

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: 10007140 Birmingham City University		
Unit of Assessment: 33 (Music)		
Title of case study: Transforming choral experiences: expanding repertoire, enhancing cultural life, widening opportunities		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 – present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Jeffrey Skidmore	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer and Artistic Director for Early Music	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2000 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Jeffrey Skidmore's practice-led research has significantly expanded the choral repertoire and challenged received notions of the classical choral canon, leading to increased understanding of the diversity of baroque music as cultural heritage (especially rediscovered Latin American and French repertoire), and of new forms of expression through the co-production of contemporary music. His research has enhanced the cultural life of the City of Birmingham through his regular performances with Ex Cathedra (choir, consort and period-instrument orchestra, celebrating its half-centenary in 2020) as an Associate Artist at Birmingham's Symphony Hall, and has nurtured a new generation of singers. Impacts of his research have been felt internationally, both through recordings and broadcasts and through publication of performing editions used by choirs and educational institutions worldwide.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Skidmore's research has focused on four main areas since 2000:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The investigation of a large and hitherto under-explored repertory of South American Baroque Music, leading to a ground-breaking 3-volume set of world-premiere recordings produced with Ex Cathedra (ExC) between 2003 and 2008 [R01] and a further CD of Brazilian Baroque music in 2015 [R05]. These recordings built on Skidmore's extensive primary-source research in libraries in Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil and the USA. Skidmore produced his own performing editions of much of the repertoire, the scores of which he has begun to publish via ExC's in-house publishing company, Stable Press, since 2009. 2. The investigation of performance-practice issues in French Baroque repertoire leading to new performing editions and critically-acclaimed recordings such as Charpentier's <i>Messe a quatre chœurs</i> (2004), and <i>Règne Amour</i> (2004) – a recital disc of music from the operas of Rameau with international soprano soloist and ExC alumna Carolyn Sampson, with whom Skidmore again collaborated on the Gramophone award-winning CD <i>A French Baroque Diva</i> (2014) [R04]. 3. Exploring the theme of cross-cultural dialogue through the commissioning and creative programming of contemporary choral music – e.g. juxtaposing old and new music, as in the commission of Alec Roth's 40-voice motet <i>Earthrise</i> in 2009 [R02], to be performed alongside Tallis's <i>Spem in alium</i>. Most recently (2018) Skidmore has collaborated with Roxanna Panufnik on the recording <i>Celestial Bird</i> [R06] in which ExC performs together with the Indian classical music ensemble Milapfest, as one example of several of Skidmore's carefully staged encounters between the European choral tradition and world musics, leading to new artistic insights and cultural understandings of particular relevance to Birmingham's diverse multicultural community. 		

4. Developing community projects that bring together singers of all levels of experience – professional and amateur, adults, children and students – as part of the methodological process of exploring and developing new choral repertoires. This aspect of Skidmore's research is evident within the Roth commission *Hymn to Gaia* in which the children of the ExC Academy sing alongside the adult choir [R02], and even more so within the *Shakespeare Odes* project (April 2016) [R03], which involved a reconstruction of Arne's *Garrick Ode*, programmed alongside *A Shakespeare Masque* commissioned from composer Sally Beamish and the poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy. The latter project involved 150 schoolchildren alongside the professional and amateur musicians of ExC and was filmed by the BBC and streamed worldwide. A further project juxtaposing cantatas of JS Bach and a new commission from Roth, *A time to be born and a time to die* – was the first of a series of 50th anniversary commissions to be performed during the 2019-20 season.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R01 *Baroque Music From Latin America*, vols 1-3, ExC Choir and Baroque Ensemble, J. Skidmore (conductor). 3 CDs, Hyperion: *New World Symphonies* (CDA67380, 2003), *Moon, Sun and All Things* (CDA67524, 2005), and *Fire Burning in Snow* (CDA67600, 2008). Vols 1 and 2 returned to RAE2008; Vol 3 returned to REF2014.

R02 Alec Roth (composer), Vikram Seth (librettist), *Shared Ground: Earthrise / Hymn to Gaia / Ponticelli*, ExC, ExC Academies of Vocal Music, J. Skidmore (cond.). Double CD (Signum SIGCD270, 2011). Returned to REF2014.

R03 *Shakespeare Odes*: Thomas Arne, *The Garrick Ode* (reconstruction); Sally Beamish and Carol Ann Duffy (poet laureate), *A Shakespeare Masque* (commission and world premiere); performance at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon (22 April 2016, and subsequent touring). ExC & Academy of Vocal Music, The City Musick (broken consort), J. Skidmore (cond.). Produced in partnership with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the Shakespeare Institute and in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Filmed by the BBC and streamed worldwide via iPlayer.

R04 *A French Baroque Diva: Arias for Marie Fel*, ExC, J. Skidmore (conductor), Carolyn Sampson (soprano). CD (Hyperion CDA68035, 2014). *Gramophone* Award Winner (recital category), 2015: awarded for 'scholarly research and creative programming, placing musical entertainment and philological exploration on an equal par ... both musically thrilling and a fascinating contextual journey'. Other accolades include double 5* review in *BBC Music Magazine* and 'coup de coeur de la semaine', *France musique*. Included in REF2.

R05 *Brazilian Adventures: Early Music from Brazil*, ExC, J. Skidmore (cond.). CD (Hyperion CDA68114, 2015). Supported by Arts Council England (ACE): £8,500. Included in REF2.

R06 Roxanna Panufnik, *Celestial Bird*, ExC, Milapfest (Indian classical music ensemble), J. Skidmore (cond.). CD (Signum SIGCD453, 2018). Supported by ACE: £15,000.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Jeffrey Skidmore is internationally renowned as founder-director of the Birmingham-based vocal ensemble Ex Cathedra (ExC), which, as the principal conduit of his research, celebrated '50 years of Inspiring Singing' during the 2019-20 season [S01]. The impact of Skidmore's research was recognised by the award of OBE for 'services to choral music' (2015), and an honorary PhD at the University of Birmingham (2017).

The specific impacts of Skidmore's research since 2013 can be grouped into three main areas:

- 1) **A significant expansion of the choral repertoire**, achieved a) through his own performances as director of ExC, and b) through wider dissemination and usage of his performing editions by other choral groups worldwide.
- 2) **Enhancing the cultural life of the City of Birmingham**; and

3) Widening opportunities for young singers and nurturing the next generation of professional choral musicians.

All three impact strands were highlighted in the one-hour BBC R3 documentary on his work, *The Choir* (2017), which acknowledged how “Ex Cathedra, the Birmingham-based choir... has carved out a particular niche thanks to Jeffrey’s own research.” [S02].

Expansion of the choral repertoire

Skidmore’s research directly influences the nature of ExC’s concert programming by introducing newly commissioned and newly rediscovered music that expands the choral repertoire and challenges existing understandings of the choral canon. This has resulted in an increased awareness of the breadth of the cultural heritage of European and South American choral music among audiences and choral participants worldwide. Moreover, by commissioning and co-producing new choral music Skidmore is actively contributing to this heritage.

Audiences experience new repertoire through ExC’s regular live concerts – typically 28 concerts per season (186 concerts during the census period, reaching an estimated total live audience of over 90,000) [S01]. Skidmore’s research-informed live performances are regularly featured on BBC Radio 3, including ‘Live in Concert’ (4 times during census period), ‘In Tune’ (8 times), Early Music Show (twice) – these fourteen broadcasts reaching an extended audience of up to 1.4 million in the UK [S02].

Skidmore’s recordings of South American and French Baroque repertoire [R01, R04, R05] are released on the Hyperion label, while the contemporary music [R02, R06] is released on Signum. Both labels have excellent worldwide distribution networks including 30 countries in 6 continents [S03]. Reviews in the international press [selection in S04] speak not only of the superlative quality of the performances/recordings, but also of the importance of Skidmore’s discoveries and contribution to the repertoire: e.g., reviewers for R05 wrote ‘Skidmore’s research into Brazilian music has given us a really touching disc ... meltingly beautiful’ (*MusicWeb International*), and praised its ‘really worthwhile discoveries’ (*The Guardian*), ‘hinting at the huge variety of Brazilian music that still awaits performance’ (*Gramophone*); ‘representative, inclusive and faithful to the diversity of Brazilian colonial production’ (*Cultura Música*, Portugal). Similarly, *The Choir* documentary acknowledged Skidmore’s ‘incredible research ... in the cathedrals of South America, really investigating this South American Baroque repertoire which, until [Skidmore] started recording it was really not very well known at all.’ [S02].

The fruits of Skidmore’s research have been made available to other choral *participants* worldwide through his performing editions of S. American and French Baroque repertoire. These are published and distributed internationally via ExC’s in-house ‘Stable Press’ (2604 scores sold since 2009; 957 within census period [S05]). This enterprise has enabled those who first became familiar with the repertoire through Skidmore’s recordings to sing it themselves, resulting in performances by professional, amateur and youth choirs, particularly in the UK, Germany and USA, including leading universities and conservatoires (HEI customers since 2013 include 8 UK, 11 EU and 11 US [S05]), and with a performance of Araujo’s *Los cofrades* sung by a youth chorus (9-18 years) taking place as far afield as Mumbai (November 2016) [S05].

Moreover, as an invited choral director at the prestigious Dartington International Summer School, Skidmore had the opportunity to programme repertoire arising from his research with a choir of c.100 participants in 2015 (‘Spem in Alium/Earthrise’ R02) and 2018 (‘Christmas in the Sun’ R05). He has similarly directed research-led programmes at the Early Music Course and Festival at the Oficina de Música de Curitiba in Brazil (dir. Rodolfo Richter) 2014-18.

Enhancing the cultural life of the City of Birmingham

Jeffrey Skidmore is a familiar cultural figure in the City of Birmingham, reaching live audiences at the heart of the city with ExC as an Associate Artist at Town Hall & Symphony Hall (THSH)

since 2007. THSH's Chief Executive writes: "It is [Skidmore's] bravery in championing undiscovered and new writing that resonates most... [We] can only remain relevant by tirelessly encouraging new artists, new composers and curiosity in our audiences... Jeffrey's ambition with Ex Cathedra is immensely helpful in supporting this, and creating a shared narrative with music makers across the city." [S06].

At THSH Skidmore has developed a unique 'Birmingham Baroque' partnership with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), through which his research insights in historical performance practices provide a basis for professional musicians to develop their skills in the field of baroque music. CBSO's Chief Executive explains, "it has been fascinating for the orchestral players of the CBSO to benefit from Jeffrey's expert knowledge... [which] made the whole experience far richer for all concerned – musicians and audience. And by performing this music with an outstanding specialist choir like Ex Cathedra ... the CBSO has been able to expand the range of our world-class offer at our home in Symphony Hall, into areas of the repertoire that are simply not an option for most top symphonic orchestras." [S06].

Throughout his long association with ExC, Skidmore has retained an amateur choir at the heart of the organisation (membership 48), which provides opportunities for amateur singers to perform at the highest level alongside professional musicians. Members of the choir testify to the positive effect this has had on their lives. One longstanding member of 24 years writes: "The choir seem to move relentlessly from one USP to another: Monteverdi's *contrafacta*, French Baroque, Latin American Baroque... all based on Jeffrey's scholarship... Ex Cathedra has given me some of the greatest musical experiences anyone could wish for – and all as an amateur singer. Its amazing network of musicians has provided me with my best friends, my husband, most of my job opportunities and an endless parade of inspiring young professionals. I can honestly say that the choir was a factor in my decision to settle permanently in Birmingham. Without it, the city and the choral landscape in general would be a much poorer place." Another member comments that Skidmore's "research and guidance on pronunciation and performance style helped us to bring this glorious music alive for audiences in Birmingham and beyond. I believe that our CD recordings of hidden treasures of 17th century Latin America ... have helped to put Ex Cathedra and Birmingham on the cultural map." [S07].

Skidmore's work with ExC is informed by an intimate understanding of and respect for the cultural diversity of the city, which he views as "a microcosm of the world – so to tackle the problems of Birmingham and the opportunities of Birmingham is what's important to me as a born-and-bred Brummie." [S02]. Diversity initiatives inform and are embedded in Skidmore's programming choices, e.g. including performing Purcell's *Indian Queen* alongside South American Baroque repertoire; Roxana Panufnik's commission for ExC alongside Milapfest (classical Indian music ensemble); and the commissioning of new music by female composers [especially R03, R06]. A prime example is Liz Dilnot Johnson's 'Jerusalem/Blake re-imagined', commissioned for ExC's 50th anniversary concert (produced digitally under Covid-lockdown in September 2020: reaching an audience of 2,966 as of 08-10-20) which combined the voices of ExC with improvisations by Debipriya Sircar (sitar and voice). The deputy chair of Birmingham and Solihull LEP tweeted about this "magnificent response to those who have been using music to seek to divide us in recent weeks" (with reference to recent programming controversy at the BBC Proms) [S06].

Widening opportunities for young singers and nurturing the next generation of professional choral musicians.

Creating opportunities for young people to engage with choral music through his research has been central to Skidmore's mission, with the ethos of "local, young talent being developed through something as unknown as French Baroque music" a central theme of Skidmore's conversation with Sarah Mohr-Pietch in *The Choir* documentary [S02].

ExC's Academy of Vocal Music (AVM) is an established choral training programme for children in Birmingham aged 4-18 (benefitting more than 130 children since 2013 [S08]), which includes the opportunity to sing alongside ExC in selected concerts and recordings (including research-

led projects, e.g. **R02, R03**). Benefits of this involvement extend beyond the musical: “I have not only developed my musical and singing knowledge but have also been equipped with invaluable communication, self-management and social skills.” [AVM member, **S08**].

Working with and nurturing young voices has also informed the methodology of his research (through which impact is embedded in the research *process* itself) since his initial forays into S. American Baroque music, which began with a series of workshops for Birmingham schoolchildren. A recent example of this methodology in practice, providing opportunities for widening participation and involvement of young people in high-quality innovative choral performances, is the *Shakespeare Odes* production [**R03**] which involved 30 children (aged 10-18) in AVM, together with 30 KS2 children from Stratford-upon-Avon and 90 KS2 from Tower Hamlets [**S5**]. One AVM member commented, “The Shakespeare Odes concert at Southwell Cathedral was the best day of my life!” [**S08**]. Streaming of this project via BBC iPlayer reached over 24,000 viewers (average engagement time 9’52”) [**S02**].

ExC provides a route into the singing profession, and important employment opportunities for young professional singers who typically form the core of the ExC Consort. Over the years this has helped launch the international careers of numerous high-profile musicians (conductors and soloists), including Paul Agnew, Nigel Short, Carolyn Sampson, Eamonn Dougan, Marcus Farnsworth, Pat Dunachie and Nick Ashby (the latter two joining the acclaimed King’s Singers in 2016 and 2019, respectively). This has been achieved in large part through Skidmore’s work as Artistic Director for Early Music and Chamber Choir conductor at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire over more than two decades, though which he has overseen the training of 70 singers (14 since 2013) who went on to sing professionally with ExC. [**S09**] This route into the choral singing profession is now (since 2016) recognised by a series of ExC Scholarships at RBC, and a graduate scholarship programme (4 scholarships in each scheme annually). International soprano soloist Carolyn Sampson joined ExC at the age 19 and writes, “my experience in this extraordinary choir gave me valuable performing opportunities and, crucially, insight into repertoire ... [which] led to my feeling comfortable when I came to work with other orchestras in Europe on French baroque repertoire. [The] Marie Fel [CD, **R04**] for which we won a Gramophone Award ... was truly a highlight of my career, and was only possible thanks to Jeffrey’s belief in me and his dedication to the music.” [**S10, S04**].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S01: Evidence of ExC concert performances and box office figures. ExC season brochure 2019-20; Yearly activity summary document, 2013-20 [**prepared by named corroborator 1**]; THSH box office figures, 2015-19.

S02: Evidence of BBC broadcasts. List of BBC broadcasts with URLs; iPlayer stats for the Shakespeare Odes production; Transcript of ‘The Choir’ (28-05-2017).

S03: Hyperion and Signum Records distribution networks.

S04: Selection of press reviews, including Gramophone award citation.

S05: Summary letter from Stable Press [named corroborator 1].

S06: CEO Testimonials. Testimonials from CEOs, Town Hall Symphony Hall and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; Tweet by deputy chair, Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership.

S07: Testimonials from members of ExC’s amateur choir.

S08: Letter from ExC’s Director of Education [named corroborator 2].

S09: List of RBC graduates who have sung professionally with ExC.

S10: Testimonial from soprano soloist Carolyn Sampson [named corroborator 3].