



Repertoire & Standards

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Male Choirs



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Finland's YL Male Voice Choir: An Interview with Conductor Pasi Hyökki

by

Jonathan Palant

YL Male Voice Choir (*Ylioppilaskunnan Laulajat*) is Finland's oldest Finnish-language choir. In addition to performing unaccompanied choral repertoire, YL regularly collaborates with prominent orchestras throughout Scandinavia and with conductors from around the world. YL has a long history of commissioning and premiering new works for men's chorus, including nearly all those composed for male choir by Jean Sibelius. Einojuhani Rautavaara, arguably today's most celebrated Finnish composer of choral music, recently dedicated several

works to the YL Male Voice Choir.

It is helpful to know a bit of Finland's history in order to understand the significance of being the oldest Finnish-language choir. Beginning in the thirteenth century, what is now the country of Finland was a part of the Kingdom of Sweden. In 1809, the majority of Finnish-speaking areas within Sweden were surrendered to the Russian Empire. This new land was named the Grand Duchy of Finland.

As singing societies and song festivals emerged throughout German-speaking lands in the nineteenth century, Finnish nationalism was fueled by a highly distinctive language and culture. Fredrik Pacius, a Finnish university professor of music, helped to popularize singing on campus as early as 1835. Like their counterparts, the Finnish-speaking societies, the music of these singing groups often emphasized Finnish patriotism.



Pasi Hyökki

Pekka Juhani Hannikainen founded YL Male Voice Choir in 1883 at a time when the Finnish language was being recognized as the official language of the Grand Duchy of Finland. From its beginning, YL actively supported the patriotic movement and promoted the ideology of "Finnishness" through its songs.

YL Male Voice Choir continues to

be part of the curriculum at Helsinki University and has been conducted by many central figures in Finnish music, including P. J. Hannikainen, Heikki Kl- emetti, Selim Palmgren, Martti Turunen, Ensti Pohjola, and Heikki Peltola. Matti Hyökki—YL conductor from 1980 to 2010 and father of current conductor, Pasi Hyökki—radically increased YL's recording library, focusing on the complete Finnish national romantic works for male choir, including works by Sibelius, Kuula, Madetoja, and Palmgren.

Pasi Hyökki (b. 1970) was appointed conductor of YL in 2010 after earning his master of arts in choral conducting from the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. He further studied with maestros Eric Ericson and Anders Eby. Hyökki is also the conductor of the Tapiola Choir and two choirs that he founded: the EMO Ensemble and Talla Vocal Ensemble.

As a male soprano, Hyökki studied under Claudine Ansermét, Christina Miatello, and Gloria Banditelli in Urbino, Italy. His debut concert was in 2003 as the soprano soloist in Handel's *Messiah*; and in 2004 he gave his first solo concert in Viitasaari, premiering commissioned works from Sampo Haapamäki, Perttu Haapanen, and Seppo Pohjola. Hyökki graciously responded to questions via email about his work with YL Male Voice Choir.

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You were ten years old when your father, Matti Hyökki, a professor of choral conducting at the Sibelius Academy, became director of YL Male Voice Choir. What influence did this have on your musical training and your eventual decision to also become a choral conductor?

I still remember well how a couple of people from the management of YL came to our home and asked my father to become their artistic director. It was about the same time I had started to sing in my first choir, the Tapiola Choir. My father had been conductor of the

Helsinki Police Singers for many years, and he was also a colleague of Erkki Pohjola, the founder and artistic director of the Tapiola Choir. I had been studying both piano and violin by that time, so my life was already full of music.

As a matter of fact, music was such an essential part of my life that in my early years, I still planned to have a real profession—like becoming a lawyer or biologist. When I ended up studying church music at the Sibelius Academy, I still thought very strongly about doing something other than choir conducting. My first singing teacher also advised me not to become a conductor, saying,

“There is space for only one Hyökki in the choir field of Finland!”

You are an accomplished soprano, a rare type of countertenor. Tell us how you came to study this voice type and how you are able to use it in rehearsal.

At the time I started my professional music studies in 1989, I joined the YL and was elected to sing first tenor. After two years of singing in both the Sibelius Academy and YL, I founded my first a cappella group, the Talla Vocal Ensemble. There were eight guys, all from YL, and I sang the highest part as a countertenor.

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For many years, I have sung the tenor part in YL, as well as in the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir and in the Sibelius Academy Vocal Ensemble. I've also sung the countertenor parts in Talla and other various small ensembles.

In the early 2000s at the Sibelius Academy, the Norwegian countertenor and conductor Carl Høgset led a master class in singing. After I performed an alto aria, Høgset suggested I try something even higher—something written for a soprano. From the first moment I sang [in this register], it felt very good. I had felt for many years that the normal countertenor register was too low for me, but I didn't have the guts to try anything higher than the highest known male voice part! The term *sopranista* was almost unknown in Finland at the time. Right after that amazing experience, I looked for a place to study soprano. I ended up taking early music courses in Urbino, Italy. Today, I can sing every part except the lowest bass voice.

What is your concept of choral sound? Is it based on a Finnish model of any sort?

There is no model in Finland, but we do have a typical choral sound based on our language. A few decades ago, children sang quite a bit in school, but unfortunately that is not the case any longer. Luckily, we have an excellent music institute system throughout the country. It allows our children to have professional coaching, regardless of their economical background or where they live. Because of that, we have both high-quality professional musicians in our orchestras and skilled amateur singers in our choirs.

What we are still missing in Finland is the ability to study singing professionally apart from opera. I would love for Finland to have just one mixed-voice a

cappella choir! We have had none since the funding of Finnish Radio Chamber Choir was stopped in 2005.

Tell us about YL. How many singers? Is it strictly TTBB? Are all the members students at Helsinki University? What is the age range? What is your typical rehearsal schedule?

Founded in 1883 within Helsinki University, YL is the oldest Finnish-language choir. We have about seventy singers ages sixty through ninety, so YL is not strictly a student choir. However, the average age is thirty-five, and all the members have to be at least secondary school graduates.

YL was an essential instrument for national Romantic composers as they started to create stylistically Finnish culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. As was tradition within the repertoire, YL was a TTBB choir for nearly 130 years. Two years ago, I added the countertenor voice, making it possible to perform music of modern composers. YL is now able to perform the traditional TTBB repertoire as well as CT-T-Bar-B literature.

We rehearse one time each week for three hours. We also have one weekend rehearsal camp during both spring and fall seasons. With nearly thirty concerts, two to three recording weekends, and one tour abroad per year, it is the maximum amount of activity we can have with the whole group.

Since its inception in 1883, one of YL's goals has been to perform Finnish choral music for male choir for audiences worldwide. Jean Sibelius, for example, dedicated many of his choral works to YL, including *Rakastava (The Lover)*, *Sydämeni laulu (Song of My Heart)*, and *Sortunut ääni (The Broken Voice)*. How do you find balance in your program-

ming and what are a few of your own goals for the present and future?

Because of this valuable history, YL is regarded as one of the most authentic voices of Sibelius. We have also felt for several decades that another key goal is to order [commission] new male choir music continually. In connection with that, I have expanded our activity to include lighter music as well—what would be more characteristic of our time! We often learn of new music from a visiting artist. Much of this is then arranged for YL. In concert, we perform some pieces a cappella, some with the visiting artist, and then some with a band. The main focus, though, is always on the chorus.

I have wanted to explore this popular genre of music because I feel this lighter music connects us better to our time and touches people the way patriotic choral music did a hundred years ago. We are working both sides of the fence to keep choral music alive as much as possible.

Your father was conductor of YL from 1980 to 2010. During that time, he placed great emphasis on recording the complete Finnish national romantic works for male choir, specifically works by Jean Sibelius, Toivo Kuula, Leevi Madetoja, and Selim Palmgren. Where does this project stand today and what are YL's plans for future recording?

I have noticed when traveling abroad that Finland is still quite an exotic country. I also realize that male choirs are quite exotic instruments even inside the choral world. There is much less repertoire for male choirs available around the world than, for example, that for children's choirs—not to mention what's available for mixed choirs. YL is just now starting to build a massive library of male choir music by searching



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and recording repertoire from all over the world. In this context, we are also going to commission many new works.

My father recorded the essential foundation of Finnish male choir music. In the future, our main goal is to record modern Finnish repertoire, including some from the lighter genre. In performance, however, we will absolutely keep singing the fantastic pieces by Sibelius, Kuula, Madetoja, and Palmgren.

You studied with Eric Ericson, one of the most famous Scandinavian conductors of our time. What did you gain from this and what concepts do you use with YL?

Eric Ericson is one of the main reasons I became a choir conductor. In his master class, I conducted Arnold Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden* for the first time. It was a mind-blowing experience for me. His collection of recorded European choral music is a kind of repertoire bible for me. I hope that I can make, with YL, the same kind of impact with our world repertoire recording projects.

What Finnish-composed piece for men's chorus should be in every American men's choral library?

If you are a male choir conductor, you should definitely get to know the four national romantic composers mentioned above. You can also find very significant and impressive modern works by Einojuhani Rautavaara and Erik Bergman. I would suggest, for example, the *Book of Life* by Rautavaara, which has eleven parts written in five different languages.

Youth and Student Activities



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Updates from ACDA Student Chapters


Plymouth State University (PSU)– New Hampshire

Fall 2013 was an eventful semester for the PSU student chapter of ACDA! We began the year hosting the second annual collegiate ACDA conference in September. The day was themed around movement and gesture for conductors and singers. Student members served as volunteers and participants in all of the movement workshops and were able to interact with other students and professors throughout the day.

In November, student members enthusiastically helped out during the All New England Choral Festival at PSU, which drew over two hundred high school students to the university to prepare a concert in one day to perform that night. ACDA student chapter members assisted by giving tours, working the registration table, singing with the students during rehearsals, and more. PSU ACDA ended the year by organizing a group of students to sing Christmas carols at the local senior center.

We also spent the semester making plans and fundraising for the ACDA Eastern Division Conference in Baltimore that seven student members attended in February 2014. The Plymouth State Chapter of ACDA looks forward to continuing to be active throughout the rest of the year as they collaborate and share ideas with other students around the area!

University of Southern California – Los Angeles

Due to a strong desire for more podium time, the undergraduate students of the BA choral music program at the University of Southern California decided to start their own version of the graduate recital choir. The goal was to provide a venue for undergraduate students to gain experience conducting an ensemble as well as give the graduate students an opportunity to mentor the more inexperienced conductors. The BA Choral Lab has been a huge success since its inception, and in the fall semester of 2013, seven students gave the first full recital performance with the lab choir. Our goal is to make the undergraduate recital choir a requirement for all BA choral music majors, as we feel that any time spent on the podium is an invaluable learning experience. 

Is your student chapter doing interesting activities? Email news updates and photos to sflansburg@acda.org. Updates should be 250 words or fewer. Include the name and email address for the person we should contact if there are questions, as well as the name of your college or university and the city and state in which you are located. Space is limited, but we will publish as many as possible—with a preference given to submissions that are interesting, creative, and relevant to other student chapters and the wider ACDA.