JABBLE! Choral Improvisation: A Model of Shared Leadership

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Abstract

Is choral singing merely a process of compliant singers taking directions from a choral expert in the interest of eliminating mistakes and polishing repertoire for public presentation? We read that the power of group singing is essentially a social phenomenon. Durrant (2000) concludes that the conductor has a "critical role in enabling social cohesion and emotional catharsis as well as developing musical skills in choral singing." (p. 84) Along with the social phenomenon of singing, conventional practice reinforces the conductor as the one who focuses the event. We explore this role in light of developing a choral improvisational intelligence, and explore the processes that culminated in a Wilfrid Laurier University Choir Concert that was based on student improvisation. The residency of Dr. Peter Wiegold at Wilfrid Laurier University in October of 2011, as part of a funded research project, provided the spark and the resources for building a choral concert on improvisation. Jabble explored the use of *embedded improvisation* within precomposed works as well as processes of *free* and pre-*structured* improvisation using musical embryos known as "backbones," originally pioneered by Weigold. The study indicated fundamental changes in the conventional choral leadership paradigm in the context of choral improvisation. Within the choral improvisation process conductors took on the role of musical facilitators and editors, whereas choristers became increasingly responsible for both basic and creative musical decisions.

Much is made of the leadership roles in choral ensembles. What are the conductor's responsibilities, both in the concert preparation process, and in the performance itself? What artistic and creative decisions are required of choristers? Is choral singing merely a process of compliant singers taking directions from a "choral expert" in the interest of eliminating mistakes and polishing repertoire for public consumption? We read that the power of group singing is essentially a social phenomenon. In choral singing the conductor's role is crucial. Durrant (2000) states the following: "[The conductor] has a critical role in enabling social cohesion and emotional catharsis as well as developing musical skills in choral singing" (p. 84).

Most studies examine the leadership paradigm within the conventional choral medium whereby music is rendered from the printed, pre-prepared score. Does the leadership dynamic change in the "new" medium of choral improvisation? Does the conductor's role change? And if so, how? What of the role of the choristers? For both parties does choral improvisation impact on issues such as conducting gestures, vocal technique, listening, blend, tuning, etc. ? This study examines ways in which improvisatory choral singing alters the conventional relationship of musical decision-making within the ensemble. This decision process extends beyond "cuing" (when who comes, how loud, etc.), affecting many other elements of the choral art including vocal technique, concepts of blend, tuning, and most profoundly, listening.

In the winter of 2012 three choirs at Wilfrid Laurier University undertook an unprecedented choral improvisation project where each engaged with a different method/form of choral improvisation. The residency of improvisation specialist, Dr. Peter Wiegold, in the Fall of 2011 provided the spark and resources for an entire concert of choral improvisation. During his

residency Dr. Wiegold worked with a broad range of musicians including elementary and high school students, university instrumental and vocal ensembles, as well as faculty and local professional musicians. With professional and university faculty musicians, he created a program for *The Hour Glass Ensemble,* a collection of improvising instrumentalists from classical, jazz, and free-improvisation backgrounds. In both his workshops and preparations for this ensemble Wiegold introduced his method of working from what he calls "backbones. " These are essentially mini-scores (one to two pages) where musical materials are arranged in linear and non-linear fashions. Most often these consisted of a page of notation, directions, and/or graphic representations. We titled this concert project "JABBLE!" the verb, is to splash, ripple, or agitate. "JABBLE," the noun, is turbulence. In the concert program notes, the following was included:

> This concert is JABBLE. Be careful, for the music might
> *jabble* you. Or, perhaps you will hear *Jabble*. You might
> find this to be a *jabbly* concert.

In fact, "Jabble" was a made-up word that was used to create an improvisatory framework for a university choral performance that pushed the conventional norms. The word "improvise" is derived from the Latin *improvisus* which means "unforeseen" or literally, "without foresight"

For some, the concert might have produced some moments of cacophony. For some who seek to make direct meaning through listening to the canon of choral compositions, there may have been confusion. And for many, there was thrilling, creative, risky music making.

JABBLE! Three Choirs, Three Approaches

For JABBLE! each of the university choirs worked with a different approach to improvisation. The Maureen Forrester Singers, a 30-member women's choir, explored an approach common to conventional choirs dabbling in aleatoric music. A young composer was commissioned to write a piece for the choir combining conventionally-composed materials with an embedded aleatoric section. The written direction in this section allowed individual singers a degree of freedom in tempo and entrances. Pitch and rhythm were prescribed within the improvisation/aleatoric section but singers were encouraged to create the musical shapes and textures through random entry points and varied tempi. This approach was quite successful. Conductor and choristers engaged in the conventional manner while allowing the exploration of randomly-generated soundscapes using prescribed materials.

The Laurier Singers, a select chamber choir consisting of 24 auditioned singers, chose a less common, but dramatically-engaging approach to the project. As in the majority of choral concerts, the ensemble presented a number of scored, prescribed works in contrasting styles including Mia Markaroff's "Were You There," and Moses Hogan's "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel. " The ensemble presented the works as a continuous set. Transitions from one work to the next were improvised. The choristers were required to create bridges between each of the works, transitioning in key, style, texture, etc. From piece to piece the ensemble was required to link two quite divergent pieces. For example, Mendelssohn's *Heilig,* a double choir setting, was paired with a student composition entitled *Lux Aeterna* Singers chose motivic fragments from the Mendelssohn and bridged it to the new piece, while moving into a different staged formation for performance. To do this they engaged a high-degree of musical intelligence and skill, spinning out motivic, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic materials to form a listener-engaging musical texture from one piece to the next. The goal here, was to present a contrasting set of choral

selections, but in the spirit of JABBLE!, to free up the idea that beginnings and endings were fixed. By blurring the defined boundaries of start and finish, a continuous organic musical event was established. Much like a symphonic work that contains various episodic and tension-release compositional devices, this had the effect of a longer presentation that held attention and demanded a concentration on the part of a listener that is often lost in a set of shorter choral works, interrupted by clapping, bowing, and re-starting.

The WLU Concert Choir, a large, symphonic mixed-voiced ensemble of approximately 80 singers, took an innovative and novel approach to improvisation. After initial sessions introducing the basic concepts and practices of choral improvisation to the choir, three student composers were engaged to create backbones (see Appendix A). The result was four different types of "compositions" loosely based around the elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. These large-scale improvisatory works utilized standard mixed choral forces in combination with instruments to create a wide variety of textures and timbres. Instrumentalists were drawn from the choir itself. Using skeletal, minimal musical embryos, the students, directed reflexively by their conductor, literally created a musical work that was never previously realized, nor in subsequent performances replicated. Each time this was approached, a fresh musical statement was made.

Creating Music: Conventional versus Improvisational

There is already a plethora of material written about working with choirs. Standard approaches in the Western classical tradition usually involve proceeding from a written score into a process of learning the notes and nuances until a performance-worthy result is achieved. The procedure is both well-documented, time-tested and culturally entrenched. It persists because it is both time and energy efficient with the majority of musical decision-making granted to the "choral expert" on the podium at the front of the room. Error recognition and error correction take up much of the preparation time with feedback from conductor at every stage. The conductor is also trained to be an interpreter of choral works, making nuanced decisions and communicating these in a variety of ways from the podium. At its most extreme this approach holds both composer and conductor to be "choral artists" while the choristers strive to execute the intentions and directions of the composer while intently following the leadership of the conductor. They essentially become the craftsperson's in this scenario.

While choral improvisation does not destroy the conventional leadership paradigm of the choral art, it does alter it and in doing so allows a degree of inquiry and illumination into the "established truths" of choral singing. It is important to be clear that choral improvisation, especially improvisation with large choirs, is a hybrid art. Choral improvisation is *conducted improvisation* and as such carries over a strong element of podium-focused leadership from the conventional model. While this is a somewhat odd concept to contemplate, it was certainly the practical reality of JABBLE!.

The Rehearsal Process: Non-Judgment, Deep Listening, and Musical Empathy

A traditional formal method of ensemble rehearsing provides clear materials and methods. Failure is common…wrong is wrong and must be corrected, rather than it being a means of discovery Typically, traditional models create hierarchies of achievement and underline power and control, and remove one of the natural ways of learning— "messing around" until a solution

is found. It is paramount that errors are corrected, and the most efficient way for that to happen is for a conductor to take on that responsibility, and implement a variety of strategies that move the ensemble toward the immaculately perfect performance.

From an outside observer's perspective, a choral improvisation rehearsal looks very much like a conventional one. The choir and conductor are in similar places (rows, risers, conductor on a podium). But, a few intangibles are strikingly different. First, are the elements of modeling correctness and error recognition. In choral improvisation the atmosphere and relationship between singers and conductor must be amenable to experimentation and participation. That is, "messing around. " Concepts of correctness and "wrong notes" are counterproductive, especially in the early stages of rehearsal. Nachmanovich (1990) holds that the best results in improvisation require an atmosphere free of criticism and judgment:

> There is a time to do just anything, to experiment without fear of consequences, to have a play space safe from fear of criticism, so that we can bring out our unconscious material without censoring it first. (p. 69)

In his work *Freeplay,* Werner (2011) concurs and adds that even self-criticism through self-imposed value judgments must be excised:

> Surrender is the key, and the first thing to surrender is one of your most prized possessions: YOUR OBSESSIVE NEED TO SOUND GOOD!" (loc. 419)

Both of these authors hold that an environment free of criticism and musical value judgments is ideal to begin the improvisation process. And although this could be said for any conventional choral rehearsal as well as improvised ones, it took a pointed and sustained effort to create a nonjudgmental, "anything goes" environment during the project. This was not solely the responsibility of the conductor, but of the choristers as well. There was in fact, a terrible fear of being judged by peers in the early stages of JABBLE! So much so, that it needed to be directly addressed:

> "Everyone was nervous at the beginning. It was really interesting to see how students at first met the concept with a lot of nervousness and aggression. It was easy to see why. They were way outside of their comfort level. (chorister)

> It was unknown and not comfortable (at first). Even once I was used to it (the idea and practice of improvising), I warmed to it slower than others, probably because I am not a vocal major. . . There was a period of time where I didn't enjoy it and . . . took more Advil than I ever had in my life. (chorister)

From volunteered student feedback early in the rehearsal process it became clear that fear of failure, sounding good or bad, and fear of peer judgment negatively influenced the effectiveness of rehearsals. In fact, any form of fear in the mix was detrimental. Both Werner (2011) and Nachmanovich (1990) identify fear of failure specifically and fear in general as negatively affecting to the artistic process:

> A person who is not afraid to die, knows how to live. A person who is not afraid to fail, succeeds. And a person who is not afraid to sound terrible may sound great. (loc. 449)

> The easiest way to do art is to dispense with success and failure altogether and just
> get on with it. (p. 135)

In JABBLE! "getting on with it" required deemphasizing conventional notions of success, failure, good and bad sound, etc. replacing them with something else. That "something else" became what I describe as musical empathy, a concept introduced into the musical lexicon by composer Pauline Oliveros in the 1960s as "Deep Listening:"

> Deep Listening includes nonjudgmental perception, the development of empathy
> through listening, the creation of nonhierarchical social relationships in music
> making, the expanded use of intuitive forms of internal and external awareness.
> (Osborne, 2000)

Oliveros scholar, William Osborne (2000), describes Deep Listening as a sort of mindfulness of sound, both in terms of listening and in terms of production. Mindfulness is a Buddhist concept, which refers to the mental aspects of memory and awareness. In mindfulness, when the mind wanders, one gently refocuses its attention. Deep Listening requires one to be extraordinarily aware of one's self as wells as the entire group and especially those singers in the immediate proximity. Choristers in JABBLE! put Deep Listening into practice by creating "inclusive sound" where their own voice was neither completely subsumed nor dominant in the musical texture. Using musical empathy they created a local space where everyone's musical ideas could be acknowledged, supported, and in many cases passed along and developed. Development of "musical empathy" or "deep listening" replaced conventional error recognition and correction as well as "sound unifications" (blending and balancing) normally mitigated from the podium. As the choir improved at this sort of listening and interaction, the musical ideas and textures became more comprehensible, sophisticated, and interesting. Simply put, the greater degree of musical empathy, the more cohesive, communicative, and enriching the choral experience.

Choral Improvisation with Backbones —

Rethinking Conducting Gestures
While two of the choirs in this study worked from conventional scores, which provided musical materials from which to derive their improvisations, the Concert Choir worked exclusively with "backbones. " These mini-scores gave rise to the final works, provided basic musical materials, and structure such as musical sections and, in some case, dramatic, artistic intent. (See Appendix A) It was the physical conducting of these improvisations that departed sharply from standard conventions and norms. Standard conducting patterns while utilized, were often less than effective, and in fact, quickly proved to be in the minority to other gestures.

Most of the musical gestures from the podium developed into visual hand signals which facilitated such things as cues for singers to move to the next section, free improvisation, a solo, a repeating motive, echo another singer, or participation in a duet or trio. The creation of this "new language" during the rehearsal process served to create a heightened awareness between the choristers and the conductor, a situation desirable in conventional choral practice, but not always achieved, especially where the conductor is relegated to the task of "keeping time. " The conductor - chorister relationship is extremely important in choral improvisation and became one of the most compelling and unique aspects of this particular project. For JABBLE! the Concert Choir adopted and utilized a gestural vocabulary of approximately 15 gestures. While these

gestures were important to the "road map" of each improvisation, the experience of heightened musical communication between podium and choristers became particularly acute. One gained the sense of not "commanding" or "directing" the music from the podium. Instead, conducting felt more akin to giving permission to choristers to participate, create, and "play" with the musical materials at hand. Peter Wiegold noted that in improvisation, the conductor becomes less of a judge of what is correct and more of an editor or music producer. During the improvisation process, the conductor draws attention to some ideas, allows some to rise and fade quickly, while others are allowed to develop. He/She essentially facilitates a continuously changing musical space that maximizes an interchoir dialogue of constant creative flow.

Responsibilities of Choristers

Just as the role of the conductor is altered in choral improvisation, so too is the role of the chorister. As in conventional choral music, the singer is responsible for such things as vocal production, tuning, and blend. But these standard choral skills take on a new guise in the context of improvisation. In JABBLE! singers were given considerable leeway with regard to note choices. Notes indicated on backbones were given as references or starting points. Singers used these given musical materials to give rise to other musical ideas depending on their choice and given the context at the moment.

While the conductor might suggest a change in harmony via a gesture, the choice of pitches, the structure, and timbre of the resultant sonority was left completely to the choristers. This meant that many musical moments came as complete surprises to both choristers and conductor, both of whom needed to react spontaneously and reflexively to maintain the flow and integrity of the piece.

In addition to singing within the larger choir, clusters of choristers would sometimes form ad hoc choirs sharing and developing ideas within their own small group. While a more difficult skill to achieve, these smaller groups sometimes worked in dialogue with one another. To do so choristers needed to develop considerable musical empathy. The result was both surprising and inspiring as these sub-choirs would create musical moments that were deeply engaging.

Within JABBLE! there were also opportunities for soloists. These took two basic forms: 1) a soloist would begin a brief, repeated motivic pattern that would quickly be picked up by others in the group, or 2) a soloist would sing a prominent, often lengthy solo. In these situations the choristers would be challenged with accompanying and supporting the soloist. With a number of vocal majors in the choir willing to challenge themselves with fully improvised solos, the choristers became quite adept at creating musical textures that both supported and enhanced solo performance. As choristers became more comfortable improvising, more of them volunteered for spontaneous solos, indicating this to the conductor through facial expression.

Choral Improvisation in Performance

In conventional choral music the sound is "perfected" during rehearsals in preparation for performance with musicians attempting to create an idealized version of a prescored work. With choral improvisation while certain structures may be repeated from one rehearsal to the next, the music varies with each attempt. In fact, the concept of a predetermined, idealized result is antithetical to the improvisational creative process, which favours the spontaneous rise of musical ideas over repetition with the intent of refinement. Choral improvisation, whether in rehearsal or performance is rooted firmly in the present moment. The performance setting and the inclusion of audience present new factors for choristers and will therefore influence the

performance in unforeseeable ways. But, it is the flexible nature of improvisation that allows chorister and conductor to take such changes in stride. One becomes less concerned with controlling the environment and more concerned with reacting in a flexible, reflexive, and musically compelling manner. There is no real difference between rehearsal and performance from a procedural perspective. In improvisation, the performance is simply an extension of the rehearsal process, only perhaps with the inclusion of new factors with which to interact. Choral improvisation in performance can be very compelling for both audience members and singers. The ephemeral nature of improvised music demands constant attention (mindfulness) at every turn. Musical ideas and textures often rise unexpectedly and organically, sometimes seemingly from nowhere.

Student Reactions

Part of the documenting of JABBLE! was to record student reactions to the improvisation process. Choral improvisation is a relatively new practice and even students with extensive choral backgrounds had little or no experience with it prior to the project. This situation provided a valuable window in which to collect comments and general impressions through voluntary interviews, which were collected at the end of the project. Students were asked three open-ended questions dealing with their experience of the project. (See Appendix B for questions)

There were a number of comments that spoke to initial fear and discomfort around improvisation later replaced by a sense of enjoyment:

> Before we did this, I would never have touched improvisation with a 10 foot pole! I thought, "I could never do that ever!" But, I really, really enjoyed it.

> (I was impressed by) how much it changed me as a musician. I was one of those people when we started, that was so scared. What am I supposed to do? How much musical knowledge do I need? I had to get over the idea that all my ideas had to be brilliant.

> I know people who hated the idea of an improvised choir, and I was apprehensive. As we did it more, it got more comfortable and then we really made it happen!

What came as a surprise to this researcher were comments about improvisation enhancing the sense of community within the choir:

> There were times when I looked around and knew that there were people that were still feeling uncomfortable, just standing there . . . I felt bad. . . wanted to turn around and help them by giving them something to sing.

> It became a very clear sense of community. It gave (me) a chance to be a part of something. You can do whatever you want as long as it flows with everything else. You feel important . . and do what you want as long as you do it with everyone else.

> The choir grew so much closer as a group and as individuals. The project got us more enthusiastic about one another.

> That's why I think improvisation is so important. You can connect quickly with someone this way.

For the students there was an overall sense of accomplishment and a general agreement that the project was a valuable experience. At Wilfrid Laurier University, students often attend choir because it is required for their degree program. The introduction of choral improvisation awakened an enthusiasm for choir that was different from previous terms where the approach was more conventional:

It made me look forward to going to choir everyday!

This was such a unique experience. . . Everyone walked away so happy!

I really enjoyed the experience and was happy with how it ended up. I wanted to take more solos and leadership. I would do it again and would love to do more!

Taken as a whole, the student comments indicate that they found JABBLE! to be an unfamiliar but wonderfully engaging process of discovery and growth. Working with JABBLE! gave them a new sense of skill, creativity, and artistry. Within the ensemble it contributed to an enhanced sense of community and connection, which added both socially and musically to the choristers' experiences.

Conclusions

JABBLE! was presented to the public as a journey of improvisatory exploration. This is a process of the imagination. The process is never finished or fully complete. A fertile and nimble imagination fosters creative thinking. As musicians, we like to think that we are creative. However, most of our performance work is the re-creating of fixed compositions, the work of others' imaginations. JABBLE! combined the pre-composed with the on-the-spot creating.

Societal expectations for university choral concerts are defined. Repertoire must be of a high standard. Performance conventions such as proper stage etiquette, dress, facial expressions, stylistic authenticity, and compliance with all sorts of prescribed instructions and leadership must be followed. And, the audience must enjoy it. It must be a pleasant experience where people are moved by beauty and excellence.

JABBLE! widened the boundaries of the conventions of choral singing. As noted earlier, it may have contributed to an uneasiness among some, but in the very process of sharing artistic decisions with imaginative young minds, a magical moment occurred. The level of risk-taking, musicianship displayed, and imaginative realization of ideas resulted in a memorable event, worthy of exploration, and further development.

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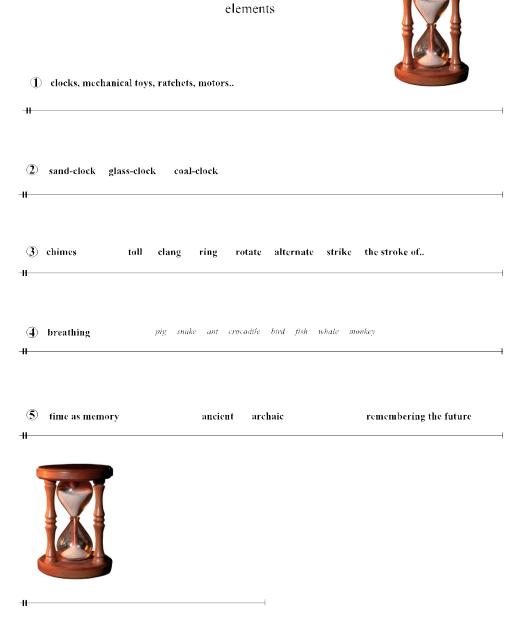
Appendix A: Examples of Backbones

Figure 1. JABBLE! Backbone "Phoenix Rising" by Kylie MacKay

Figure 2. JABBLE! Backbone "Earth" by Mélanie Bakos Lang

the hourglass
elements

① clocks, mechanical toys, ratchets, motors..

② sand-clock   glass-clock   coal-clock

③ chimes   toll   clang   ring   rotate   alternate   strike   the stroke of..

④ breathing   *pig   snake   ant   crocodile   bird   fish   whale   monkey*

⑤ time as memory   ancient   archaic   remembering the future

Figure 3. Backbone for Hour Glass Ensemble by Dr. Peter Wiegold

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Choristers

1. I am interested in your personal experience with the choral improvisation project, specifically how it was different than other choral, or other musical experiences you have had. Please identify two or three aspects of this experience that made a particular impression on you. These may be anything about the experience that was remarkable to you.

2. Comment about the experience comparing or contrasting it to other experiences you have had (these may or may not be musical experiences).

3. Is there anything else you'd like to add about this experience?