

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHORAL SINGING AMONGST ELDERLY PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore the experience of elderly adults who sing on a regular basis with a community choir. A research design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research methods was developed with data collected through the use of questionnaires, observations and interviews. As the findings of this case study suggest, the main factors that attract singers to join a choir appear to be the aesthetic experience and the social joys to be experienced from taking part in a joint activity. Despite their age, the participants agreed that developing their skills and knowledge and making music to a high standard were desirable elements in their membership of a choir; however, absolute technical precision was regarded as a positive and desirable element but not as a necessity. Findings from the study also suggest that whilst singers were willing to accept the conductor's authority when it related directly to musical issues, they also preferred their own individual opinions to be heard with regard to issues such as repertoire selection. For most participants, it appeared to be most important to have a conductor who was encouraging and inspiring, who transmitted his/her passion for the music and had a good, clear conducting technique. Finally, findings suggested that public performances were regarded by choir members as an important and very rewarding part of choral singing.

Keywords: *Community choirs, older singers, choral participation*

Introduction

For a wide range of very different reasons, the human voice changes with age (Lortie et al., 2017). Sataloff et al. (1997), for example, listed becoming breathless, losing vocal range, changes in the characteristics of vibrato, reduced ability to control breathing,

vocal fatigue and pitch inaccuracies, being amongst the most commonly reported issues affecting the ageing voice. Following a longitudinal study of males aged between 50 and 81 years of age, Verdonck-de Leeuw & Mahieu (2004), reported measureable deterioration in vocal ability over a period as short as five years, whilst Smith & Sataloff (2012), reported significant differences between male and female voices in both the rate and the extent of change which took place with aging. Similarly, studies exploring the differences in the voices of singers and non-singers have suggested that along with general, overall good physical health, singing appears to reduce the degree of changes and characteristics, which cause the voice to sound 'old' (Boone, 1997); a factor supported by Smith & Sataloff (2012), who argued that as our understanding of the aging process improves, it is becoming more and more apparent that many of these changes can be forestalled or even corrected.

Accordingly, Meredith (2007) has argued that many of the so-called 'signs of aging', which can become apparent in the human voice, are in reality, frequently signs of disuse; just as with the rest of our bodies, much of what seems like degeneration is simply due to the lack of use of the vocal mechanism. Additionally, Sinard & Hall (1998) found poor respiratory and abdominal muscle condition whilst further studies (see for example Brown et al., 1993) reported limited aerobic exercise as being the root cause of vocal complaints. Further work by Ramig & Ringer (1983) noted that elderly individuals in good health tended to maintain more stable frequency levels ('jitter') than individuals of the same age who were in poor health leading them to conclude that frequency and amplitude stability were related far more to physical condition than to chronological age.

As Welch & Thurman (2000) point out, research has shown that vocal training and experience can counteract expected age changes. Prakup (2012), for example, found significant differences in a range of age-related characteristics between singers and non-singers. For example, singers were perceived to be younger than non-singers and individuals who were significantly younger in age; singers demonstrated far greater levels of vocal intensity than non-singers and overall, singers were found to display significantly reduced level of vocal characteristics which are typically associated with the aging voice, for example, frequency and amplitude stability. However, the potential health benefits in terms of increased levels of wellbeing to be gained from singing, and in particular choral singing, go well beyond simply reducing the characteristics normally associated with the aging voice. Mueller (1991) points out the importance of voice quality in reflecting the individual personality, whilst Prakup (2012) considers the way in which voice quality can affect the social, emotional and vocational functions of older adults. In short, with an expanding elderly population, knowledge of those features, which occur as a natural process of aging and those, which can counteract changes in physiology through disuse can be seen as important as knowledge of changes that come about through misuse. As Teater & Baldwin (2014) further point out, older people constitute the main user group of the health and social care services in most countries and therefore any community intervention which promotes increased levels of wellbeing must be considered to be a valuable activity.

The social aspects of choral singing contribute in a significant way towards its popularity as a community activity (Kirsch et al., 2013), and there are numerous studies reporting on the positive benefits to be gained for partaking in such choral activities (Hillman, 2002; Sanal & Gorsev, 2014; Joseph & Southcott, 2015). For example, using

questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, Teater & Baldwin (2014) found that participants self-rated their individual levels of wellbeing as increasing following weekly one-hour singing sessions. Improvements included a reduction in feelings of social isolation, making positive changes to life style and reduced levels of depression. However, how can we reconcile the increased need for and the benefits obtainable from choral community singing with the voice changes, which occur in older people?

According to Kontogeorgiou (2011), when a singer's voice 'bears the burden' of its age, then the singer becomes a burden for the choir. In such cases, the conductor has the "painful but necessary" duty to dismiss this person from the choir "for the sake of the ensemble" (p. 41). It is interesting to see, how easily in some instances, singers are sacrificed for the sake of the ensemble rather than an approach where the ensemble is created and exists for the sake of the singers. Using contrasting arguments, O'Toole (1994) adopted a critical, feminist perspective along with Foucault's theories of power and argued that in the 'choral world' singers were subject to a discourse that is more interested in the production of music than in the singers themselves. In contrast, Meredith (2017) suggests that senior adult singers can bring a lifetime experience to the choir which can be beneficial for the younger singers both musically and socially. For example, Durrant (1993) reported on the case of an 83-years-old contralto asked him if she should leave the choir. Having sung for a number of famous conductors when she was younger, the lady in question was still a very good sight-reader and her voice was in a very good condition. Given her experience, as Durrant points out, she was the last alto he wanted to leave. In addition, Smith & Satalloff (2013) agree with this perspective and suggest that senior adult singers' experience can be invaluable for the choir, especially when they are assigned duties concerning administration and or fundraising, for example.

Therefore this paper explores the experience of elderly adults who sing on a regular basis with a community choir.

Methods

The London Welsh Male Voice Choir is a choir for men only, and it has both a long history and a great tradition within the London area. Currently, the choir consists of approximately 100 members, most of which have Welsh roots, or a familial connection with Wales. During an initial visit to one of their choir rehearsals, the first impressions of the group suggested a well-organized choir. For example, the choir nominated and elected representatives who took responsibility for making decisions on a variety of issues ranging from the way the choir operated, the policy on accepting new members and the selection of the repertoire. All members behaved in a very welcoming and hospitable way towards the researchers, and were very positive with regard to both the research and its results. Overall, three observations were carried out of three rehearsals of the choir. One interview was held with the conductor before the second rehearsal that was observed. During the third rehearsal observation, a questionnaire was distributed and completed by all singers.

Over the course of three consecutive rehearsals, non-participant observations were carried out. As it is the custom of this choir to frequently host visitors, a particular row of seats was provided especially for visitors and in this respect, the impact of the

researcher was not considered to be significant. An average of 90 singers attended the three rehearsals, which lasted for approximately two hours. Despite the large size of the choir the rehearsals ran without interruptions. The choir had a rule concerning late arrivals, which were required to wait until the conductor had asked them to take their seats. This tends to be common practice amongst professional ensembles where passing in front of the conductor while he/she is conducting is regarded as a cause of distraction and very often as sign of disrespect. A professional pianist who assisted the conductor and was present during all the rehearsals observed accompanied the choir. There was a short break during the rehearsal during which time one member of the Board made announcements.

During his interview, the choir conductor provided background information about his personal background and about the choir. The London Welsh Male Voice Choir aimed to promote Welsh culture through the Welsh male voice choral tradition and secondly to give the Welsh language a presence. The choir is open to all on condition they agree to support Welsh culture and are prepared to learn certain items in the Welsh language. That having been said, the repertoire of the choir is varied and not limited to Welsh choral music. The main factor that attracts singers to the choir is the opportunity to participate in a very successful organization in addition to the aesthetic and social joys of participating in a male voice choir.

In total, 38 members of the choir completed and returned the questionnaire. 92% of the members were older than 55 and were very experienced in choral singing as the average number of years singing in choirs was 35.72 years (only 18% have not participated in other choirs). 42% answered that they had formal training in music before joining the choir. The most frequent response given for previous experience of singing was vocal training during their time. In response to the question *What country is the major part of your identity?* 39% responded with Wales, 26% responded with England and 33% gave more than one answer for example, Wales and England, Wales and Scotland, United Kingdom or Great Britain.

Results

A. *“Enjoying making music with others”*

According to participants' responses, it seems that the prime motivation for most of them to become members of the choir was *“enjoying making music with others”* (74% of the responses). Furthermore, when asked about the positive and distinctive elements of their choir, 46% of the respondents referred to social elements beyond the actual singing, with words such as 'comradeship', 'friendliness', 'fun', 'enjoyment' and 'outings', factors frequently appearing in their responses. Field notes made during the observations confirmed each of these elements. For example, it appeared that many members of the choir arrived at the London Welsh Centre early and remained later beyond the end of the rehearsal. Visiting the pub in the London Welsh Centre and meeting friends from the choir seemed important for many of the singers and Thursday evenings had an important place in their weekly agenda, not only because of the choir but also because of the ability to socialize with friends.

The important role that social activities have for the participants in this research was evidenced further by their responses to the open-ended question, which required them to describe a very important personal experience in the choir. A number of singers referred to more specific instances, in which they had performed at the funeral of old friends and colleagues and other moving moments that remained in their memory. As one singer described:

“One of our young choristers was tragically killed in a car accident whilst on holiday. We sang at his funeral. When the hearse left the church we lined in the street and gently sang ‘Speed your journey’. As the cortege passed in front of us and we could see the face of the widow, everyone was too choked up to sing...”

It seems that members of LWMVC are familiar with such events. In the middle of each rehearsal, there was always a short break, during which a member of the Board made announcements. These announcements were mainly about details relating to the choir but also, it frequently included news about ex members. As the choir is an organization with a long history, there is a significant number of ex members, most of whom are elderly. In all of the rehearsals that were observed, some of the announcements were about ex members (or their relatives) that had passed away. In these cases, the member of the Board provided information about the place and the time of the funeral for those who wanted to attend. In one case, there was an announcement about the death of an ex member’s wife. It could be deduced from the singers’ reaction that this lady and her husband were very much respected. The member of the Board informed the choir when and where her funeral was going to be held and then all choir members were asked to stand and sing a Welsh hymn; that one of the lady’s favorite pieces. This event indicates how strong the feeling of community and comradeship amongst the choir members but also how important choral singing is for them, as a means through which they express their emotions and feelings.

42% of participants also included memories of public performances in their responses when asked to describe a very important personal experience involving the choir. For these participants, singing in famous venues like the Royal Albert Hall or in the Cardiff Sport Stadium at the 1999 Rugby World Cup seemed to be important factors that made these moments unforgettable. Some singers also referred to the importance of singing in Cathedrals or in venues with good acoustics. However, most singers view public performances as an opportunity to meet new people or to have fun with their colleagues. Thus, tours were seen as one of the most important activities of the choir, and were therefore regarded as more of a social activity rather than an opportunity for the choir to perform.

One interesting response provided by a member, described a concert in his home town. This reference indicates the importance of making his singing activities known to the members of his local community as he wanted his friends to know and to understand the value of his activities with the choir. Perhaps, this need for approval could be seen as a factor that strengthens his self-confidence:

“Singing at a concert in my home town... Therefore, showing friends and local community what I do as a hobby and enjoy this activity”.

B. Choir as a learning environment

According to Durrant (1993), choirs are learning environments. As a result, many people joining choirs want to develop skills and knowledge and make music to as high a standard as they can. In short, people who join choirs would like to get better at singing. Taking into consideration this view, the authors decided to test the validity of this stance - as expressed by Durrant - among older singers, by exploring the extent to which the participants of the present research wished to improve their individual level of skill. In other words, were they concerned about the musical standards of their choir?

In order to further examine this question, participants were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with two specific statements namely:

- In choral groups, I want to develop my skills and knowledge;
- In choral groups, I want to make music to as a high standard as possible.

The percentage of agreement with these two statements was high and surprisingly, was identical for both statements, with 94.7%. However, when asked to rate the importance of technical precision for a choir, only 58% of the participants rated this as an important issue. The contrast between the percentage of singers' acceptance of the statement regarding making a high standard of music and their perception about the importance of technical precision is interesting, as they seem to have similar meaning. In addition, when singers were asked to rate the importance of member's ability to read music, only 25% rated it as important, which seems to contradict their wish to develop their skills and knowledge. However, this does not mean that singers are not concerned, at least in some respect, with the overall musical standard of their choir. When asked what they liked and what differentiated it from other choirs, a significant number of responses actually referred to musical elements such as the high musical standard of the choir and the skills of their conductor.

These seemingly contradictory opinions concerning the musical standards, present an interesting issue with participants expressing a degree of pride in the high standard of the choir, but at the same time not seeming to regard high standards as being important. There are a number of possible interpretations of this. First, the findings could suggest that although singers wish to develop their personal skills and want to make music of high standards, they do not want to feel that they are obliged to. More specifically, it is the authors' view that the singers wished to perform music really well. However, it appears that they believed that 'chasing technical precision and perfection' was a constricting factor which could easily generate, anxiety and stress instead of pleasure. In sum, technical precision is significant but appears to come at a price. As O'Toole (1994), pointed out and is noted previously, in a choir it can be the case that singers become subject to a discourse that is more interested in the production of music than in the labourers.

Secondly, the finding could be interpreted as meaning that individuals wish to improve, learn and take part in high quality performances. However, they also have the belief that 'quality' can be achieved in ways other than through a narrow focus on technical

precision; for example, through conveying a sense of enjoyment. Certainly, a narrow and strict focus on precision can ultimately produce a performance that is rigid and mechanical, and lacking in any form of emotional message.

This belief becomes apparent in the repertoire that the choir usually performs, which also seems to be very diverse. A typical concert consists of Welsh hymns, operatic choruses, spirituals, pieces from musicals and pop songs. According to the conductor, singing pop songs (for example, songs by Freddie Mercury, the Beatles or the Everly brothers) is an innovation of the LWMVC which was followed by other Welsh choirs, something that also indicates the status and the ability of the choir to influence and form 'trends' in choral music. Above all, the conductor holds the belief that the pieces that the choir sings must be enjoyable for both members and audience:

"I believe that I have an obligation to find music that the choir enjoys singing and the audience enjoys listening to. So, you won't find Stockhausen, Stravinsky and so in my repertoire because that's not the type of thing that I personally enjoy".

The participants in the present study supported and valued the importance of commitment to the choir, as the statement "*The importance of members' enthusiasm and dedication*" was rated as the most important characteristic of a good choir (89%). The significant point here was that dedication was regarded as the result of members' enthusiasm and not as an obligation. Furthermore, it could be argued that when commitment to the choir (and therefore desire for self-improvement and contribution) is presented as an obligation to the entire group, non-professional singers react in a negative way probably because they regard it as a constriction related more, to professional musical settings. Therefore, these particular singers regarded technical precision as a positive and desirable element but not as a necessity. A clearer view on this subject was provided by responses to another question in which singers were asked about the reason that prompted them to join their choir. More specifically, singers' responses suggest that their most important motivation was "enjoying making music with others" (74% of the responses), while only 13% responded with "to develop musical skills (sight reading / singing)". This highlights how important it was for these participants to sing and make music with others; something that adds support to the idea of choral music having a significant social dimension as outlined in previous studies (Durrant & Himonides, 1998; Clift & Hancox, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Durrant, 1993).

In terms of the singers' perceptions of the role of the conductor, 84% of the participants, when asked to rate the characteristics of an 'ideal conductor', agreed that it was important for a conductor "*to have confidence and presence of authority*". It was interesting to note that more positive answers (92%) were given when singers were asked about the extent to which they agreed with the statement "*The conductor must be a music authority*". This indicates that singers more easily accept the conductor's musical authority rather than the situation reported by O'Toole (1994), who argued that conductors possessed significant power over singers. However, even if singers seemed to more readily accept the statement about conductor's music authority they did not appear to believe that "*musical decisions are best made by one person*", as 79% of participants disagreed with this statement. This suggests that singers prefer to be

conducted by a person who is a music authority; perhaps because this makes them feel more secure. However, choir members in this particular study still appeared to be able to express their individual opinions on issues that concerned the choir. For example, 74% of participants agreed that they preferred their opinion to be heard when selecting the repertoire.

The results from this research suggest that some common perceptions regarding the conductor's role do exist. For example, having a conductor who is encouraging and inspiring was a characteristic, which the majority of participants (95%) rated as important along with the importance of having a good conducting technique (97%). Another factor seen as being important was the conductor's skill in transmitting his/her passion for music (89%). These findings echo those reported in Durrant & Himonides' case study (1998) which found that choral participants regarded their conductor as a source of inspiration, encouragement and trust. Finally, despite the contrasting views on the importance of the conductor's authority, during the observations, the members of LWMVC did demonstrate respect towards their conductor.

Conclusion

1. The purpose of the present study was to explore the experience of elderly adults who sing on a regular basis with a community choir. As the findings of this case study suggest, the main factor that attracts singers to the choir is the opportunity to participate in a successful organization in addition to the aesthetic and social joys that offers. Furthermore, the participants, despite their age, agreed that they want to develop their skills and knowledge through belonging to the choir and make music to as a high standard as possible. However, it seems that technical precision is regarded as a positive and desirable element but not as a need. A possible explanation is that the attainment of technical perfection demands from singers to sacrifice the joys of singing. These findings suggest, that a conductor of a choir with elder singers should maintain a balance between activities that bring joy to the singers but also give the opportunity for a further improvement.
2. According to the singers, the most important factor for a good choir is to have members that are enthusiastic and dedicated. Conductor was regarded always as a very respectable person and as this study suggests, it seems that singers can accept easier his/her authority when it is limited to musical issues. However, they like their opinion to be heard about issues that concern the choir (for example selection of the repertoire). It is important according to the participants of the study to have a conductor who is encouraging, inspiring, transmits his/her passion for music and has a good conducting technique. Finally, public performances were regarded as important by most of the singers and were regarded as a very rewarding part of choral singing. Some performances are more significant than others due to factors associated to the venues where they performed, emotional reasons or the strengthening of self-confidence.

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