A Case Study of the Process of an Adult Female Learning to Sing in a Senior Chorus

Mary L. Cohen and Erin Smith
University of Iowa, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine, over nine months, the perceptions and processes of an adult female who is learning to sing with a chorus for adults over 50 years old. The three-part process is as follows: 1) exploring the history of her life story with respect to previous singing experiences, perceptions, and frustrations, 2) assessing her vocal skills with respect to vocal range, body alignment, breath management, and pitch accuracy, and 3) developing her ability to match pitch with other singers and to sing harmony with the chorus. The following research questions guided the investigation: 1) Why did this particular person not learn to sing while growing up? 2) How does not singing earlier in her life affect her self-identity and her self-perception? 3) What elements of her individual and group singing practice help and hinder her ability to sing with the chorus? And 4) How does learning to sing with the chorus affect her self-identity and her self-perception?

This embedded case study (Yin, 2003) employed a grounded theory qualitative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection included written reflections from three music teachers who alternately worked with the singer twice per week, vocal range, duration of a singing a middle C on "loo," written reflections from the singer, in-depth interviews with the singer, and direct observation. Open, selective, and axial coding were used for data analysis and theory generation.

Findings and implications for choral music education are described. Further research directions and studies are suggested.

Introduction

On August 21, 2008 Joyce Springer (actual name has been changed) (1949-) replied to an article Mary Cohen, director of the Voices of Experience Chorus, wrote in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* inviting people to join this chorus for adults age 50 or older. Springer inquired whether Cohen would consider her, describing herself as someone who cannot sing and who knows little about music, and if this type of member would annoy other people in the chorus. She explained that she was "rejected" from chorus in the sixth grade. Cohen encouraged her to join, mentioned that she had three students who would help her, and told her about this research project.

Springer's lack of vocal experience is not unique in the United States. Pascale (2005) suggests that culture and society affect our musical belief systems (p. 169). She argues that a white, western cultural context requires three stipulations for singing: (a) someone who sings a solo, (b) someone who leads songs, and (c) someone who sings in tune (p. 168). Conversely, in the Solka tradition in Barbados, Pascale notes that vocal quality does not matter. Yet in the United States, a pervasive attitude that vocal quality does matter appears prevalent. Springer identified herself as someone who had poor vocal skills and who did not meet the criteria listed above, particularly in light of her not being accepted into sixth grade choir.

Joyce (2003) examined how people come to know themselves as singers, with particular focus on why some adults never learn to sing. She suggested aspects of contemporary choral

practices that limit people's abilities to participate fully, such as how multiple choruses require music literacy, how singing tends to be a spectator activity (for example, soloists singing the National Anthem at American sporting events), and how contemporary society seems to consume music by purchasing recorded music and listening to performances more than creating their own music (p. 5). Joyce borrowed Razack's (1998) theory of "Whiteness," which Joyce noted is about domination, boundary keeping, and a system of interlocking relations of power among people, sets of beliefs, and concepts. According to Joyce, assumptions related to singing include the notion of privilege connected with western art music. She described judgmental attitudes about acceptable singing suggesting that many people feel shamed, undermined, and silenced, resulting in them being fearful to sing in front of others (p. 269). She argued that binary thinking, that is, singer versus non-singer, is problematic because singing is more accurately, as Knight (1999) described, "A developmental capacity…not a fixed, designated 'gift' to a chosen few (p. 152)." Despite, or perhaps in spite of, this mistaken notion that singing is a gift possessed by the minority, some researchers and teachers have created groups or classes to aid adults who want to learn to sing and improve their musical skills.

Topp (1987) taught a one-month college interim class called "Music for People Who Fear Music." His students described how when they were younger, they heard negative comments about their voices. These interactions silenced their singing voices. For example one college student recalled a music teacher said, "You can't make your voice go where you want it to, can you (p. 52)?" By the end of Topp's class, all 11 students sang solos with vocal accuracy.

Abril (2007) examined adult singing anxieties in the context of three undergraduate education majors taking a music methods course. Each of these students, two college-age one in her 50s, reported negative experiences from their school music programs. They noted that family members and music teachers shaped their beliefs about singer identity and singing ability.

Grenough (1983) led an ongoing non-therapy group that met weekly called "Sing It!" Participants in this group also feared singing and shared comments that prevented them from trying: "My kindergarten teacher made me a bluebird listener. That was 47 years ago. And even now at birthday parties when they're getting ready to sing, I make sure I am busy doing something in the other room (p. 70)." According to Grenough and others (for example, Carter, 2005; Thurman, 2000), the process for these individuals to develop their capacities to sing requires trust, encouragement, and creation of a space where people are willing to make mistakes and experiment with their bodies and voices.

The 20,000 Voices project (http://www.20000voices.org/home.asp) based in Alnwick, Northumberland in the United Kingdom and David Darling's Music for People program (http://www.musicforpeople.org/index.html) in Connecticut are two programs that provide opportunities for adults who are interested in developing their singing and music-making abilities. Although there appears to be a strong interest in such work, researchers have not systematically investigated an individual's process of learning to sing in a chorus.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine, over nine months, the perceptions and processes of an adult female who was learning to sing with a chorus. The three-part process for this study has included:

(a) Exploring the history of her life story with respect to previous singing experiences, perceptions, and frustrations
(b) Assessing her vocal skills with respect to vocal range, body alignment, breath management, and pitch accuracy
(c) Developing her ability to sing with the chorus while assessing this process.

The following research questions guided the investigation: (a) What were some of the circumstances of the participant's past that contributed to her not learning how to sing? (b) What elements of the individual lessons and the Voices of Experience group singing practice helped or hindered her ability to sing with the chorus? (c) How did learning to sing with the chorus affect her self-identity, self-perception, and any other aspects of her life?

Methodology

Research indicates that individual practice is more beneficial to improve singing than group classroom music instruction (Graiser, 1961; Klemish, 1974). Because of this indication, three members of the research team individually spent 15 to 30 minutes once or twice weekly with Springer helping her develop body and breath awareness for singing, phonation skills, ear training, and basic musical knowledge. This component of the research process allowed for multiple sources of data and multiple perspectives of the individual case.

This embedded case study—a case study incorporating multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003)—employed a grounded theory qualitative methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Data collection included written reflections from three music teachers who alternately worked with the singer twice per week, written reflections from Springer, an in-depth interview with Springer, follow-up interviews with Springer, and direct observation. Open coding (concepts identified in data) of the written reflections from Springer and the research team influenced the questions asked during the interview. Through selective coding we defined the properties and dimensions of concepts using the narrative data and the memos (researchers' records of interpretations, thoughts, questions, and directions for further data collection). We diagrammed key concepts to assist in axial coding, the process that leads to the integration of data into a central category and eventually a working theory. We then sampled the theory with raw data and related literature. To provide a context for these findings, we examined implications for how these ideas relate to current societal perspectives toward singing and contemporary music education.

Lack of Satisfying Musical Activities in School Years

Springer explained four examples of dissatisfaction when pursuing music-making activities as a youth. She described her weekly grammar school music class as "boring" and remembered her teacher requiring everyone to sit up straight and be quiet. In the sixth grade she was not admitted to the school choir. She recalled the teacher being "new," that she had to sing something, and soon after that found out that she was not admitted into the chorus. Upon reflection of this event, she recalled even when she was a youth that she thought everyone should have a chance to sing. She did not sing in public after being rejected from choir as a sixth grader until she joined the Voices of Experience at age 59.

Springer attempted to play clarinet, piano, and guitar during her school years, but ended up quitting each instrument. She was first chair when she started clarinet in fourth grade, but did

not like sitting close to the teacher. In high school she took piano lessons at an adult school, but did not want to go to an adult woman's home to play a duet, nor did she want to dress up to attend such an event. She did not want to practice either instrument and described herself as someone with a typical "quitter's attitude."

Outside of school, she did not participate in any social activities that would have involved group singing such as church or Girl Scouts. Her parents and siblings did not encourage her to participate in music-making. Rather, she described her family as a "television family." They liked watching television together as a family. Influenced by her two brothers and her own interests, she enjoyed sports and has continued to be physically active into her retirement years.

Retirement: A New Start in Music-Making with the Voices of Experience Chorus

On August 21, 2008, Springer responded to an article Cohen wrote in the local paper inviting anyone interested to participate in the Voices of Experience Chorus. In her email message, Springer expressed concern about whether Cohen would be interested in someone with little to no singing experience and whether such a person would annoy the other members. Cohen initially asked to meet with Springer in person rather than replying directly to Springer's concerns via email. After a five day delay, Cohen responded positively to her in a second email message. The two met before the first rehearsal of the fall season and Cohen explained the research project to Springer. After gaining the University of Iowa's Institutional Board approval, the research project commenced.

The individual sessions with the student research assistants helped Springer develop specific singing skills such as expanding her rib cage while singing, using her breath effectively, releasing unnecessary jaw tension, opening her throat, expanding her vocal range, and developing her tone. One of the biggest challenges for Springer was learning to open her throat while singing and raise her soft palate. When working on "O Danny Boy," Smith noted, "When Joyce sang through it the first time, I noticed that she sang the piece in the same manner one would speak the text." After instructing how to sing with tall and round vowels, Springer and Smith noticed considerable improvement in her tone.

Springer developed new friendships and a new supportive community through her chorus participation. She wrote in her journal about meeting new members, learning their names, and enjoying time together. She shared the following quote in an article published on July 26, 2009 in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*:

> Just one year ago I read almost this same article by Mary Cohen and it
> changed my life. I have no musical history – no singing at home, chorus,
> school, or church; not even Girl Scouts, but Mary's invitation
> intrigued me. Like many people, I had always wanted to sing. I contacted
> Mary and joined the chorus. Even though the VOE has many good and
> experienced singers, they took me in. Little by little I am learning to read
> music, understand harmony, and sing in tune. The VOE has offered me
> the opportunity of a lifetime, to actually become a singer. They have
> provided me with new friendships and experiences. Joining the VOE
> forced me to become a member of the Senior Center and consequently
> learn of the many facilities and opportunities afforded by the Senior
> Center. I highly recommend that if you have ever wanted to sing, that
> you join the VOE. We welcome you (Cohen, 2009).

Central Category: Self-Motivated Growth

Through data analysis, a central category emerged in the data: self-motivated growth (see Figure 1: Self-Motivated Growth). Springer consistently demonstrated internal motivation for her newly developing skills as a choral singer. She researched meanings of musical terms on the internet, approached the teachers with specific vocal and musical questions, and made transfers between what she was learning in chorus and other aspects of life (specifically the similarities among breathing when biking, practicing yoga, and singing). She willingly wrote reflections on her experiences and thoughtfully answered all follow-up questions.

Despite the development Springer clearly made with respect to her choral participation, she commented that she does not entirely view herself as a "singer." Rather she perceived her vocal and musical growth as slowly developing. She said that she plans to participate with the chorus for the next 20 to 30 years, continuing to grow and develop as a singer. She remarked that because she is retired, she looks at her role as a member of the Voices of Experience as her full-time job.
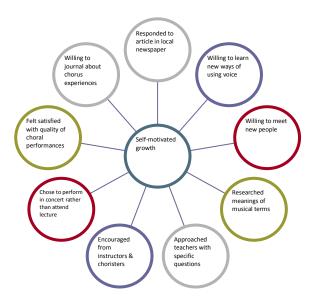

Figure 1. Self-Motivated Growth.

Working Theory: Satisfaction Theory

When Springer participated in music-making activities as a youth, a consistent pattern evolved. She described dissatisfaction with each of these activities. This dissatisfaction was rooted in a lack of meaningful social interactions, an absence of encouragement from adults, and little to no musical growth. Perhaps part of this dissatisfaction related to the lack of individual connection between Springer and her teachers, as each of these experiences was in a group context.

Conversely, data indicated that Springer's participation in the Voices of Experiences was satisfying in a number of ways. She remarked in her journal that she enjoyed rehearsals when she sang her alto part on pitch and when she learned new songs. She noted that concerts were fun and boosted her confidence. One of her fellow altos complimented her singing after a particular performance, which made her feel good: "The concert was fun. I thought we sounded great. We sang in their lovely dining room. The audience was large and enthusiastic. I felt confident. Beth even told me that I sounded good. Joining this chorus was a great idea (Springer's journal)." She attended Erin Smith's graduate voice recital and a reception the chorus provided for Smith. Springer and her husband went to their first opera during the spring semester, at which Smith performed. She took pleasure in both performances. She remarked that being in the audience at an Iowa City Chamber Orchestra performance was more enjoyable now that she had a deeper understanding of the role of a conductor and other musical concepts.

These two music-making portions of her life, as a youth and as a retiree, contrast in three main ways: First, the youth experiences lacked any meaningful acknowledgement from peers or adults—being rejected from sixth-grade chorus was the ultimate setback; secondly, as a retiree, Springer received recognition from multiple sources such as her teachers, fellow choristers, and audience members; and thirdly, she remarked that when she was in school, she did not have fun while music-making. She had more enjoyable times playing sports than practicing her instrument. As an adult, she described choral rehearsals, concerts, and social functions as "fun."

It appears that the various adults who worked with Springer when she was in school did not make an effort to get to know her as a person. For example, if her fourth grade instrumental music instructor and the teachers at the piano school had known that she was shy, they may have modified her participation to make her feel more comfortable. The student assistants who worked with her one on one during her initial time with the Voices of Experience took a more personal approach and got to know Springer as an individual. Through the journal reflections, interview, and follow-up questions Cohen learned about Springer as an individual. We were able to provide a learning opportunity that helped her feel comfortable, safe, and at ease to try new things because we developed meaningful and respectful personal connections. These friendly approaches to learning to sing gave Springer a satisfying experience, which helped her to develop and grow.

We propose the following working satisfaction theory which was generated from these data:

> People who want to develop a new skill of singing with a chorus need multiple opportunities to feel satisfied in the process of learning to sing. These feelings of satisfaction must be rooted in a clear sense of a specific individual's needs and interests, must be linked with appropriate and meaningful social interactions, must include a sense of accomplishment, and must be a genuinely enjoyable experience for the particular individual.

Although the data in this investigation center around one individual, the concepts may transfer to similar situations. Further research is warranted to test this theory and refine it as future findings indicate.

Implications for Current Music Education Practices

As mentioned above, there appears to be a stark contrast between Springer's musical experiences in school compared to retirement. As Thurman (2000) suggests, a human

compatible approach is necessary for one to develop singing skills: "Brains will learn constructively only when the people who own them feel safe, and the pleasure of personal mastery or personal self-expression is likely (p. 197)." Choral music educators in the schools who carefully consider how to provide a compatible approach to learning to sing foster growth and enthusiasm for singing, which is opposite what Springer experienced when she was in school.

School choral directors deal with multiple variables such as adolescent growth, student motivation levels, their own skills and personalities, and musical traditions, which may challenge choral programs and thwart the development of a safe space for all to learn to sing. These challenges could have far-reaching consequences. Parents, teachers, and community leaders serve as informal role models for youth. Youth, whether they are aware of it or not, learn from adult behaviour and attitudes. Adults who classify themselves as non-singers may send a message to youth that it is permissible to avoid singing throughout life because only a select few actually have the ability to sing. This way of thinking may deter future generations from lifelong singing. If people do not perceive value in lifelong singing, they could negatively influence present and future choral music education programs and silence potential singing voices.

References

Abril, C. R. (2007). I have a voice but I just can't sing: A narrative investigation of singing and social anxiety. *Music Education Research, 9* (1), 1-15.

Carter, T. (2005). *Choral charisma: Singing with expression*. Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Music Pub.

Cohen, M. (2009). Rhythmic delights: VOE to perform Thursday. *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, p. 2A.

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13* (1), 3-21.

Grenough, M. (1983). Sing it! Groups for "bad singers." *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, and Sociometry, 36* (2), 67-77.

Joyce, V. M. (2003). Bodies that sing: The formation of singing subjects. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Toronto, 2000). *Dissertation Abstracts International, 64* (04), 1215.

Klemish, J. (1974). Treating the uncertain singer through use of tape recorder. *Bulletin for the Council on Music Education Research, 37*, 36-45.

Knight, S. (1999). Exploring a cultural myth: What adult non-singers may reveal about the nature of singing. In B.A. Roberts & A. Rose (Eds.), *Sharing the voices: The phenomenon of singing II* (pp. 144-154). St. John's, NL: Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Pascale, L. M. (2005). Dispelling the myth of the non-singer: Embracing two aesthetics for singing. *Philosophy of Music Education Review, 13* (2), 165-175.

Razack, S. H. (1998). *Looking white people in the eye: Gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Thurman, L. (2000). Human compatible learning. In L. Thurman & G. Welch (Eds.). *Bodymind and voice: Foundations of voice education*. pp. 188-301. Collegeville, MN: St. John's University.

Topp, D. (1987). It's never too late to sing! *Music Educators Journal, 74* (2), 49-52.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.