

What Happens When People Sing? A Community of Voices: An Investigation of the Effects of Belonging to a Choir

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Abstract

This is the story of people who come together regularly to sing; a community of singers who partake in a meaningful artmaking experience. Why do people spend time and money on arts activities when current economic and educational values suggest that other pursuits are more worthy? What can be learned about engagement in arts experiences from this group?

Literature and research inform us that the arts are a means of knowing and learning; that they contribute to a culture of permanence; and that they are a means of connecting humans to the world beyond. This study is designed to get at the heart of the experience of the individual singer who belongs to a specific choir.

Case study, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry methods were employed, using the ethnographic tools of the video and audio recorded field events, the recorded and transcribed interview, recorded and transcribed focus group interviews, field notes, and questionnaires. The individual voices of the participants were captured, studied, and analyzed, and conclusions in the form of hypotheses were introduced.

The data presented themselves in a matrix of layers and clusters. The study revealed that participants viewed their participation in the choir as *Community, Self-Identity, Means of Restoration and Healing, and Means of Developing Discernment and Connoisseurship*.

A Community of Voices

Note: All quotes in this paper from volunteer choral singers will appear in *italics*.

Singing makes me a happier person. Making music is a joyful experience.

Figuring out new music on a Saturday morning is better than sitting doing the Globe and Mail crossword.

Singing washes away the dust of everyday life.

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Why Would Anyone Join a Volunteer Choir?

We humans of this third millennium are members of a materially abundant society. However, in this age of growing personal resources and technical prowess, there is clearly something missing. As David Abram writes, "...some essential ingredient has been neglected, some aspect of life has been dangerously overlooked, set aside, or simply forgotten in the rush toward a common world (in O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 4)." While major arts organizations are incurring devastating shortfalls, people are finding ways to experience the arts as a means of enriching the quality of their lives...in finding that "missing essential ingredient." The Toronto Arts Council, for example, gives over \$8 million in grants to more than 600 organizations or individuals annually to provide opportunities for the citizens of Toronto to participate in dance, literary, music, theatre, visual, and media arts endeavours.

As a director of a community choir, I am interested in what happens in the lives of these people, who, in the age of the BlackBerry and satellite television, choose to dedicate much of their personal time and resources to the ancient and primal human practice of singing. What characteristics do they demonstrate as a result of their experiences? What properties and priorities order their lives? When people sing, what do they learn? How does this learning affect the various dimensions of their lives? How does it change them? What impact does it have on the community and society? In a bottom line world, what role does the profoundly personal human experience have?

These questions and others were addressed in a recent research study designed with the title, *A Community of Voices*. Using simple data gathering methods such as interviews, surveys, and observation, some very interesting results were revealed.

The Choir as Community

As musicians, we constantly and dynamically exist in the atmosphere of a larger community. Our society has progressively become alienating and rootless for the people who live in it. The need for a sense of belonging to a community and place is particularly wanting as people strive to connect, become rooted or seek for that larger-than-self experience. Choirs are a community, a subculture in the greater society. Subjects of this study commented about what it means to be part of the group.

...community is not sharing the same address, but it is the people in the world that are important to me. [Our choir] has shared as a family all

kinds of stuff together, even the loss of one of our members to illness, personal tragedies, successes, and simply being on the same page musically.

[Our choir] is a safe place to find a vehicle to express ourselves emotionally through music. It is safe because there are others undergoing the same experience. We can do more than it is possible to do alone.

Coming to rehearsal is like greeting an extended family. The music-making happens much faster because of the closeness of the fellow singers.

James Jordan (1999) suggests that as we come to know ourselves in more than a passing or fleeting understanding, we then are in a place to begin to understand or know other beings. For a community to work, and for music-making to be profound, there must be a union, a bond, a connectedness that brings human beings so close together that they almost become one.

I was just thrilled when I was invited to belong to this group. At our first rehearsal it was a little intimidating because everyone was new to me. Many of these strangers have now become very good friends. I really appreciate and care for them.

There is an alchemy that happens when a balance is present between one's own individual reasons for belonging to the group, and the true sense of the community expectations, both musical, and social. There are layers of connections to our experiences. Relationships within the choir are extended at concert time to include the audience. The relationship to audience is also community.

While most choirs have members with much in common, frequently there is diversity within the community. Age, gender, race, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation as well as other non-visible differences make up our choral communities. How do we deal with diversity? O'Sullivan (1999) suggests that "diversity is one of the necessary ingredients of a healthy spirituality (p. 261)." He urges us to go below the surface of differences to appreciate the deep interiority of all creation.

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Clearly, the act of belonging is key. We conclude that belonging to a community of singers helps us to acknowledge the things we care about, and allows us to celebrate that caring with others.

The Choir as a Means of Self-Identity

Who am I? At any given time, there are various ways one might answer the question: "I am a Liberal," "I am a woman," "I am Caucasian," "I am ____" and the blank can be filled with whatever one wishes. Yet, there is always a lurking question in the background that asks, "Are you sure?" We are constantly in search of the whole story of who we are.

Within that search, we all feel a need to be part of something larger than ourselves. So much of our energy as human beings goes into finding that connection with something larger. Belonging to something larger is a way of telling ourselves, "that is who I am." The voices that follow are responses located within that quest. They define the self of the choral singer...an individual voice emerging from within the larger voice of the choral community:

My mother grew up in a household where there was a string quartet, but not always food. My father grew up in a household where there was little music, for religious reasons, and he really liked the music as I was growing up. The irony here is that my love of music came from the church.

My family put intrinsic value on something that society would deem as extrinsically worthless. We were always supported in our music lessons and music-making within a fairly poor family.

This choir has brought back my childhood. Singing was a big part of my life. I used to love singing. I would make up words and sing up in a tree. I would make up Italian lyrics and sound like an opera singer. I stopped singing in grade 6 and replaced it with violin, flute, and piano.

I do not have a self-image of being a "singer" in the formal sense of that word. I have no doubt that I'm good enough to be in the choir. My self-doubt coefficient clicks in and informs me that I am not a singer, and

I can stand beside someone who makes that claim, who is not necessarily any better than I am in accuracy or musicianship, but it still affects who I am.

Through experiencing the music that we sing, which is so beautiful, I realize that I really want my life to be centred around beauty.

The misconception that hard work is virtuous, and art is mere play peeks out at us from time to time in our self-doubts about our worthiness or abilities. Perhaps it is a form of self-pampering, in the best sense of that term, to set aside time each week to be with great music in a community of like-minded people. Each of the voices above reveals the abundance of the art presence in their lives, and how this presence has facilitated a sense of self. If we believe that music is a form of self-expression, it should follow that one must have a self to express.

The Choir as a Means of Restoration and Healing

In a materialistic culture it should come as no great surprise that people are in search of quality experiences to give their lives more meaning and profundity. The non-material dimension of humanity is clearly a cohabitant within the imagination and work of the artist. The increased interest in matters metaphysical has led some to suggest that we are in a spiritual renaissance. Matthew Fox suggest that artistic force is a form of spiritual self-examination. He writes:

Creativity is not about painting a picture or producing an object; it is about wrestling with the demons and angels in the depths of our psyches and daring to name them, to put them where they can breathe and have place and we can look at them (in Pitman, 1998, p. 169)."

We might say that grappling with the themes and power of great musical works evokes that same struggle. It takes us inward.

Plato emphasizes the effect of music on the soul,

...harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of the soul within us, was given by the Muses to him who makes intelligent

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use of the Muses, not as an aid to irrational pleasure but as an auxiliary to the inner revolution of the soul, when it has lost its harmony, to assist in restoring it to order and concord with itself (Lewis, 1983, p .37).

Aristotle in his Poetics describes the influence of melodies which fill the soul with “religious excitement,” calming and restoring them as if they had undergone a medical treatment and purging (*Ibid*, pp. 52-53).

Music has this special quality. It is a precious thing. I can feel so connected to a piece that it moves me to want to cry. Music has such order... it has its own life, and it goes beyond just being an extension of the composer. It is a gift we receive, and that we can give back when we perform it from our deepest being. It is a gift we give to ourselves, to others, and back to the source, the Creator.

If I live close enough to my “self” that I can be moved, my personhood opens up and I can be receptive to experiences that might be described as transcendental.

Any discussion about spirituality must address the yearning or longing of the human spirit for nourishment and healing. We yearn to be creative and to experience artistic presence in our lives, and we must constantly feed that hunger. Singing addresses the yearnings of the soul.

Art can address disturbing and provoking issues, but you don't come away from the experience being depressed. Even after we've sung something that was emotionally or socially disturbing, I still feel a sense of peace as a result of the singing experience. I always come home after a rehearsal or concert feeling great. There is something physically freeing about that.

We need to stop and engage in openness, both spiritually and physically. We cannot sing without our bodies being in an open and receptive

position. When you are hurting or feeling hurt yourself, you cannot do justice to the music or the audience.

Singing also has healing and restorative effects on the body and overall sense of well-being.

I find that the actual physical act of singing, whatever it is that it does to your body, it is a little bit like chanting. I was surprised at how much singing physically relaxes me.

Sometimes I find that my breathing has slowed and my previous sense of frustration has been replaced by an overall sense of well-being.

When you are doing any repetitive vocalizing, it activates beta waves in resonance with your bodies. It has the effect of moving you to a different location.

Finally, we hear choristers speaking about the music and the direct connection it has to the interior dimensions of humanness.

Music is created order, but the link is not with our logical mind, but in our spirit and soul. When you sing, you admire the logical ingenuity, but it really originates from our heart. That is the link that connects them to the music.

If it had not been for music I would have been a very sorry soul. I'm not sure I could have made it in any other way. It begins to reveal an inner side of yourself and you go "aha, there is something good in me after all." One has to be redeemed somewhere, that we have a useful purpose, and that we have something beautiful, no matter how ugly or how bad people think we are, or how bad we have labelled ourselves... it is music that sets us free and makes us feel like we have a purpose in living.

Walter Pitman (1998) recounts the story of an artist shocking an audience of business tycoons by suggesting that their stress and ulcers were but an "unkissed imagination...an undanced dance (p. 66)."

The Choir as a Means of Developing Artistic Discernment and Connoisseurship

Connoisseurship can be defined as the state of deeper knowledge and understanding of a thing or practice that stems from personal interest, appreciation, and enjoyment. Being a connoisseur is to have more than a superficial knowledge of the practice. Connected with connoisseurship is discernment, or the ability to judge the quality of the experience. Discernment depends on knowledge, understanding, and a reflective memory, all providing a foundation for making judgments about quality (Eisner, 1985).

Connoisseurship and discernment in singing are inextricably connected to the performing or practice of singing. Non-singers may gain some knowledge and pleasure by reading about singing, or by listening, but because the sounds of singing caused by the human body, mind, and spirit, a discerning level of understanding and appreciation demands a "knowledge in kind" or in other words, personal experience.

Singing in a choir develops qualities of discernment and connoisseurship.

I am not speaking metaphorically here by saying that I am becoming one with the composer's work. I am not the composer, but the work is part of me. It is not like a library I would go to. I am the library, the embodiment of that music and text. When I am experiencing and thrilling to the music, I have apprehended it and grasped it.

I would define my connoisseurship this way. I respect knowledge. I respect someone's competence in something.

Being in the choir is like being on the inside. I am interested in this from a composer's viewpoint. When you hear a piece recorded, that is one thing. When you are singing one of the lines, you are part of the construction. As a composer you have a different sensation while doing it. You hear it differently. The music takes on different colours. It's like singing under a different light.

There is a sense of deep personal satisfaction in these narratives. The reporting that happiness was experienced is deeply significant. Since Aristotle, we have known that happiness is the true foundation of existence. Sometimes, we refer to this as an aesthetic

experience. These reports of deep enjoyment come as a result of understanding the experience, and being in touch with ones own singing.

It is so stimulating to add these experiences to my life. We are able to develop so many musical ideas...and are given opportunities to go far beyond the typical experiences.

When we revisit music, I am aware that it is internalized. It is not me reading music as much as it is me experiencing the music as we have performed it before. There is an intuitiveness and clarity about how it should be sung, and what emotions should be there. It was an unconscious order present in singing music that we have already learned and performed... like visiting an old friend.

To be a connoisseur of an art form is to have some kind of competence in that art form. Understanding is part of know how. For a singer, to be a connoisseur means having some understanding of what it is to sing.

Conclusions

Qualitative research does not purport to "generalize" to a population of people, but rather, to a population of process (Feagin *et al*, 1991). "Thick description," the naturalistic generalization of precise story-telling about individuals who act as part of a group, is simple, and remains the most authentic to the form in which people often experience their own lives (Geertz, 1973). So, it is not the purpose to derive conclusive results about behaviour, beliefs, or personal priorities to be applied to a population of others. Rather, some provisional conclusions are offered, based upon the four construct clusters, and some contingent theories are hypothesized, based upon the revelations of our subject's personal experiences in this study.

Four emergent constructs

A study of this sort yields data from a wide spectre of sources and viewpoints. There are dozens of sub-inquiries beckoning us to probe a little deeper into their seemingly limitless store of intrigue. Bearing in mind the properties of "parsimony and scope (Glaser, 1992)," the construct list is limited to four. These four constructs form the core

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of the conclusions, fulfilling Glaser's prediction that the "core emerges; it just has to, as it is on all the participants' minds in one way or another (p. 77)."

The reader is reminded that research is about constructing *knowledge* (Bartel & Radocy, 2002). The emergent constructs in this study serve the research plan to the extent that knowledge is both derived from inferred meaning, and revealed through direct narrative.

Choir as community

Dewey described a community as an organic entity with characteristics all its own, where these characteristics are "no mere sum of its parts (in Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, p. 271)." This study supports Dewey's notion of community.

What are the characteristics of this community? What do the data reveal about the kind of community it is? What can be learned in this study, from the perspective of observing the individuals as they reveal their life within the group of fellow singers?

First, it is observed that this community values the sharing of a common bond. It is a social experience with a focus. The binding stuff of this community is the common love of music. There is a sense of teamwork, of interdependency, of pulling together.

This community is a safe place to be...to express one's personhood, to take risks, just to be. People in this community care and take responsibility for each other's well-being. There is safety in striving for excellence in this community, and there is a shared sense of quality in performance, and quality or depth of experience.

As in all communities, there are tensions. People bring anxieties, personal issues, strained relationships, loneliness, shyness, and in some cases, their own sense of inadequacies. These tensions are intertwined with both the social and musical expectations within the group. There are also artistic frustrations because of the variety of skill levels and backgrounds.

This is a community where learning and growth are part of the members' storied experience. They are developing and constructing their own knowledge through the communal activities, both musical and social.

The community is diverse in some areas, but homogeneous in others. There is concern expressed about the monocultural aspects of the choir and the audiences it attracts. There is a respect for the artistic leadership and the manner in which music is presented and developed.

The concept of being *on-line* or single minded about musical performance styles and commitment within the engagement of music-making speaks to the "no mere sum of

the parts" descriptor. The individuals in this community make abundantly evident in their narratives that they believe they are able to achieve more collectively than they can individually.

What can be inferred from this collection of characteristics about these specific individuals in this choir? The data suggests the following, presented as untested hypotheses:

1. People are drawn to belong to a community because of a shared desire to participate in a common activity or experience.
2. People come in contact with, and establish relationships with other individuals with whom they have little or nothing in common, other than the activity or experience that drew them to the group.
3. People engage in activities within the safety of a like-minded community, that they otherwise would not attempt.
4. Given the right conditions, diverse individuals become supportive of each other's learning and growth within the domain of the community's focus.
5. In order for the community to function at its best, the individuals must be open, vulnerable, and in a centred place as far as the common activity is concerned.

In the same way that a musical instrument is constantly going out of tune, yet when in tune is capable of producing satisfying and sometimes even magical sounds, so goes the community of singers. When "in tune" with each other and the common focus, the community performs with a minimum of negative tension and dissonance. To keep the community in tune is the optimum goal of both the membership and the leadership.

Choir as a means of self-identity

To claim to be able to define one's self with veracity is not dissimilar to the equally false claim that one really knows what they look like. The philosopher, Robert Nozick (1989) warns that "it is easy to fall into an 'end-state' conception of the self, demarcating some particular condition for it to reach and maintain: (p. 128). His warning suggests that the ways the self transforms are more important than the achieving of a certain end state or result of being. The self does not simply undergo these processes; it shapes and chooses them, initiates and runs them (*Ibid*).

The "polyphony of voices" in this study are worth examining for the very reasons that Nozick identifies. They have chosen to belong to the community, have actively

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shaped their roles within it, and are forming their sense of self through these processes. The investigator moves in close range, focussing his sights on the *person* of the study, and through observation infers some conclusions.

In this choral community, there are individuals who self-declare their identity as being derived, at least in part, by attributes connected to their community of choice. Self-esteem, reinforced by singing well is a building block of one's identity. Buying into a standard of excellence provides the challenge or the stretch that humans seem to seek. The development of skills in singing and musicianship informs the self on a repeated basis each time there is opportunity to rehearse or perform. Pride in belonging to something worthwhile, and in achievement add volumes to the self picture, as does a belief that one is acting with honesty and truth. The personal connection to beauty is foundational in providing a positive self image...who does not value and yearn for the beauty in life?

Perhaps the strongest expression of self is that of belonging to something larger than ourselves. Much human energy is expended in finding that special connection, the antidote to solitude and loneliness (Spangler, 1996, Palmer, 1998). It is possible to have self doubts about skills, musicianship, even labels ("I don't really think of myself as a 'singer'") without the usual destructive results, when connected to an intrinsically valuable experience that expands "who you are". The sense of self-worth is contingent to some degree upon the belief that the experience in which individuals find themselves in some way furthers the purpose of their lives.

These individuals define themselves by their levels of engagement, by the intensity with which they commit to the experience. They speak of themselves as joyful, happy, living a life of abundance.

This panacea of perfection must be tempered with the reminder from Dorothy Heathcote that "the arts isolate a factor of human experience...they make you examine it through a particular moment of life...and because it does this, it distorts (in Johnson & O'Neill, 1984, p. 114)." A distorted fraction of the self-identity of these singers has been examined. However, it is a positive image, and one that can infer some general theory about the effect of arts experience on the worth of the individual.

Again, some untested generalizations are appropriate here:

1. Pleasure is derived through a sense of personal contribution to a larger-than-self endeavour.
2. Personal achievement in making art that is deemed to be "excellent" by both the group peers, and society in general, is greatly affirming to one's self-identity.

3. Even when one feels deficient in skills or understanding of a specific activity, when the conditions are supportive, it can be profitable to one's sense of worth to engage in that activity.
4. Honesty and truth are essential virtues for artmaking experiences to do their most authentic work within the life of an individual.

Choir as a means of restoration and healing

Music is a source of healing. There is no doubt that music can soothe the troubled heart. All of us experience a deficit from time to time in our psychological and spiritual lives that welcomes music's healing powers (Willingham, 2000b, p. 6). The well-known Hungarian composer, Zoltán Kodály stated that "It is not technique that is the essence of art, but the soul (in Hausemann & Jordan, 1991, p. 1)." The travail that gives birth to art is mirrored in our human struggle to experience the restorative qualities that the art can offer us. Our subjects give these experiences of the human interior a variety of names.

One suggests that the inner workings of the art bring mental order. Another knows that living close to self is necessary to being receptive to the transcendental. The loss of ego opens the human spirit for aesthetic experiences and non-temporal and non-material realities. Singing enlivens the spirit, inspires the soul, replaces boredom with animation and a sense of peace and well-being. Music has redeeming qualities that helps you discover your own goodness.

There are some physically restorative qualities about singing, such as relaxation, slower breathing, and a profound awareness of stress relief.

The optimal experience that we have come to recognize as flow is alluded to in a number of responses. What is to be made of this? What power is being tapped? How does the common physiological structure of the human voice connect so deeply to the uncommon experiences of the heart? Several inferences are made that invite further study:

1. There is an immediacy of connectedness to one's inner realm, through the contemplative practice of artmaking activities.
2. For many individuals, the spiritual experience is more profound in a community where everyone is in a similar state of engagement.
3. Thoughtful and reflective pursuits in artmaking activities have restorative and nurturing effects on the artmaker.

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4. Through singing, or other forms of artistic concentration, a consciousness of mental order and calm can be realized.

I have not proposed hypotheses that have to do with the physical effects of music on the individual, nor with the work being done in music therapy. Current research being undertaken (such as in the Centre for Research in Music Therapy at Wilfrid Laurier University) on the effects of music as psycho therapy and the therapeutic use of music are opening new windows for our understanding of the many layers in which music touches us. Neuro-biologists are also revealing important clues as to the effects of music and the arts on brain processes.

Choir as a means of developing discernment and connoisseurship

For many, the arts are mysterious, and confined to the spiritual, emotive, or feeling side of experience. Hillman (1996) identifies music as one of the traditional bridges to mysticism and the invisible realm.

...the notations on a musical score cross the limbo land between two worlds. They (along with math equations and myth personifications) offer a seductive front that seems to present the unknown other side, a seduction that leads to the delusional conviction that math, music, and myths are the other side (p. 94).

The mystery is an essential ingredient for many, but for those who are mindful, and even somewhat diligent in their artmaking, a quite different process occurs. Tools of discernment are acquired, and the joy of deeper understanding and knowledge bring connoisseurship to the experience. Connoisseurship is more than mastering Hillman's seductive *notes on the page*. However, reading music and understanding musical systems are tantamount to the amateur wine connoisseur mastering the removal of a cork with some degree of dignity, if not with elegance and élan.

Our participants reported that through the development of singing and reading skills, contextual knowledge of the music itself, understanding stylistic performance, and the performance experience itself, they were able to exercise their growing dilettantism in becoming true connoisseurs of singing.

Skills in singing and understanding vocal technique are first steps to discernment. The somatic experience described by one as "I am the music," where the body vibrates

in order to release the human expression from *inside to outside* expresses the activity well. Hand-in-hand with vocalization is phonation. The formation of vowels and consonants, and infinite combinations of vocal sounds as they express the profound poetic texts of choral music lead the singer into a personal understanding of choral music procedures.

Happiness reappears as a key element of deep experience. This is not just a flip or superficial happiness, but the state of human quest declared by Aristotle as the true foundation of existence. It is also the pleasure afforded those who invest deeply enough into any topic, enterprise, or human endeavour, to derive depth and meaning from the experience.

Knowledge is fundamental. Knowing the language of the composer, the context, and the operational influences deepen the understanding. There is sheer joy in being able to sight-read competently, and the direct entry into the musical artistic features that good reading facilitates creates opportunities for intimacy with the music.

Along with knowledge comes respect and appreciation. An inherent value must be afforded the things in our lives that we consider to be great (Palmer, 1998). Making the connections historically, contextually, and socially deepens the appreciation.

However, cognitive knowledge and deep-felt appreciation are not enough. Musical knowledge is manifest through performing, rather than through discourse. The ability to become one with the music is an elevated form of connoisseurship.

Elliot Eisner introduced the term "connoisseurship" into the lexicon of educational evaluation. The research has been fruitful in informing educational planning and practice. He admonishes us to "listen to the shop talk [of teachers]...the kind of discourse they carry on in the lounge; their shop talk reveals the application of their own levels of connoisseurship..." Then, he simply and profoundly articulates the essence of connoisseurship. "What is obvious...we learn to recognize easily and early. What is subtle and complex we might never perceive...Seeing is not simply an act, but an achievement. Seeing is a realization secured (1985, p. 109)." What goes for teachers, goes for artists. To be able to *see* is to discern. To have and to be able to use the tools of discernment is to be able to exercise polish, refinement, finesse and grace, qualities attributed to one who is a *connoisseur*.

Once more, questions for further inquiry are applied. What can be learned from this discussion? What transpires in the lives of the subjects? What knowledge is being constructed? The following might serve as the focus of further study:

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1. Understanding is part of knowing how. To be a connoisseur of an art form, whether it be an observer, listener, creator, or performer, is to have some kind of competence in the performance of that art.
2. It is possible to become one with an art form so that it is apprehended fully as a part of one's knowledge of self.
3. Profound pleasure, described as "happiness," "joy," "flow," and in other ways, is a result of an optimal experience where the knowledge, understanding, and skills in that artform are balanced by a suitable level of challenge.

Call to Action: Singing and Social Responsibility

Maya Angelou (1997) exhorts us to sing the songs of struggle, resistance, pain, tribulation, and justice. Songs such as "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, Oh Freedom!" and "Run children run, I've gotta right to the tree of life", or "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" connect us through soulful music and text to the universal human history of pain, sorrow, human agony, and destructive injustice. Music that immediately grabs the heart of the choir members in this research study has been that which speaks of the oppressed and the victimized. *Hard Shoulder*, a choral work by Stephen Hatfield, referenced in several participants' responses is evidence of the power of music to stir the human spirit into examining beliefs, values, and practices toward those challenged by illness, homelessness, and other manifestations of poverty.

While the investigation of this group of singers was not focused on social action and human justice, there is an undercurrent of response that serves as an indication that in some cases they were thinking and linking their music to this dimension of human accountability. Several of the narratives spoke of a better and more beautiful world, and that the arts sustained the good in the world, although these matters were never addressed directly in the research.

The issue of the arts and their connection to social action is included in the conclusions of this study, because it can be inferred that there is a connection. The connection, in part, lies in the language. O'Sullivan outlines a belief system drawing on the work of David Purpel that serves as a credo for kindling the fires of the soul as a call to social action. But the language sounds so familiar to those of us who dwell in the world of the arts. Listen to the sound and timbre of these aims and aspirations and their evocation of spiritual responses. Those who would seek to act on principles of sustaining and improving the good in the world engage in:

1. The examination and contemplation of the awe, wonder, and mystery of the universe.
2. The cultivation and nourishment of the process of meaning making.
3. The cultivation and nourishment of the concept of oneness of nature and humanity, with the concurrent responsibility to strive for harmony, peace, and justice.
4. The cultivation, nourishment, and development of a cultural mythos that builds on a faith in the human capacity to participate in the creation of a world of justice, compassion, caring, love, and joy.
5. The cultivation, nourishment, and development of the ideals of community, compassion, and interdependence within the traditions of democratic principles (O'Sullivan, 1999, pp. 272-274).

These are the concepts, words, and issues of the artists. The "cultivation" and "nourishment" of mythos that celebrates the notion of a world of justice and compassion is the theme of hundreds of musical compositions, plays, poems, and paintings. Once more, an occasion presents itself to hypothesize about this link between arts and social action.

A multi-layered hypothesis that invites further investigation might be this:

- How do the arts foment the possibility of abundant living (Davis, 2000)?
- How might the sustaining of our culture depend of the abundant living of citizens (Pitman, 1998)?
- To what degree does abundant living lie in the ability to make meaning through narrative, mythos, song, and dance (Postman, 1995)?

The Final Word

By asking members of a choir to respond to the question, "What effects does singing in the choir have on you?" four main clusters of ideas and concepts were revealed. Singers strongly professed to belonging to a *community*, they *self-identified* with being in a choir, they experienced *restoration and healing* through music-making, and finally, they reported a degree of *discernment and connoisseurship*.

The narratives you have read tell the stories of musical discourse that also serve as windows through which a different world can be glimpsed. Music bridges the spaces

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among individuals and the community of the whole. There is a common mystery, a transcendency that the experience of singing provides.

There are many reasons for people to join a choir. I encourage the reader, whether you be choristers, directors, choir administrators, or members of the audience, to reflect on the reasons people sing, and the effects that this great human endeavour has on all of us who are fortunate enough to be members of choirs.

The final word goes to a great choral educator. She underscores the undeniable connection between music and living. If anything, this study affirms that connection.

It is necessary to perform as a good musician. We need excellence in performance; but we need excellence in living because music is a product of living. They are not divorced. One cannot sing clichés or platitudes; but understanding comes out of reality. Real life. This is what music is all about (excerpted from Elaine Brown, Lecture, in Jordan, 1999, p. 80).

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