

Choral Confidence: Some Effects of Choir Configuration, Cohesion and Collaboration

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Introduction

My interest in confidence issues amongst choral singers originally had its roots in some of my own experiences as a professional singer, accompanist, choral conductor, and vocal coach. As a teacher of amateur as well as professional vocalists, I have devoted a substantial amount of lesson time to confidence building, alongside listening to stories of amateur ‘careers’ (Stebbins, 1996) that have been affected by some form of problem with self-confidence.

There are two main areas of literature pertaining to confident performance. Firstly, there is a vast body of work on musical performance anxiety (MPA), in which some of the sources and effects of ‘stage fright’ and performance ‘nerves’ are examined. The majority of studies have concentrated on professional instrumentalists (Abel & Larkin, 1990; Kenny, Driscoll, & Ackermann, 2012), or on music students (Hamann & Sobaje, 1983; Kenny, Fortune, & Ackermann, 2013). Where MPA amongst singers has been explored, the emphasis has tended to be on professional soloists (Spahn, Echternach, Zander, Voltmer, & Richter, 2010; Wilson, 2002). Where choral singers have been studied, participants have usually been drawn from professional or semi-professional ensembles (Kenny, Davis, & Oates, 2004).

The second strand of literature relating to performance confidence can be found in a range of studies based on self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). The following definition of self-efficacy seems particularly appropriate to the challenges of choral singing:

The belief in one’s competence to tackle difficult or novel tasks and to cope with adversity in specific demanding situations. (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005, p. 81)

Research into self-efficacy amongst singers and musicians has similarly tended to focus on professional performers (McPherson & McCormick, 2006), tertiary level music students (Nielsen, 2004; Ritchie & Williamon, 2011) and professional or semi-professional choristers (Ryan & Andrews, 2009). In most of the existing research into MPA and self-efficacy, the adult amateur singers who comprise the majority of the performing population in Western classical choral music (Pitts, 2005) have hitherto been largely neglected.

Previous research (Bonshor, 2002) has demonstrated that, amongst adult amateur singers, confidence issues are a common concern, which can limit participation and adversely affect the enjoyment of performing in choral activities. These effects are regrettable, as the benefits of choral singing have been well-documented (Clift & Hancox, 2010; Southcott, 2009). For this reason, the current investigation has been undertaken, with the following research aims:

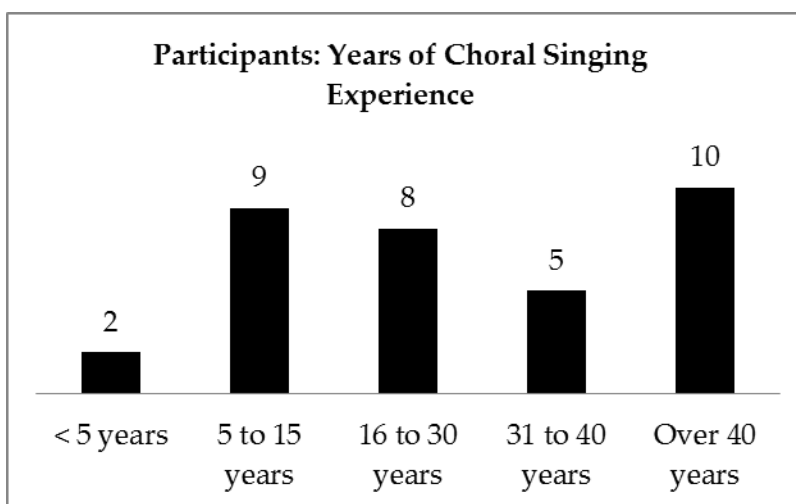
- To explore the lived experience of amateur choral singers in relation to confidence;
- To identify some of the main influences on singers’ perceptions of their vocal ability;
- To highlight some of the factors affecting singers’ confidence in their performance ability;
- To extrapolate strategies designed to manage confidence issues amongst amateur choral singers.

Methodology

Due to the subjective nature of singing (Miller, 1996), and the inherently personal nature of perceived self-efficacy, a qualitative methodology was adopted. Three focus groups, involving a total of eighteen participants, were held, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with sixteen choral singers. Over forty hours of recorded verbal data were obtained and subjected to a process of analysis and interpretation based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were carried out after the interviews, in order to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. All of the singers have been anonymized in the data tables presented in this paper, with 'S' indicating a quotation from a singer participating in an individual interview, and 'FG' indicating an extract from a focus group session.

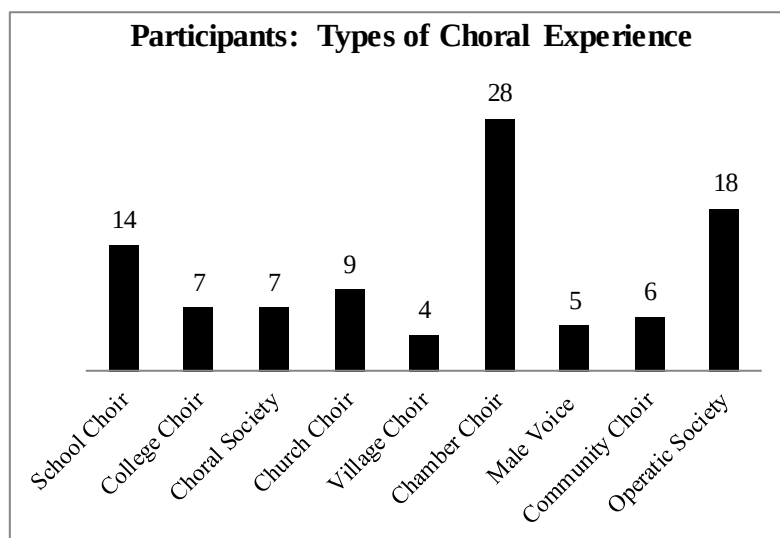
Participants were mainly highly experienced amateur singers (Chart 1); the majority had over fifteen years of choral experience, and ten participants had been singing in choirs for over forty years.

Chart 1.



All thirty-four participants had experience of a wide range of choral activities (Chart 2), with many singers taking part in several different types of choral ensemble.

Chart 2.



Emergent Themes

A data driven approach was taken to the analysis and interpretation, and a number of interacting super-ordinate and subordinate themes emerged as a result (Chart 3).

Chart 3.

Practicalities	People	Perceptions
•Choir formation (configuration) •Inter-singer spacing •Position of the individual within the choir	•Hearing fellow singers •Reciprocal peer learning •Cohesion and collaboration • The conductor's contribution	•Quality of performance •Confidence during rehearsals and performance •General self-efficacy for singing

In the following data tables, some of these interacting themes are presented. The theme of being able to hear other singers (Table 1) was spontaneously generated and discussed at length in all focus groups, and in thirteen of the sixteen individual interviews.

Table 1. Hearing each other

It's important to me, for my confidence, that I <i>hear</i> , that I can hear the other sections. S8. 33
It's quite important to be able to hear your colleagues. And if you're in an awkward formation, you know or the sound goes up into the ceiling (gestures upwards), or you can't hear them, then that really does affect...I think it affects your singing and therefore affects your confidence as well. S4. 12
I think I'm more comfortable with a more compact configuration, rather than stretched thin... I think it's easier to sing with other people. I can hear what's going on, on each side of me, and I can hear the other parts. S15. 12
If we're not positioned where you can <i>hear</i> people...I've been in quite a few churches...where, if you're not in the position that you feel happy with, it can just crumble. S6. 4
Last year at the Students' Concert, the annual one, was the most appalling one, because of where we stood, and the acoustics. We just couldn't hear each other, and everybody was really disappointed that we hadn't done what we meant to do. S5. 4

All focus groups and eleven of the individual interviewees instinctively made the connection between standing closer together and being able to hear their fellow singers more easily (Table 2).

Table 2. Closeness, comfort and confidence

It's a lot, lot better if we're all close together and can all hear each other...you can hear each other. And that gives you confidence as well. S2. 5
It's crazy, but I hated...I felt there was quite a gap between B and me...where I've got people either side of me that are squashing me, that's when I feel comfortable. S1. 14
In [church] one time, we had a pretty bad concert...because we were so far apart, and...you can't hear people. It's the acoustics and positioning. That was quite a bad one. . . We were in two opposite pews, and we were quite a long way apart. They had enough room to get a grand piano in there, and probably another one, width-wise, as well! S6. 4
It was awful really, because we were too far apart. We weren't together – we didn't <i>feel</i> together. And because you couldn't <i>hear</i> what the other parts were singing, it was very, very difficult...At the end of it I felt as if I was going through the motions. I didn't feel as though I was singing with the rest of them. S11. 3

Where participants expressed a preference for a particular choral configuration, they tended to favour a tight-knit, semi-circular formation, arranged in voice parts rather than 'mixed' (Table 3). The rationale for this was, again, that this enabled them to hear the other singers more easily.

Table 3. The 'tight semi-circle'

I prefer semi-circle ...because you can hear the other parts... you can hear each other. And that gives you confidence as well. S2. 5
I like...it to be quite a tight semi-circle really...so you can hear <i>everybody</i> around you. S3. 4
I like it to be in a semi-circle. So I can hear the rest of the guys singing. And I think hearing the soprano line helps, 'cause that's typically the melody and, you know, all the other lines fit into that. That certainly helps...It's very difficult if you can't hear your colleagues at all. Definitely. S4. 24
The first time with [chamber choir]...the arrangement just didn't seem right...a flatter semi-circle – we were wider...the basses couldn't hear the sopranos. And then, when we came round like this (indicates semi-circle), it seemed much better, and everyone was happier. S6. 7

The need to hear one another seems to be related to the singers' self-professed reliance on each other (Table 4). All focus groups and interviewees discussed their dependence on their peers for help with musical cues and moral support.

Table 4. 'Having people next to you'

So if you think, 'Gosh I don't know this,' stop - take a deep breath - listen to people either side of you and then right, come on, get in. I think it's just having people next to you. FG1. D. 35
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We've done it quite often...sort of lean in, and we know that G [alto] will have the right note. We know when one another has gone a bit wrong and we chivvy one another along. FG1. M. 35
<i>You're</i> very confident in what you're singing, and you will always start on the right note. I always feel that maybe I <i>won't</i> , so if you're standing next to me, or J is standing near by, then I know that if I do falter at any time, I can get back on track because I can hear somebody who's singing the right note. FG2. J. 41
FG3. M: Even from day one, you come in and you're on the notes, and that helps me. FG3. P: But isn't that what a choir ensemble is all about, in whatever section? We're the same in the tenors. I'm sure G would agree that sometimes we rely on each other to find notes. I rely on G sometimes, and sometimes he relies on me. Sometimes I rely on R, you know. ' FG3. A: And I rely on B! FG3. 15

Collaborative peer learning was seen as a reciprocal process which was an important part of confidence building (Table 5).

Table 5. 'Different strengths'

We all have different strengths haven't we, and I think that's really nice. And that helps your confidence if you feel that other people are with you. FG1. G. 11
It's quite nice to have people who know what they're singing on either side, because if I'm not quite sure I can actually learn from them. S7. 6
Everybody supports everybody else, in a sort of a quiet way. They're watching you and learning from you, and you're watching them and learning from them. And it's all very comfortable, and confidence-boosting. S16. 12
I love the (whispers) 'Tell me what it was. Can you help me on that? Lah my bit. I got lost – lah that to me!' S9. 30

Self to Other Ratio and Amateur Singers

The findings of this study contrast with other research into choral acoustics. The term 'self to other ratio' (SOR) was coined by Ternström (1994) to describe the ratio between the sound pressure levels of the feedback (the sound of the singer's own voice) and the reference (the sound of the rest of the choir). It was discovered that there is a link between the singer's preferred SOR and the inter-singer spacing in a choir:

On average one's own voice needs to be about 6db stronger than the rest of the choir. In most rooms this implies a fairly spread-out formation. (Ternström & Karna, 2002, p. 269)

Other research has similarly found that wider inter-singer spacing is usually favoured, as it enables singers to hear their own voices (Daugherty, 1999, 2003).

The clear preference of the amateur singers in the current study is to be in a closely spaced choir configuration that allows them to hear their peers, rather than to be widely spread out so that they can hear their own voices above their fellow singers. This contrasts with the findings of other studies mainly due to differences in sample type, research focus and methodology.

Studies linking preferred SOR with wider inter-singer spacing have tended to focus on university choral singers, who are generally performance majors (Daugherty, 2003; Eckholm,

2000) and experienced choristers with a high level of formal musical training (Aspaas, McCrea, Morris, & Fowler, 2004). Although adult amateur singers are not necessarily less experienced or less competent, they have often received less formal musical training than the participants in other studies, and may therefore have different needs. In my study, only two of the interviewees had received musical education beyond secondary school, and the majority of participants had little formal experience of singing during their school years.

The research focus of the current study differs from those cited above, which have centred on judgements of choral blend by auditors rather than on the subjective experiences of the singers. Where singers have previously been consulted about their preferences for choir formation and spacing, the emphasis has largely been on sound quality and intonation rather than on perceptions of confidence or self-efficacy. It is also likely that the qualitative approach of this study may have facilitated more disclosure about the singers' subjective feelings and perceptions, and has therefore resulted in a different outcome.

Conclusions: Configuration, Collaboration and Confidence

It is generally recognised that the interaction of the reference and feedback in choral singing can lead to difficulties in hearing oneself and others accurately. In this study, it emerged that this has an impact upon amateur choral singers' perception of security of intonation and timing. SOR can therefore be seen as a significant factor in amateur choral confidence.

An intuitive awareness of acoustic factors related to SOR was relatively common amongst the participants in this study. The majority of the interviewees emphasized the importance of being able to hear their peers, and felt that closer inter-singer spacing facilitates this. It was also felt that 'mixed voice' formations are less helpful for achieving the amateur singers' preferred SOR than formations in which singers remain with those on the same voice part. SOR and choir configuration were reported to have an impact on the level of group cohesion and collaborative learning, their perception of the quality of the performance, and their feelings of enjoyment, satisfaction and confidence.

Ternström (1999) suggested that choir directors might consult singers regarding preferred SOR, in terms of whether they can hear themselves amongst the other singers around them. For these amateur singers, their need to hear each other is paramount; accommodating this may maximise the confidence derived from peer interactions. In practical terms, musical cues and confidence provided by singer to singer interaction could be optimised by judicious 'voice placement' (Lamb, 2010), based on relative strengths and weaknesses, in terms of vocal strength, accuracy of intonation and sight singing skills. The relative confidence levels of individual singers could also be taken into account by placing less secure singers next to more confident performers.

Balancing group dynamics and choral blend to optimise cohesion, collaboration and collective confidence is just one of the many demands of the conductor's role. However, the results of this study suggest that, when considering the configuration of the amateur choir, it is worth taking into account the needs of individual members, as well as the combined sound, overall layout and spacing of the ensemble. This is admittedly a tall order, but it is likely to pay dividends in terms of group efficacy within the context of amateur choral rehearsals and performances.

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