“But the eyes do not see it”
Synaesthesia in singing instruction
A film featuring choir boys from the Aurelius Sängerknaben Calw in conversation with Alexandra Kirschner, vocal coach, and Christine Söffing, artist.
Music by Alexandra Kirschner
Played by Shu-Han Yang
Plot
Alexandra Kirschner
Camera and editing
Christine Söffing

“But the eyes do not see it”

This is a quote by a nine-year old choir boy. He found out pretty quickly that he was the only person to see his synaesthetic perceptions as he experiences them in his mind’s eye.

Some years ago I started to notice how children and young persons experience their synaesthetic perceptions while singing. This was when I started to integrate synaesthesia in my singing classes. I ask the choir boys to paint their synaesthetic experiences and to verbalise them. Looking at the results, it is obvious that synaesthesia in pre-puberty children is not yet constant. Moreover, thoughts, ideas, emotions and feelings influence their synaesthetic perceptions, which adds spice to the choir boys' striking, almost magical accounts. Imagination and synaesthesia seem to blend into one another. Possibly this is the reason for the inconsistent nature of their synaesthetic experiences as thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions keep cross-pollinating each other in different ways.

Apparently, some children also experience emotional synaesthesia.

In a 15-minute documentary by Christine Söffing and myself, we show how several choir boys aged nine to thirteen experience visual synaesthetic perceptions while singing. The children had all been unaware of their synaesthetic perceptions until they were pointed out to them. Some of the boys struggle remembering melodies and have difficulties in holding their part. This is why I encourage the boys to use their synaesthetic perceptions as a mnemonic tool, which is also documented in this film. Knowing about and using their special gift seems to result in a broadened type of attention. Notes of a scale sung out of tune are not just heard but also perceived synaesthetically. Even though the acoustic stimulus and the synaesthetic experience it triggers are perceived at the same time, the attention of the singer is either directed at hearing or the synaesthetic perception. With a little bit of practice, the children can switch back and forth between the “two channels” of hearing and seeing to evaluate their performance: they listen to a crescendo and see - while processing the acoustic information - how the colour changes. If somebody sings the second part, another colour or shape is added. Or, for example, the colour is getting darker if a note is sung out of tune. Thus, one educational target is to link the processing of synaesthetic and acoustic information.

Furthermore, in my opinion, raising the awareness for synaesthetic capabilities not only fosters the young singers’ vocal and musical talent but also gives a boost to their personal development - the children and young persons gain access to their inner resources and learn how to creatively work with their synaesthetic perceptions and voice.

English version: Joachim Rudert (VKD)
Diplom-Dolmetscher und Übersetzer,
BDÜ, Verband der Konferenzdolmetscher (VKD)