

Why Do Young People Sing Differently in Everyday Life Scenarios and at School?

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Introduction

In modern society, music forms an essential part of young people's lives (Behne, 1997; Fitzgerald, Joseph, Hayes and O'Reagan, 1995; Garton and Pratt, 1991; Larson, 1995; Larson, Kubey and Colletti, 1989). A growing body of research has revealed that young people are deeply involved in musical activities, and pop music (both listened to and sung) plays a central role in their lifestyle (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill, 2000; Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves, 2000).

Although current youth are deeply involved in various kinds of musical activities, in modern society, involvement in musical performances is not quite as popular as just listening to music. In Japan, Masuda and Taniguchi (2005) have explained the dominance of music listening as a result of the fact that, in contemporary society, the balance of listening and performing has changed due to the development of recording technology; digitally recorded music produces vast numbers of copies, and enables people to listen to music everywhere. Barthes (1986) also pointed out that engagement in musical performance has declined in contemporary European society, in spite of a culture in the 19th century in which amateurs enjoyed performing music.

However, over the past 20 years, participation in musical performances has increased among the majority of young people thanks to the continued popularity of karaoke. The enrichment of current technological developments has had a significant influence not only on listening devices but also on karaoke machines. For example, as a result of the popularization of i-mode (a mobile phone Internet access system), karaoke can be enjoyed with various kinds of mobile systems and has become portable and ubiquitous. This opens up karaoke to new users, such as primary and secondary school students who cannot easily go to karaoke-boxes and bars.

The contribution of such developments is that young people can enjoy singing almost everywhere with luxurious accompaniments. Although there is a recent history of a performing culture among young people, such as the garage band and folk music booms before the emergence of karaoke, the target population for such activities was still limited. One of the most important aspects of karaoke culture is that engagement in musical performance has become popular among a wider range of young people.

Empirical data suggests that the popularity of karaoke has been reflected in the singing behavior of young people. Mito (2010) investigated individuals' singing behavior using a diary method in which the frequency of singing behavior was noted. Results showed that 70% of all participants reported a singing episode at least once a week, with an average frequency of 2.5 a week. Thus, in modern society, young people are deeply involved in singing as well as listening activities on a regular basis. This means that many young people have an opportunity to sing outside of school as well as during school music lessons.

While musical activities have become more abundant, one of the most crucial problems for music education has been a lack of interest in school music lessons. This is especially the case at the higher-grade elementary school and secondary school levels, where it has long been reported

that positive attitudes towards music at school has declined (Ross, 1995; Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001). In Japan, studies investigating students' favorite subjects clearly suggest a decline in music interest. Sumiya & Muto (2004) conducted a questionnaire survey assessing elementary and secondary students' favorite school subjects; a clear decline in music interest was observed among secondary school students. The latest survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology in Japan (MEXT, 2005) obtained similar results. In this study, elementary and secondary school students also reported on their favorite subjects. Results showed that while 44% of grade 4 students reported liking music very much, this number gradually decreased among older students.

Kunieda (1998) showed that the decline in music interest was specifically observed for school singing activities, which particularly emerged at higher-grades within elementary schools. Kobayashi (2004) also discussed the lack of singing interest in higher grades at elementary schools, where teachers had to face the problem of pupils who were unwilling to sing.

In summary, although a broad range of singing experiences are open to young people in everyday life, singing activities at school have serious issues. It seems that the degree of interest in singing at school is inversely related to that of music outside school. In order to investigate this gap between singing in everyday life scenarios and at school, we need to clarify how music activities in these two venues differ and influence each other.

Mito & Boal-Palheiros (2012) investigated the relationship between young people's *singing activities in everyday life situations and at school*. Participants' singing behavior/attitudes in secondary school and outside of school were assessed. The questionnaire asked students where they sang, with whom they sang, what they sang, why they sang, and how they sang. Results showed that although several participants actively engaged in singing in and out of school, singing activities at school were not always enjoyable for young people. Furthermore, negative attitudes towards singing were based on several reasons, which indicated that the enrichment of singing activities in everyday life could have both positive and negative effects on the way young people approach music at school.

Although the above study has important implications for clarifying causes of declines in singing interest at school, it is still unclear why this is the case. In Mito & Palheiros' study, although a question like, "why do you sing/why don't you sing," was asked, this single question was not sufficient to clarify reasons for an interest or lack of it in singing. Several participants simply responded, "because I don't like singing," or "because it is not enjoyable," and concrete reasons were not described in detail. It appeared difficult to uncover participants' ideas about singing only from one question. Furthermore, there was also a methodological limitation for clarifying the meaning of singing. Since Mito & Palheiros' study was conducted via a questionnaire method, it was difficult for participants to answer a question like, "why do you sing," via written text. Therefore, the essential meaning of singing in everyday life situations and at school is still unclear.

The goal of the present study was to explore what makes young people sing and what keeps young people from singing. In order to clarify these research questions, the psychological underpinnings that might motivate young people's singing activities were investigated by asking four interrelated questions: the reasons for singing, the reasons for enjoyment, positive/negative singing experiences, and the meaning of singing. Although the content of these four questions overlap, the intention was to explore the essential meaning of singing by asking a similar question from different angles.

Method

Participants

A total of 16 participants volunteered for the study. This included nine secondary school students, three high school students, and four university students.

Questions

The following four questions were posed. Although pre-determined questions were prepared, the interview took the form of a semi-structured interview. The interview allowed new ideas to be brought up because of the interviewee's responses.

1. Why do you sing in everyday life situations/at school?
2. Do you enjoy singing in everyday life situations/at school? Why? (Why not?)
3. What was the most intense singing experience in your life?
4. Describe the positive intense experience and the reasons for it being positive
5. Describe the negative intense experience and the reasons for it being negative.
6. What is the meaning of singing?

Results

Researchers, based on responses from all participants, devised a categorization system. Participants' answers for each question were transcribed, and responses, which were directly related to the questions, were extracted. These responses were broadly divided into positive and negative responses and were further summed into a single sentence so that each sentence included a single meaning. These sentences were then coded according to their meaning. Similar codes were grouped into categories, in which five categories—"simple reason," "positive mood," "way of singing," "social relation," and "external motivation"—emerged as positive responses. Four categories—"simple reason," "negative mood," "singing anxiety," and "unfree"—emerged as negative responses.

Results will be addressed for each question, separately. Since participants often gave plural answers for one question, answers for one question were sometimes categorized into several categories. Therefore, the total number of responses does not always add up to the total number of participants.

(1) Why do you sing in everyday life situations/at school?

All answers were positive for everyday life singing. 14 responses were categorized into "positive mood" as reasons for singing. This category includes responses such as "relieving stress," "raising my spirit," and "enjoyable." Seven responses were categorized into "simple reasons" in which participants did not indicate any particular reasons for singing: "I like singing," "I want to sing," and "no reason." In contrast, all answers related to singing at school were negative, and had to be categorized into negative categories except for one response. Almost all responses were categorized as "unfree" in which many participants reported that they sang at school because it was their obligation.

(2) Do you enjoy singing in everyday life situations/ at school? Why? (Why not?)

All participants answered that they enjoyed singing in everyday life scenarios and, naturally, there were no negative responses regarding reasons for their enjoyment. Reasons for enjoyment

were similar to those in Question 1, with 10 responses categorized into “positive mood,” followed by seven responses categorized into “simple reasons.” The most common answer in the category “positive mood” was “relieving stress.” As for singing at school, 8 out of 16 participants answered that they enjoyed singing. However, the reasons for enjoyment were different from those in everyday life situations. The majority of responses were categorized into two categories: “social relations” and “external motivation”.

While all participants showed enjoyment with everyday life singing, not all participants expressed enjoyment with singing at school. eight participants answered that they did not enjoy singing at school, with 10 responses categorized into “singing anxiety,” 9 into “negative mood,” and 3 into “unfree”. “Singing anxiety” seemed to occur during situations where students had to sing alone in public. Many participants expressed anxiety because they “do not like other people listening to me sing.” Some participants explained their anxiety in relation to the “lack of skills” and “negative feedback” while singing in public. In the “negative mood” category, participants expressed their mood as “uncomfortable,” “not enjoyable,” “nervous,” and “embarrassed.” In the “unfree” category, many participants mentioned an uncomfortable feeling on receiving instructions from the teacher related to singing.

(3) What was the most intense (Positive/Negative) singing experience in your life? Why?

For question 3, the most intense (positive and negative) singing experiences were assessed. Surprisingly, positive experiences were concentrated on choral events conducted at school. Thirteen participants considered that their most positive singing experience was at a “choir competition,” which is the most important school ceremony in Japan. Most of the reasons for this positive experiences were categorized into two categories: “social relationships” and “external motivation”. Participants unanimously emphasized the significance of “interactions with friends,” which emerge during the process of preparing for choral events, and strong feelings of accomplishment when “external feedback,” such as a prize, is awarded.

As for the negative experiences, many participants reported “singing examination” as the most negative experience, and most of the responses for negative reasons were categorized into “singing anxiety.” This was also the main reason for negative responses for question 2. Participants were sensitive about singing in public. Participants reported feeling “humiliated” when forced to sing alone in public.

We also assessed the meaning of singing in question 4. Although we did not ask separate questions not about everyday life scenarios and school separately, the answers were similar to everyday singing assessed in questions 1 and 2, with 13 responses categorized into “positive mood”.

Discussion

The present study provided a theoretically grounded account of young people’s interest in singing both in everyday life scenarios and at school. An interview was designed to gather information about the psychological underpinnings of singing activity *by asking* about the reasons for singing, reasons for enjoyment, positive/negative singing experiences, and the meaning of singing.

Questions regarding reasons for singing and reasons for enjoyment were assessed both for everyday life scenarios and at school, separately. For everyday life singing, answers for these

two questions were consistent. Almost all responses were positive, and “positive mood” was the most common answer given as to reasons for singing and enjoyment. Responses categorized into “positive mood” often included the keywords “sing loudly,” “warm up with friends,” and “go crazy.” It seemed that the youngsters engaged in singing to facilitate enjoyment with friends. The establishment of such singing styles seemed to be closely connected to karaoke, which is clearly reflected in the following comment: *At karaoke, I can sing with a loud voice and get a kick from singing! I can warm up and go crazy while singing with my friends!*

As for singing at school, results of the two questions—reasons for singing and singing enjoyment—were not consistent. Almost all participants provided negative responses to reasons for singing at school as, “singing was compulsory during a music lesson.” Given that most of the singing activities in school were conducted as music lessons, it seemed reasonable for students to say that reasons for singing were related to an “obligation.”

Regarding students’ singing enjoyment at school, about half the participants gave positive responses. However, the reasons for enjoyment at school were quite different from those in everyday life situations. Several comments were not related to the singing behavior itself but to the benefits related to singing activities. A majority of participants found that the enjoyment related singing at school was linked to social relationships.

This association was highlighted in answers to question 3 in which a majority of students noted that their most positive singing experiences were choral events at school. This was because of the significant social interactions that emerged while preparing for those events. The following comment clearly represents this sentiment:

I can’t forget the intense experience from the choral competition in which great social relationships were established. The members of the class collaborated with each other in order to accomplish our goal, which was to win the prize.

While almost all the participants enjoyed singing in everyday life, about half of the participants said they did not enjoy singing at school. The negative aspects of singing at school were concentrated on singing anxiety, which was mainly focused on singing in public. Participants’ comments indicated that they were extremely sensitive about singing in front of other people: *During the singing examination, I sang alone in front of my whole class. I was so embarrassed. I don’t want other people listening to me sing.*

Furthermore, singing anxiety was especially related to participants’ own assumptions regarding their “lack of skill”: *During the singing examination, I was so humiliated because I sang out of tune. I was nervous about whether I would be able to sing correctly or not.*

The “negative feedback” from other people also fostered participants’ anxiety: *One day, I was told that I was a poor pitch singer, which was so shocking to me. I don’t want to sing anymore.*

Negative attitudes about singing at school contrasted with attitudes about singing outside of school; here, singing in public did not impose negative feelings. In everyday life, there were many situations where participants sang alone in public. However, students did not appear to feel anxiety in these situations. Rather, the existence of an audience seemed to be a positive factor that encouraged these individuals to sing. As has been explained, most of the singing in everyday life situations involved karaoke, and a solo performance is one of the most important karaoke singing styles in Japan. Furthermore, the solo singing conducted with audiences is one of the most essential attractions for karaoke singing. Many participants emphasized that they could sing uninhibited with the existence of an audience.

The act of singing in front of others exerted an entirely opposing effect on singing motivation in everyday life versus school scenarios. This contrast might originate from the existence of

differences in external pressure. While at school, many participants reported that they were often expected to sing eloquently; to do so, teachers provided many instructions. Several participants disliked such instructions that designated the “right” way to sing. There were many comments such as, “I don’t want to sing as I’m told” and “I want to sing freely.”

Contrary to school singing scenarios, there were few external pressures while singing in everyday life situations. Many participants reported that one of the good aspects of regular singing is that they could sing as they wanted. Several participants pointed out that they could sing without taking notice of their mistakes, correct pitch, and imposed expressions.

Conclusion

The present study showed that several participants actively engaged in singing in and out of school. However, the findings also showed that, for some participants, singing activities at school was not always enjoyable. Several participants were sensitive about singing in public, which led to negative attitudes regarding school singing. School music education has to have a renewed sense that singing at school sometimes imposes a big burden on the students.

However, from the viewpoint of music education, singing in everyday life scenarios also has its challenges. The problem was that, during everyday life scenarios, motivation for musical achievement was not high. Although singing activities were the central interest for singing in everyday life situations, it seemed that singing was done without deep musical meaning. There were few responses describing the attraction of musical aspects to singing. For example, descriptions such as, “attraction to songs,” “quality of the performance,” and “emotional reaction to singing,” were rarely mentioned as reasons for enjoyment. Instead, “relieving stress,” which was attained by singing in a loud voice, was the main purpose for singing in everyday life situations. Thus, it would appear that singing during everyday life scenarios was a rather superficial activity

The lack of musical motivation was also seen when singing at school in which the primary reason for enjoyment was “social relationships.” The establishment of social relationships through singing is surely a meaningful outcome of school singing. However, musical development, such as the acquisition of musical skills and elaboration of musical expression, should also be an important goal for school singing. It is disappointing that few participants showed an interest in musical development through singing.

Pursuing musical meaning during a singing activity is not an easy task. In fact, the results of present study clearly indicate that participants were uncomfortable when required to improve the musical quality of their singing. Many participants were unwilling to be constrained by a teacher’s instruction, even though those instructions were given in order to foster musical development. Instead, participants seemed to be inevitably drawn to unconstrained singing. The present study does not intend to downplay young people’s desired method of singing. A majority of the participants enjoyed singing in everyday life scenarios, and this can have a positive impact on school singing. However, considering the long-term enrichment of singing activities both in everyday life situations and at school, the importance of musical meaning needs to be considered.

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