

Professional for a Day: the Experience of Singing in an Amateur Symphonic Choir

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Introduction

This paper deals with a kind of music-making that is in a sense quite commonplace. Most large cities and many smaller ones have choirs of the kind I have referred to as *symphonic* choirs, and which are sometimes called philharmonic choirs: large choirs that sing most often with an orchestra, concentrating on the standard oratorio and large-scale accompanied choral repertoire. These choirs are unusual in the sphere of amateur music-making in their relations with the professional music world, and my paper looks at the way in which this particular relationship affects the singers involved.

My concern with such choirs stems from two sources: from my involvement with this kind of choir over many years; and from a survey I recently undertook of members in the choir in Australia of which I am currently a member.

The choir

This choir (which I will refer to simply as *the Choir*) has been in existence for a little more than 30 years. For most of that time, it has been the choir which performed the standard choral and oratorio literature with the city's main professional orchestra. In the past, sections of the Choir had performed a much wider repertoire than this, including light or popular music, and a capella repertoire (the organization included a chamber choir). With the advent of a new Musical Director three years ago, the focus of the Choir has been narrowed to its core business of singing with the orchestra and presenting its own series of concerts of similar, but somewhat more adventurous literature, also with orchestra. There are occasionally engagements by other organizations, and usually an annual performance for the Melbourne International Festival. The Choir receives a fee for these performances of course, but the singers are not paid.

There are currently around 250 singing members, not all of whom sing in every concert. The choir prepares around 8-9 major programs each year, some of which are performed more than once. Some of the concerts with the symphony orchestra are conducted by the Choir's Musical Director, who holds a part-time position as a conductor of that orchestra.

The survey

With the various changes that accompanied the appointment of a new Musical Director, there was a significant turnover of the membership, a few members leaving to follow the departing Director, others retiring in the wake of a more stringent re-auditioning process, and many new singers, often younger, coming into the Choir. It seemed a good time to find out who the choir membership really were, and I arranged with the Board of Management to conduct a survey of the members at the end of 1996.

The aims of the survey were several:

- (1) to gather information about the characteristics, background and *career paths* of members of the Choir;
- (2) to gather information about the opinions of singing members on their experience as members of the Choir;
- (3) to compile a list of suggestions from members about ways in which they thought the Choir, or their experience of it, could be improved.

It was expected that analysis of this data might provide further understanding of the ways in which the membership was changing, the possibilities for recruitment, and the reaction of members to the efforts being made by the Choir to improve professional standards of performance. A more general aim was to explore the notions of *amateurism* and *professionalism* in the context of the singers' perceptions of the nature of their participation, and the process of raising the performance and management standards of the organization.

A questionnaire was given or mailed to all 251 singing members of the Choir, and responses were received from 192 members, or 76.49% of those surveyed. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. Answers to the closed questions were coded numerically and analyzed by computer, using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program, while most of the qualitative data was coded and analyzed manually.

Many of the questions were designed to collect demographic and statistical information of value only to the choir itself. Other information, especially the qualitative data describing members' views, is of more general interest in considering the nature of amateur music performance.

Amateurism

The term *amateurism* has been variously defined. Amateurs have generally been regarded as the antithesis of professionals (Drinker, 1967); although definitions of the term 'professional' have more often focused on the distinction between professionals and people who are employed, but not in a profession (Greenwood, 1957; Roth, 1974; Hall, 1986). One criterion of most definitions of amateurism is the absence of any substantial income from the activity in question. Members of this choir receive no income from their performances, but pay an annual subscription to the choir, and incur further costs for uniform, travel, etc. It seems clear that by most definitions the members of the choir must be regarded as amateurs, whatever else that term might imply.

Hutchison and Feist have pointed out that the distinction between amateur

and professional is not as clear cut as is often thought,

The amateur and professional arts are intertwined and interdependent; the term *amateur* is not unambiguously separated from 'professional'; rather than a clear amateur/professional divide, there is a complex amateur/professional continuum or spectrum of ambition, accomplishment and activity (1991, p. xiii).

The continuum which they propose is probably close to the way most people think about amateurs and professionals. At one end is the pure amateur — a self-taught, inexperienced, artist who pursues an activity as a spare-time recreation, with no serious artistic aspirations, evidence of originality, status or income from the pursuit. At the other end of the continuum is the original and business-like professional, fully trained and experienced, with high artistic aspirations and enjoying the income appropriate to public recognition as a professional (Hutchison & Feist, 1991, p. 10).

Of course, the two ends of the continuum represent only the extreme cases, but even allowing that artists may be located at any point on the continuum, the model seems inappropriate for choristers, and especially so for the choir in question. The implication here is that artists will proceed along the axes of the criteria given more or less in parallel. But singers in a good amateur choir will typically be at quite different points of the continuum depending on the criterion examined. On the criteria of income and time allocated they will be at the amateur end of the scale; on the criteria of experience and artistic aspirations, many will be at the opposite end.

Another point of view is put by Stebbins, who considers that amateurs of this kind engage in what he calls *serious leisure* (1982; 1992). This he defines as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge' (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Indications of the *seriousness* of this kind of leisure activity include, as well as the acquisition of skills and the tendency to have careers mentioned here, significant personal effort and perseverance, the unique ethos that grows up around such pursuits, and the tendency of participants to identify strongly with them. Amateurs reap durable benefits from their pursuits, namely: "self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity" (1992, pp. 6-7). The characteristics are not generally evident in casual leisure activities which are undertaken with less regularity, commitment and perseverance.

Amateurs in a professional choir

It is not difficult to see how this definition of what Stebbins calls "modern amateurism" is appropriate to almost any choir, where serious endeavour and the acquisition and expression of skills are so necessary. But how does this definition sit with a choir which, though composed of amateurs, fulfils a purely professional role? Should the singers be regarded as amateurs or as some kind of amateur-professional hybrid? How do the singers regard themselves? How does this

situation affect their experience as members of the Choir? Should the Choir, in striving for higher standards, attempt to make its members behave more like *real* professionals?

The definitions of *amateurs* and *professionals* used above have referred only to individuals; but if it is possible to categorize an organization in this manner, then the Choir itself must surely be regarded as professional. It performs exclusively with professional orchestras, conductors and soloists, usually in the most prestigious concert hall in the city. It receives substantial fees for doing so, and these fees make up a large proportion of its income. Its performances are regularly reviewed, and critics judge it by the same standards as other professional performances.

In most pursuits, amateurs can be easily compared with professionals because there is a professional equivalent. Both Stebbins and Hutchison and Feist assume that this is normally the case: Stebbins believes that "the term *amateur* should be used only with those activities that constitute for somebody, a *professional work role*" (1992, p. 41). In theory, this is the case with choirs, but although large professional choirs are not unknown, they are rare, and do not exist in Australia, although there are professional opera choruses, and have sometimes been professional chamber choirs. Equivalent professional choirs do make their presence, and their standards, felt, but only through recordings. Unpaid though they may be, the amateur singers in the choir considered here are the most professional of their kind available.

Choristers' views of their experience

In the survey of the Choir, members were not asked directly to comment on issues relating to amateurism or professionalism, but they wrote about their reasons for joining the Choir, and the aspects of their involvement which they most valued, and they seemed eager to try to express what the choir meant to them. These comments are quite striking for the way in which they confirm Stebbins' list of the benefits of amateurism mentioned above. A sample of these comments covers most of these benefits:

A fantastic creative and spiritual outlet that occurs on a regular basis - quite addictive! Adds meaning to life.

Singing and performing with [the Choir] is a very enriching and nurturing aspect to my well-being. The choir has developed enormously during the past 3 years and is now an organization of which I am immensely proud to be part of.

I have sung since I could talk and will continue to sing until I die. I enjoy the performance opportunities provided by being in [the Choir]. I get a real buzz out of coming to grips with unfamiliar works and 'conquering' them.

[The Choir] has been for me the most important continuing activity of the last 20 years. It was my lifeline after the accident, at times even my *raison d'etre*. My social life, my continuing musical education and a great privilege to have worked with so many fabulous conductors over that time.

Singing has helped me relearn coordination in both my speech and thought

patterns. Apart from the physical improvement, my sense of importance in myself and as a member cannot be measured.

What comes through clearly from some of the comments above, and from many others, is not only the enjoyment that members get from their participation, but also the realization that their satisfaction comes from working hard and attaining a high standard of performance.

The unprompted answers to the questionnaire talked about rehearsals at least as much as they did about performances. The rehearsal comments were of two kinds: appreciative remarks about the current conductor's skill and enthusiasm, and negative comments on a host of mostly minor matters: hard seats, poor lighting, people who tapped their feet, sopranos too far from the tea and coffee. What both kinds of remarks indicate is that rehearsals are not just regarded as a means to an end - the all-important performance. Singers value the rehearsal experience in itself: it is an important part of their leisure activity, and they want it to be enjoyable, even though they have to work hard.

This is supported by comments made by a number of singers about the social climate of the Choir. When asked how highly they valued a number of aspects of their participation, few rated *socialising with members* highly, but at the same time they made it clear that they wanted a welcoming, collegial atmosphere at rehearsals, and they wanted to get to know more of the other singers — something that the size of the choir and the nature of rehearsal made difficult. One singer commented:

I would like to get to know more people at [the Choir] but find the break an almost impossible time ...I don't know what can be done about that - as I really appreciate the way we start on time, finish on time and work hard all night.

This emphasis on the experience of rehearsal confirms the findings of a study by Juniu, Tedrick and Boyd into the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of amateur and professional orchestral musicians (1996). This study found that there was little difference between how the two groups of musicians felt when it came to performances: for both amateurs and professionals the thrill of being onstage, the appreciative audience and the challenge of performance produced a high level of intrinsic motivation. When it came to rehearsal, however, there was a significant difference between the two groups: professionals were more influenced by the extrinsic motivation of remuneration, while amateurs continued to be motivated by the enjoyment or satisfaction of the rehearsal activity itself.

In these respects, singers in the Choir demonstrate the reactions that might be expected of serious amateurs. But the members of the Choir are well aware of their situation as performers in a professional choir, and this manifests itself in several ways.

First, whereas all amateurs are likely to strive for higher standards of achievement, and to see the performance of professionals as the benchmark, the singers in this choir actually feel obliged to achieve professional standards. They are aware that, in the absence of any choir of professionals in the city, they themselves are responsible for providing the professional standard of choral singing. The angriest and most critical comments made in the questionnaire answers were reserved for other members whose behaviour was felt to have

undermined the Choir's professionalism, for example:

The most frustrating thing about [the Choir] is lack of commitment - people tend to miss too many rehearsals and also don't seem to put in the preparation time. Consequently, conductors are having to spend a lot of rehearsal time repeating details ...This becomes **exceedingly** tedious for the people who come regularly and have bothered to look at their music.

After a performance, it is always the reaction of the orchestra that carries most weight with the singers, certainly more than that of the critics. This is not only because members of the orchestra are regarded as knowledgeable judges, but also because they are the Choir's professional colleagues, and their approbation signifies acceptance at their level of performance.

Another indication of the Choir's desire to feel and be accepted as professionals is the importance they place on singing in the Melbourne Concert Hall. Over 77% of members rated performing in this hall as having a high or very high value for them. The hall is large, prestigious and very expensive to hire; other local choirs rarely get to sing there. Performing in this hall is pleasant because of the superior facilities, but it is also a symbol of professional status.

Costs of participation

When asked if there were costs as well as rewards in singing with the Choir, 77.1% of members replied that there were, specifying time/conflicting commitments/time away from family; financial cost; and fatigue as the most important costs. Generally, singers recognised the inevitability of this kind of tension, but many still felt strongly enough about it to expand on their answers to describe the frustration they felt in trying to reconcile their choir commitment with their *other lives*, for example:

I sometimes wish there was a tiny acknowledgment of the fact that most of us are people with full-time jobs and that evening rehearsals are often after a trying day with 7P, an after school meeting, a rush home through traffic to make a meal, a rush to Carlton, etc. Some consideration that we are mostly very weary by the end of the day would be gratefully received.

A large majority of singers stated that they sometimes found it difficult to fulfil their obligations to the Choir, and many expressed their distress at a conflict which they could find no way of resolving. A small number suggested more lenient rules about rehearsal attendance, but in general singers supported the stricter requirements that have recently been put into place, even when they found them difficult to meet.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that these singers do inhabit a kind of no-man's-land between amateurism and professionalism. Stebbins states that the costs for amateurs consist in unfulfilled hopes or the absence of expected rewards (1992, pp. 100-102), and this may often be true - for a member of the Choir it could be a

disappointing performance or not being chosen to perform in a particular program. But the greatest cost felt by the members of this choir is clearly the tension created by the unresolvable conflict between the professional demands of the choir, and the demands of their *other* lives. The lesson for the Choir seems to be that in the ongoing endeavour to raise standards, the goal of 'professionalism' should not be mistaken for an expectation that the singers should act or be treated in exactly the same way as professionals. Rather, the Choir needs to try to achieve its goals by tapping into the most important quality that amateurs bring to their performance: the passion which, because they are shut out from many of the benefits of fully professional life, is directed solely towards the activity itself. Perhaps it is not more professionalism that the choir needs to encourage, but more serious amateurism.

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