought to myself, "they aren't always so angelic."

I helped myself to some pizza and decided to brave the gaggle of children. Finding a seat open across from two of the smaller boys, I made my way over to them and asked if I could sit down. Jacob looked up and said that I could.[9] His red sweatshirt bearing the All Saints crest told me that he was a member of the choir. He sat facing the boy to his right, Charlie, who was his guest and potential new recruit. The two companions were playing with the cheese on their pizza, pulling it off in a big oozy glob and trying to eat it all in one bite. Lucky for me, talking with their mouths full was not a problem for them and so this did not hinder our conversation, nor did our conversation hinder the important task of pizza deconstruction.

> Maria: So, are you both in the choir?
>
> Jacob: I am but Charlie isn't. He's visiting because he wants to maybe be in the choir but he isn't yet. But I am.
>
> Maria: Really? How long have you been in the choir?
>
> Jacob: This is my second year so I'm a novice instead of a probationer. If Charlie joins he'll be a probationer because you have to do that first even though we're the same age.
>
> Maria: Oh yeah? What grade are you in?
>
> Charlie: We're in second grade. We're in the same class at school together.
>
> Maria: (to Charlie) Really? And how did you hear about the choir?
>
> Jacob: (to Charlie) Yeah. And there's this boy in our class, his name is Jonathan, and the other day, remember Charlie, the other day he was […].

My question to Charlie was never answered as Jacob took the conversation by the reins and described at length the scene in his class a few days prior when his classmate was throwing things and shouting at other children. The details were few, but from what I gathered the teacher had to scold this student frequently. With cheese dangling from their fingers and mouths, the two boys laughed as they told me all about their teacher and the misbehaved kids in their class.

> Maria: It sounds like Jonathan doesn't behave very well. Is he in the choir?
>
> Jacob: (laughing) No! No way!
>
> Charlie: Ha! Jonathan?!? (shaking his head)
>
> Jacob: No—he could never be in the choir. No way.

Maria: Really? Why not?

Jacob: Mr. Koebler would have to throw him out! He would last like one minute or maybe even not a minute. Maybe like one second!

Maria: Really? Why?

Jacob: Because you can't fool around and stuff in choir. You have to pay attention and sing and always be quiet and watch and stuff. Mr. Koebler gets angry if you don't and Jonathan would not be able to be good enough. Uh-ah. He could never do it. (chuckles and shakes his head)

Maria: So it's important to be really well behaved in choir?

Jacob: Oh yes. Mr. Koebler always wants us to be really good. (pauses) We can't sing if we talk and don't pay attention and stuff. We can't sound good enough.

Maria: So does Mr. Koebler get mad and yell like your teacher does? Is that how you know he wants you to behave?

Jacob: Oh no. (emphatically, shaking his head) Mr. Koebler rarely yells.

Jacob's statement that "Mr. Koebler rarely yells" echoed in my mind. He said it with such awe and conviction. He likes his teacher and thinks she is nice, but the sense of respect is not present in his discourse about her. Mr. Koebler rarely yells, and yet he is able to impress unequivocally upon the boys that appropriate behavior is imperative and anything else is unacceptable. Jacob's responses also suggested that Andy instills a sense of responsibility in the boys not only for themselves and their behavior but for the music. If Jacob does not behave, the music suffers and this is unacceptable; he does not just disappoint his choirmaster, he destroys the music. In this way, musical performance is the context in which the choirboy way of being as an individual disposition is constructed and expressed.

In addition, Jacob demonstrated that he understands that there are certain kinds of boys who are suited for the choir and certain kinds of boys who are not. Though he may not be able to articulate them as such, he recognizes that there are characteristics that a good choirboy must possess or must learn to possess.

After the active space of the recruitment event, I looked forward to watching Andy wrangle this noisy bunch of children into a cohesive choir at the 7:00pm rehearsal. As I made my way to a seat in the back of the choir room, he took on his professional Kapellmeister persona—I refer to him as Mr. Koebler here to reflect this—and he plunked out a major triad on the piano—1-2-3—while bellowing for quiet: "Everybody! Quiet now. Take out Gibbons' 'Drop, Drop, Slow tears.'" Ignoring that both piano and director had called for their attention, the boys continued to chatter on with no apparent intention to stop and follow directions.

Exasperated, Mr. Koebler tried again: "GUYS!! What don't you understand about stop talking? Now let's try this. I'll give you three-four-one." This seemed to do the trick, and, following Mr. Koebler's direction, the choir began the slow, lyrical piece: "Drop, drop slow tears, and bathe those beauteous feet, which brought from…."

With a loud clap from Mr. Koebler, they stopped. "Trebles!," he bellowed, "Do you think that's piano, because I sure don't." Having been reminded that musicality is never to be ignored, they began again. This time, they made it through the entire song, with dynamic contrast and without being stopped for correction.

In these first few minutes of rehearsal, Mr. Koebler impressed upon the boys and the potential recruits the importance of singing with dynamic contrast, he asserted his authority, and he suggested that it is beneath them to fail to follow simple verbal and musical instructions. In addition, several of the teenaged boys gently but sternly corrected the younger boys if their behavior or singing left something to be desired, letting them know that it was not just Mr. Koebler who was paying attention. I took note of many musical lessons in these exchanges—some overtly taught and others subtly modeled—and the ways in which these became lessons in good behavior and appropriate expressions of the choirboy ethos.

As the rehearsal continued, I also observed a fraternal collegiality that at times reminded me of a sports team. At

one point, Mr. Koebler complimented the basses, and I saw two of the teenagers pound one another's fists in a show of self-congratulation common among adolescent males. This was, however, the first time I saw anyone pound fists over a successfully executed set of pitches. I also saw them behave in competitive ways, trying to out-perform their fellow singers. They consistently sought to prove themselves to Mr. Koebler, who frequently challenged them, raising his voice and wondering aloud why they could not do as they were told. One of the men once told me that it is in those moments—when Mr. Koebler announces that they will never get some difficult passage—that they finally get it right. They feel challenged and need to prove him wrong. In this way, the fraternity of the choir creates an atmosphere of interpersonal challenge and communal pride, with music as both the foundation and the goal. The youngest boys quickly learn that if they do not maintain their part in this musical and social matrix, the choir suffers and can fail to be what it is supposed to be.

The Halleluiah Chorus, Easter Sunday 2008

Video 1: All Saints Easter Sunday performance in 2008. This video is property of the All Saints Choir of Men and Boys and is used with their permission.

"It's boring," one of the older choirboys told me before the service as he sat in a recliner drinking a soda, "We just repeat the same thing over and over." Being the Easter service, the holiest day of the Christian liturgical year, the choir was set to perform the Halleluiah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. This was a significant annual event for them, and the high point of the All Saints Easter liturgy. They had been preparing for months. When I saw Andy before the service, he called down the hall to me, "This is it! The big show!" Given his enthusiasm, I expected a bit more excitement from the boys, but apparently repeating "halleluiah" over and over again is not their idea of fun choral repertoire. They prefer singing in Old English, Archaic Spanish, Russian, or Latin, and they like the more challenging pieces.

I arrived at the Easter service early to observe the preparations for the big show. Boys arrived in a steady stream and went to the robe room, where a room full of navy blazers bearing the All Saints crest became a room full of bright red pleated robes and white surplices. Suddenly, I heard one of the smaller boys shout across the room, "I'm not wearing a coffee filter!" He went on, "We look like cupcakes!" The boys each wear a ruff around their collar, and it does indeed resemble a coffee filter or cupcake liner. The ruffled collar was once standard protocol for each and every Sunday, but after decades of such complaints the ruffs only come out for special occasions like Easter and Christmas. The protesting probationer sat down, folded his arms crossly, and called out to Andy, "I'm not wearing a coffee filter! It looks stupid!" The choirmaster patted the boy firmly on the back as he moved across the room on his way to take care of other things, saying, "Put it on, and try to sing well." Ultimately, how they look is not the most important thing, but the outfit is not up for discussion. As Andy walked away, the room seemed to dissolve into a mess of whining little boys in red robes and fluffy white collars.

In observing this scene, I realized that I expected the robes not only to represent the choirboy persona visually, but somehow to contain it, effecting a transformation as the boys donned their habits and aligned themselves with the appropriate habitus. I had been taken in by the romanticized image of the angelic boys in long robes and ruffled collars. The power of that visual imagery in the context of the church service had caused me to overestimate the role of the robes in making the choirboy. As the boys, robed and ready, gathered in a small sitting area and waited for their cue, I expected them to be poised and focused. Instead, they lounged around the room—teenagers sat lazily on a couch, younger boys sprawled on the floor, and an older boy sat in a recliner.

The boys soon gathered in the choir room to warm up and get a few final words from their director. Andy reminded them of the cues they would get, hoping that they would watch his conducting gestures carefully. He cautioned them not to shout the Halleluiah Chorus. In his opinion, most choirs shout this piece, and it is a fatal error. "Remember," he admonished, "you don't get more credit the louder you sing." His choirboys would not become shout-singing children. As he said this, I noticed that the choir members were looking at him with quiet attention. The importance of their impending performance was beginning to settle in, and they were moving from their informal social space, through the in-betweeness of the rehearsal space, preparing for the formal performance space of the service. Whatever transformation the robes failed to effect, Mr. Koebler's presence and demeanor, coupled with his efforts to bring the boys into their musical way of being, began to produce.

Noting that it was nearly time for the service to begin, I moved down to the sanctuary and found a seat in a sea of brightly colored pantsuits, seersucker jackets, pastel hats, and floral Easter dresses. The brass section and tympani, assembled just for the Easter service, played the opening hymn along with the organ as the procession of ministers, servers, and assistants of all kinds began their parade into the church. The men and boys processed

with them, red robes flowing from their necks to their feet, heads nestled into white ruffs.

As the boys processed, it seemed to me that they were only then fully transformed into choirboys. The context of the church service conveyed the final, most important elements of the choirboy habitus to these children and their observers in the audience. Hundreds of people were watching, counting on them to create an effective ritual capable of producing and conveying critical aspects of their communal religious ethos. At All Saints, this is strongly Anglican, politically and socially conservative, oriented toward High Church and High Art, and aesthetically grounded in medieval and Renaissance architecture and imagery. Not only do the boys fit right in with this way of being, they play a central role in constructing it.

In liturgical contexts like this one, the performance of authoritative language creates ritual. In examining the ritual music at All Saints, I understand authoritative language broadly as any performed utterance of the local Episcopalian ethos. Bourdieu argues that such language has no power unless it is given power by the spokesperson or people, who are in turn drawing on authority delegated by the community. He observes that language in a liturgical context is only effective if the gathered people determine, based on agreed-upon criteria, that it has been correct. Informed by their habitus, participants collectively receive and perceive symbolic stimuli. They are thus able to understand various kinds of errors that render a ritual ineffective and false. Conversely, they can make choices, from the language of worship to the style of music, designed to create and maintain a ritual that is experienced as authoritative and effective (1991).

A boys' choir might make little sense at the Baptist Church just down the street from All Saints, and it would likely be ineffective in a Shabbat service at the local synagogue. But at All Saints, a boys' choir is an authoritative utterance of Episcopalian ritual. The boys are thus endowed with the symbolic power to articulate that habitus on behalf of the entire congregation, a particular point of authority delegated to them by the community and directed toward the performance of an effective ritual. It is this exchange that turns the boy into the choirboy, allowing him to move between and among various aspects of his own personal narrative—sometimes rebellious and silly, sometimes pristine and angelic—while participating in the process of learning what it means to be and become a carefully defined member of the All Saints community.

Perhaps there are unwritten rules, commandments so to speak, of the choirboy just as there are rules for worship that I experienced on my first visit to All Saints. Andy and the other choir members help to bring the boys along by teaching them how to recognize, understand, and follow the musical and social rules, collectively imagining and articulating them; but it is their participation in the formal performance space of the Sunday service that completes the transformation from boy to choirboy, even if the transformation is temporary and the silly schoolboys will return as soon as the service is over.

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- 1. “High Church” denotes Protestant Christian churches that have adopted elements of ritual, ecclesiology, and theology typically associated with Roman Catholicism. High Church is formal and it is positioned as strictly traditional. See Faught on the development of High Church Anglicanism during the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement (2003).
- 2. For further exemplars of similar methods, see: Hagedorn 2001, Sklar 2001, Kapchan 2007, and Hahn 2007.
- 3. The creation of this narrative is examined in Rainbow’s study of the nineteenth-century choral revival in the Anglican church (1970).
- 4. See Stubbs 1917, Temperley 1971, and Faught 2003 on the boy choir movement.
- 5. An interpretation of gender issues in a tradition of exclusively male choirs is outside the scope of this paper. See Ashley’s study of gender and the young male voice in which he looks at singing and the processes of identity construction in boyhood (2009). See also Norden’s article, which rejects the notion that boys’ voices are angelic, pure, and lyrical in a way that female voices are not (1917). See also two recent studies that have tested claims that boy singers have finer voices than girl singers, finding that the average listener can discern the difference with only about 50% accuracy, and even this is highly dependent on context (see Moore and Killian 2000/2001, and Howard and Szymanski 2002). For arguments in favor of exclusively male choirs, see Stubbs’ article in which he suggests that boys are not only the most appropriate choice to fulfill liturgical music roles, they are more focused and naturally inclined to work harder than female choristers (1917:426). See also Beale’s more recent article in which he calls “girls in the choir stalls” an “invasion of feminism” that will “destroy the nation’s musical life” (1991:314).
- 6. The surplice is a white, tunic-style, knee-length liturgical vestment worn over a full-length robe.
- 7. See Temperley 1971, Faught 2003, and Olwage 2004 on the Victorian choral movement and the Oxford movement.
- 8. Andy spoke to me at length about John Bertalot—a choir director who wrote many practical books for choir directors. Andy worked with him during his undergraduate studies at Westminster Choir College and

attributes many of his methods to Bertalot's guidance. See Bertalot 1994.

- 9. I use pseudonyms for all children in this study.

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