

# FROM KING'S SINGERS TO PURPLE VOCALS

## Interview with Paul Phoenix, Founder of the Vocal Coaching Firm “Purple Vocals”

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### ANDREA ANGELINI

*Choral Conductor and ICB Managing Editor*

*We are with Paul Phoenix in ...where are we, Paul?*

We are on Jeju Island, Jeju International Choir Festival. Are you like me when you wake up in the morning and can't remember where you are?

*Sometimes I forget where I am when I travel so much. We're on Jeju Island in South Korea. And we are so glad that you said, "Yes, I am willing to do an interview with you for IFCM." The first question, Paul, is: could you tell our readers something about your childhood and how you approached singing and choral music?*

I'm so glad you asked that question, because my story goes back a long way. I started singing in a church choir when I was six years old. And the reason I joined the church choir when I was six was that at primary school, elementary school, I was always the person that was singing the loudest - not because I was trying to sing the loudest, but I was the most keen, I was the happiest when singing. And my teacher suggested that I join the choir, and I joined. And this is up in the north-west of England, in Manchester. And I joined this church choir. I joined it with my dad. My dad was - is - a good singer, but not a professional singer, just had a lovely voice, and I must have inherited it from him. And it was a great way for us to spend time together, because we both joined the choir. And the choir master at this local church choir suggested that I do an audition for the local cathedral, which was Manchester Cathedral. I got into the Manchester Cathedral choir after the audition, although I didn't really have any musical training. But because of where I lived at the time, about one kilometer outside of the Manchester City limit, I didn't qualify for any scholarship or any help to attend the school of music, Chetham School of Music [the biggest of the four specialist music boarding schools in the UK]. And so, as a result of that I couldn't take my place in Manchester. The only option that was left to me was to try for St. Paul's Cathedral Choir in London, because

it was one of the few places which was not charging a lot of money for its choristers to attend the school. I come from a very normal, humble background. So it's not like I was a privileged young man, as we'd say in English "with a silver spoon in my mouth," because I really wasn't. And the very first time I went to London was with my mum to take the audition for the St. Paul's



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Paul Phoenix ©Jiang Meng



In Arezzo, November 2017

Cathedral Choir, and for some reason I sang a hymn which was really unknown:

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"Come unto Me and rest;  
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down,  
Thy head upon My breast."  
I came to Jesus as I was,  
Weary and worn and sad;  
I found in Him a resting-place,  
And He has made me glad.*

And Barry Rose, who was at the time the director of music at St. Paul's, said that he recognized something, and he had a good instinct for it. He recognized something in me which showed potential. And he is quoted as saying that he thought that I had what he described as a *golden voice*, and I am so honored that at that stage of my life there was somebody that really believed in me and was prepared to give me a chance. Barry Rose, all of those years ago - 1976 - is the person that changed my life and sent me on the journey that I'm still on. And to be in contact with him still and to have this privilege to be a singer and to be sharing a gift which I've been given around the world is something that I think is really special.

Your question about how I approach choral music would be quite simple to answer in that old saying, that it was more to do with instinct than it was to do with education. Even to this day - and we've spent a bit of time together already, and we've laughed and joked about a lot of things already - even to this day I think of the work that I do as being based upon a very strong

instinct, things that are good and things that can be improved upon.

So do you think that this is a kind of gift of God?  
I think so. It's like my DNA.

*Later you became a member of The King's Singers. Was it a coincidence or did you deliberately look for this experience?*

I was in the right place at the right time. So when I was in ...actually in my mid- to late twenties, the opportunity to audition for The King's Singers came along. I was a little bit worried that I might have been in the middle of a career and doing the same thing age forty as I was doing when I was approaching thirty. Well, I was making a living, but I felt like there was something missing. And so this opportunity to audition for The King's Singers came along because Bob Chilcott was leaving. And I got this call, and I went through the two rounds of audition. And ... right place at right time. I did two very good auditions and I remembered during my first audition singing the King's Singers arrangement of *Danny Boy*, and it has mostly a tenor solo with a baritone solo in the middle. And I remember singing ... *But come ye back when summer's in the meadow...*

...and singing that on top of the texture. And I remember Bob Chilcott sitting out in the room, and I remember his face was a happy face. And at that time I thought, "I can properly do this."

*How many competitors?*

About twenty-five.



Working with US Army Chorus and US Army Voices, in Arlington VA, September 2017

*And only one?*

Only one. Yeah, and I was lucky. I learned some important lessons, though. The first important lesson that I learned was preparation is great and important, but when you get the job, preparation becomes much more important. And as I've already said to you, I don't really remember my first four years, because the preparation for, maybe, twelve pieces is a lot different to a working repertoire of two hundred pieces and 100-120 concerts a year. And all the travel, being a business partner, all of the stuff that's involved in being a King's Singer. There's no period of "don't worry about it if you're not good enough." Perfection from day one. And it was tough, but I survived. And I am very glad that I did, because I think as the years progress, as the years went by, I became a better King's Singer and a better business partner. And the most important thing, it was an apprenticeship for what I do now. It's like a 17-year apprenticeship of King's Singers for Purple Vocals.

*After many years spent as a singer of a professional group, you have decided to turn your attention to amateur choral music. Starting from the fact that choral music is considered amateur, probably at 90%, what is it possible to do, in your opinion, so that there can be uniform growth everywhere? Or is it right to consider it as a complementary activity reserved for those who approach this discipline more for its social importance? I think that's the place for us to start because I ... as you say, I probably get to work with professional singers for a very small proportion of my time. When I work with*

professional singers, I say the same thing to professional singers as I do to amateur singers. It might be articulated in a different way for professional singers, but I think for me, I'm ... Well, first and foremost, I'm running a business, but I'm running a business because I think there is a need and an important social responsibility behind what we're doing, which is that we are allowing the people that we work with, even if they're amateurs, to become good communicators. So the skills that I'm passing on to people through my experience and through the kind of coaching that I give, given that it's based upon affirmation and given that it's based upon working at many, many different standards, is important to me. I'm not a snob about this. If a choir is not very good, I can still help to make a choir better. There is this social responsibility of people coming together and it means a lot to people as part of the community. And yet singing is good for you, physiologically it's good for you. So there are many important reasons for it being like that. The things that I say to the most amateur of choirs, I say as a professional, but I don't think that matters, because I am allowing people to raise their standards. And what I do is that I talk to people about it, rather than just talking to a conductor and saying, "You can raise your standard, and therefore pass it on." I am asking everybody to think about what they're doing and to raise their own standards and to work with a conductor, so that when they leave a rehearsal there is a sense of collective responsibility about what's gone on. It's the best team sport in the world with the lowest risk of injury. And I really believe that it's a great

team sport, but it's a team sport for everybody. So that's the case. The other advantage that I see from a purely commercial point of view is that the world has a lot of choirs and yet the world is a small place. So for me it's about attitude. I'm not going to not go to China because it's a long way away, or not go to South Korea because all I'm doing is a one-hour talk and looking and saying "hi" to a lot of people. I don't care. The world is a small place. I get onto a plane, I go, I work with people. I hope I inspire people - as well as promoting, of course, my business. Because that's why I left The King's Singers, to found a business. And I'm really captivated by the idea of running a business. I like it. I like this idea of having a brand and developing a brand, and expanding a brand. But that aside, let's not forget the social responsibility behind it and what we can give to people. And if that means I'm making a living doing it, that's fantastic.

*Thank you. I would like to ask you and to talk to you about the contamination - this is a completely different question - the contamination of musical genres. The ease with which we can be in touch with everyone, globalisation, has had a very important effect on choral music. We frequently attend concerts where the repertoire of a specific geographical area is sung by those who have not played a part in the history of this repertoire. Is this, in your opinion, a positive factor, or are we witnessing a confusion that will end up not doing justice to the right performance practice?*

I believe that there are two parts to that problem. I don't think that because we come from Europe, we should be elitist about European Renaissance choral music and that we shouldn't share it with choirs in Asia, for example. I think it's important because if we're not doing it, then someone

else might be doing it without the knowledge and background that we have. So globalization in any form means that certain aspects of culture become diluted. So for example, we all use American terms for things because America is perhaps the most globalized nation on the planet. But that doesn't mean that we should live in a bubble and not embrace cultures, different cultures. And we could look at it the other way around: as a member of The King's Singers, I would have been singing Japanese music in Japanese in Europe and in the USA. And nobody ever said to The King's Singers, "We don't think you should be doing it." People were saying, "We're really glad that you're singing this haiku poetry and sharing it with people around the world, because otherwise it wouldn't be, the dissemination would not happen." So I can understand the question, but at the same time, I really don't feel as though it's a problem as long as there are people like you and me who are doing our best to make sure that there is a certain authenticity in it. I'll give you a strong example. I work a fair proportion of my year in China. When I'm in China, I very often will meet choirs and ensembles that are trying to sing Renaissance music. So they might be trying to sing a madrigal. And one of the best-known English madrigals is *Fair Phyllis* by John Farmer. And it's a really rude madrigal! And in China, for example, unlike other places, they don't have the resource at their fingertips - literally at their fingertips - where they can go onto Spotify or YouTube or Facebook, all of these different social media, and access recordings of those pieces so that they can listen to 20 different versions and make their own minds up about it. There isn't that cultural acceptance yet. And, also, the social media is controlled in a different way, let's say, to the way it's controlled in other parts of the world. So I'll go to China and I'll work with a choir that's singing *Fair Phyllis*, and unlike a British group or an Italian group that'll go ...

*Fair Phyllis I saw sitting all alone*

*Feeding her flock near to the mountain side.*

... you know, being playful, a Chinese group might sing it in a very slow tempo, as if it were a motet, because they don't have an understanding, because they haven't had that resource benefit. I've got no problem with



In Arezzo, November 2017



In Shanghai, November 2017

that, because I can educate in real time, explain the context of the piece. It was the pop music of its time. It was the kind of music that people stood around and sang to one another, especially educated people. The world's changed a lot since then, but the message is the same: I saw Phyllis, I really liked her, and let's not talk about what happened next. But if you want a definition of what happened next, then maybe we could sing fa la la, fa la la. You know, so that brings an educational context, and that they're having fun, and so I've got no problem with globalization. For me globalization means travel. And as a brand ... my Purple Vocals brand is an agile brand, because all I have to do is go to an airport and get on a plane as a single entity, not as a whole choir. So it's easier for me to go to people and share what I know with people than it is for a whole choir to travel to the UK, so I've seen a lot of the world as a result of that.

*In recent years choral music is also becoming a business around which it seems easy for some to reap economic benefits without paying attention to the artistic and educational aspects. What do you want to recommend to the choirs so that they know how to choose the right events to take part in?*

PP: That's a really good question. Part of that question is already answered, because I'm running this as a commercial business, I could maybe have stopped in The King's Singers, gone to college, retrained as a teacher or taken a DMA, gone to work in a university and had security. I'm taking a risk doing what I'm doing, founding a business, working with my friends around the world, making sure that I'm developing that business. It's the same as any other brand, except it happens to belong to music. So I hope that I'm doing it for the right reasons. One of the things that I have witnessed and become more of a part of since I left The King's Singers is this circuit around the world of music competitions. And there are some competitions that are really good. There are some competitions where it's very obvious that it's more about promoting the promoter, or it's about promoting a particular place or city, or it's about making money and promoting a place. I've enjoyed adjudicating competitions. It doesn't mean that I think competition is a good thing in music, because in any form of competition there is going to be someone that wins and someone that doesn't win. And in certain cultures,

musical cultures around the world, now the culture of competition and music competition has become something upon which lives depend. And I'm not sure I agree with that. I think that I want to encourage people to enjoy singing and to sing to the highest possible standard without feeling as though their lives and their fate depends on it. And that they have to win, and if they win it's as a result of divine intervention rather than hard work and dedication and a bit of luck, because that's what we all need along the way. So I'm cautious of that, but I understand the motives behind it. So finally on that point, if that's going to be the case, then I want to make sure the business that I run is not about promoting competitions, the business that I run is run for the right reasons, and it's done to allow people to feel good about themselves. And if that's the way that I make a living, I'm very, very happy and I have a clear conscience about it, because it's not all about making money. But I still want to be able to pay my mortgage.

*The motto chosen by IFCM to present itself is "volunteers connecting the choral world." Do you think that the role of the Federation is important for building bridges of peace, while respecting the diversity of opinions? Can cultural growth, the knowledge of others' thoughts through music, play a fundamental role in peaceful coexistence?*

A hundred percent yes. What I believe also again is partially related to the last question, and that is that in any profession, in any organization, there has to be a level of professionalism, and therefore professionals. And that the reliance on volunteers can sometimes mean that the standard is not where you want it to be, because you'll get people who do it because they love it, but were not able to do it as a profession, and of that we

have to be careful. I think there's a role for professionals like you and me, mentoring volunteers and teaching and helping people to think in a more professional way. There is an organization in the UK which is concerned about saving lives at sea, that I've been involved in as a council member, and it's absolutely fantastic. The people at the top of our organization are professional people, and the reason that it's fantastic is they get paid to do that, and that success filters down and helps the volunteers do a professional job. And over the years this organization has realized that in order for it to become better at what it does, it has to invest some of the money that is donated ... it has to invest it, not just in equipment, but also in people. And that has helped the organization get better.

*Dear Paul, I thank you for the time you have dedicated to me for this interview, and I would like to leave you with a 'provocative' question. Why is it still necessary to sing?*

If you could encapsulate everything we've spoken about in the last thirty minutes that would answer all of it. But if I had to put it down to one thing, it's a language we can all understand and speak. And when it comes to singing, everybody, without exception, can sing, everybody can sing. There are some people that are better than others. Everybody can sing! There's nobody, virtually nobody ... on this planet that's never tried to sing. Given that that is a fact, it means that for us and for choral music, that is a vehicle, a medium, through which we can bring people together. And at a time in world history that we're in now, we have never had a more important time to make good communicators and good leaders. Singing together allows people to think the same. When I have a choir standing in front of me with their conductor, or an ensemble without a conductor, I look at the people in front of me, amateur or professional, and no person in that group is more important than anybody else. There are sometimes people that think that they're more important. Nobody is more important than anybody else in my eyes. It's incredibly equalizing. It's such an equality going through those groups. If you can get those people to think the same, through their singing, they start to make the same sounds. They start to make the same sounds. They make the same shapes with their mouths. They start to think in real time together. They communicate with their conductor. The conductor communicates with them. And an interactive experience begins between audience, choir, ensemble, conductor and audience. And it's a never-ending cycle. And we know, because we've seen it, that there are choirs that just sing to their conductor. And in some cultures that happens more than in others. And my mission is to tear up the rule book and to encourage people to think in a different way. And that's why your organization is so important as

well, because it's bringing people together. And there are no language barriers, there are no gender barriers, there are no sexual orientation barriers, everybody's the same. We've come together, we sing, we make music, we learn from each other. Cultures don't seem to exist, it's just everything is the same and I think that has been something that's helped me sum up my own existence in the last twenty-five years. I like working, and so if someone asks me to work it takes quite a lot for me to say no. Because there's a drive that's in here, inside me, which compels me to learn, share this message with people and to allow people to be Version 1 of themselves - which will be the title of my book: *Version 1*. Don't settle for Version 2. Be Version 1. And that's something which is a philosophy, which is shared through my tiny company and your much larger organization, and long may it continue.

*Thank you, thank you very much.  
My pleasure.*

*Transcribed by Grace Kim, U.S.A.  
Edited by Karen Bradberry, Australia*



**Paul Phoenix's long career in the music business spans five decades, from Ivor Novello Award-winning Chorister at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, through seventeen years and two Grammy Awards as tenor in the world-renowned a cappella group The King's Singers, with whom he performed more than 2000 concerts, to founder of Purple Vocals, his coaching company which draws upon his vast experience as a singer and performer. His work - not only as a vocal and performance coach, speaker and mentor, but also as a soloist - continues to take him all around the world as he shares his passion for singing and choral music. Paul's coaching specialises in encouraging audience engagement and confidence-building with soloists, conductors, choirs and ensembles. He lives in Cambridge, England, with his wife, Helena, and two sons, Will and Ed, and when not working he enjoys running, cycling vast distances on his mountain bike and supporting Manchester City!  
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