

The Necessity of Panopticism?

by Niall Peters

A choir, at first glance, would seem to be one of the few things to defy Foucault's seemingly inescapable panopticism; you'd think people are too busy singing on their own parts to conduct surveillance and there is no shaping behavior since you can't stop in the middle of a performance. However, you, an outsider, only see the finished product, not the hours of rehearsal leading up to the concert. For this exploration, I will be using my chorus, which runs very similarly to other choruses I have been in. The role of the panoptic system in this case is to shape members into "useful individual[s]" (296); the definition of what is 'useful' being a direct construct of the system. Panoptic systems feature certain collection of intrinsic traits between them; there is a hierarchy of power whose goal is to shape and control members of the system through surveillance and segmented confinement. The system found in my chorus has a purpose and is ultimately necessary for any chorus trying to do justice to the composer's work.

One of the most interesting things about the system employed by the choir is the hierarchy of power. Foucault grounds his philosophy on the creation of order in a plague town. He outlines the power structure in a pyramid format, with one supreme authority on the top, various sequentially larger and less powerful authorities below it, and ultimately a relatively large populace that is thoroughly observed (282). In our choir this hierarchy is strongly present: At the top, the director supervises the entire group and handles the artistic direction of the piece. Beneath her are the section leaders. These leaders are composed of a single person chosen from each section; they are the essentially the "useful individual" in which all other in the section should strive to mimic. They are responsible for watching over their respective section and making sure that their specific subdivision is doing the best that they can to benefit the group as a whole.

It is important to note however, that Foucault implies the basis of the hierarchy in his system don't choose to be a part of it. Our chorus differs from this in that all members have chosen to participate. What is less obvious about the chorus' hierarchy is that underneath the section leaders, there are members of the chamber chorus, which I am a part of. The chamber chorus is a smaller separate choir that is sort of an 'invite only' ensemble; they stay after the large group rehearsal to work on extra pieces and are composed of the best or most "useful" people in each section. Since the chamber members are a part of both choirs they are almost like mini section leaders that are physically interspersed with regular chorus members. Their job is to help the section leader out with their duties since the section leader can't always hear every wrong note or misinterpreted rhythm. The hierarchy's power, and ultimately their control, comes from "... strict divisions... [:] the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through... [a] complete hierarchy that assure[s] the capillary functioning of power..." (284). What is really striking, and also different from Foucault's system, is that the regular members of the chorus don't solely respond to those above them, they are expected to also 'call out' other for wrong notes and wrong rhythms. This takes some of the 'macro' load off of the hierarchy above so that the section leaders and director can focus on the micro things like dynamics and phrasing to push the performance to the next level.

At times, this difference from of the hierarchy of Foucault can be hostile and egos can cause problems. For example if you tell someone, who thinks they are better than they are, that they are wrong on a note, they often get offended and although they may not directly talk back to you, there is a tension created that there was not before. Is it possible this is because they are in direct conflict with Foucault's ideal panoptic system? An authority (The section leader or someone with perfect pitch) is usually called in to resolve the issue. Tensions also arise when the converse happens. The more experienced singer usually believes they are 100% right and that the less experienced singer frankly should mind their own business. Taking a step back, we see someone lower on the hierarchy trying to police those above them. This increase in tension could very likely be due to the conflict with the system; in an ideal panoptic system the lower parties have no true power to upset the hierarchy, because that would cause the system to come to a halt in order to deal with this person obstructing the flow of the system, wasting everyone's time and slightly ruining their day in the process.

The system, in addition to the hierarchy, is based on a surveillance whose presence is visible but whose 'field of view' is not. Foucault describes that in order for the hierarchy to work, "this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network" (299). While members can see who the observers are looking at, and their physical presence, they have no way of knowing exactly who they are listening to. This is the invisible portion of the surveillance. Daily, the director will be looking at a section while conducting, for example the basses, stop the piece and say, without turning around to face them, "altos, that F# you just sang is supposed to be a G natural". The director is relayed macro information from observing and listening to the sections as a whole. She can't really hear individuals very well. This is where the section leaders come in. They can hear individuals better than the director. However, due to the size of the section they can't always hear everything, so the chamber members help with this and so do the regular members. Everyone polices both each other's behavior and performance. This allows the learning of new material and corrections to be optimized and made more efficient. Since everyone is always listening while singing, this is how the segmenting, capillary function of the system takes its form; everyone is placed into their own little box surrounded by 3-4 surveilling members. While Foucault posits that it doesn't matter who is doing the observing (as the power figure is "unverifiable" (288)), it differs in this particular setting. You are less likely to take direction from someone who you hear is wrong (on their notes/rhythms) more frequently than you, or if they are less experienced than you. A lot of times they think their wrong note is the right one and will try to convince you that you are the one who is off. I've done it myself. You are more likely to take direction, or even solicit help (on a tricky melodic line for example), from someone higher on the totem pole. In the case of our choir, it does matter who is doing the observing and ultimately acting on their observations. The information gathered from every level of surveillance ultimately bubbles up through the segmented capillaries to the director, who will adapt rehearsals to help a section figure out a difficult passage among many other things. The surveillance allows for adaptations to be made, which ultimately best serve the group; the music is learned, interpreted, and performed better, and the imposing of discipline unifies our segments.

Foucault outlines this concept very effectively when addressing the subversion of the original uses of the system from preventing (stealing, rulebreaking, etc), to shaping. Although he is addressing its use in a military system, the essence truly filters down into any large group setting with a common goal. “Military discipline is no longer a mere means of preventing looting, desertion or failure to obey orders among the troops; it has become a basic technique to enable the army to exist, not as an assembled crowd, but as a unity that derives from this very unity an increase in its forces; discipline increases the skill of each individual, coordinates these skills, accelerates movements, increases fire power, broadens the fronts of attack without reducing their vigour” (296). Surveillance is essential in not just the learning of our music, but in crafting the performance for the end goal of performing for an audience, while breaking down and shaping the individual and morphing these segments into a unified corporeal entity.

When we zoom out and look generally at our choir (and any group performance art) there is a strong emphasis on giving up individualism in order to make the group stronger. You try to create a unity onstage between all members in order to provide a good performance to the audience. We are not just observing ourselves; the ultimate goal is to be observed. The audience observes this spectacle that we put on and ultimately we strive to satisfy them with our performance; in a way, this puts their place on the power hierarchy above the director. The audience is turned into the primary all-seeing observer in the center of Bentham’s idealized prison, the Panopticon. Foucault writes, “All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower” which in our case, is the audience as an entity, “and to shut up in each cell a [member of the system]... They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.” (286). The audience expects us to deliver a performance and while we are on stage (in our specified standing places on the risers; our shared segmented spatial unity), there is no relief from the constant gaze of the audience. It is interesting to note that their power doesn’t end there; they possess the additional layer from the “dissociat[ion] [of] the see/being seen dyad” (288), just like Foucault’s ideal observer. The lights lighting the audience are turned off, and extra lights lighting the chorus are turned to full power, some would say to a blinding degree. In Foucault’s words “The Panopticon” in this situation, the performance space “is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man... it makes it possible to observe performances” (291). This relentless observation compiled with the expectation of a performance brings a distinct vitality and energy to our performance; we modify our behavior that extra bit, just like the prisoners in Bentham’s prison, to deliver that performance and meet the observer’s expectation. The pressure from this panoptic system is essential to the final performance, and therefore essential to our success as a choir.

(In this video of our final concert, you can really see the observational system in place, as well as how the choir blends all of its individuals and is seen as a unit, not a collection of units. The chamber chorus can be seen at 4:30 and 21:01, the full chorus can be seen at 14:50.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWD6L8sF8Nw&feature=youtu.be>)

Within the hierarchy, the ultimate use of all the surveillance and its collected information is to craft members into Foucault’s useful individual. It is encouraged to be the “ideal choir student”, always striving for beyond perfection, turning ink and paper guidelines into music. This student

is always focused on the micro; not just shaping each phrase, but also shaping each note, putting power into your consonants, always looking at the director for guidance. If you fall into this category you have the possibility for the reward of being in put into the chamber chorus; the select group of useful individuals who also help self police the regular choir. The “useful individual” becomes useful not just to the director who will be able to craft a better performance, but also to the group. Frankly, it sucks singing next to someone who sucks; they make you worse. As everyone strives to become the “useful individual”, the group gets better and is able to be more unified, breathing together, singing together, and cutting off together. I think the most striking example of this can be observed in how we achieve a strong vocal blend. We are literally told to look at the people next to us and match the shape of our mouths in order to unify the way we sound. This mitigates and minimizes the individual and distinct part of your voice. You actually start to sound like the person next to you.

Now that we have a firm grasp the panoptic system in place, along with how and why it works, is it a good thing? Is the shaping of our members into “useful individuals” effective enough that the gains outweigh the loss in individuality? If you think of what would happen without the system, it is easy to see that panopticism is essential to merely achieving a good sound, and when everyone buys into it, you can sound great or even fantastic. If no one bought into it and were exercising their individuality, the performance frankly would suck. You would need a miracle to prevent the sloppiness in cut offs, notes, rhythms, dynamics, and balance. The director would have no control and everything would basically be a train wreck. While this could be considered a spectacle, believe me this is not the spectacle you want to present to an audience.

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 9th ed. David Bartholomae, and Anthony Petrosky. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011. 282-309. Print.