Men's Ways of Singing

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Ethnomusicology and anthropology provide a wealth of information about music, men and masculinity. Studies by Magrini (2000) and Sugarman (1997) for example, both reveal what Sugarman describes as a "patriarchy of singing," transmitting central values of manhood and justified by belief in an ahistorical maleness which determines gendered vocal behaviour, repertoire and style. Such beliefs sit uneasily alongside Connell's rejection of a definitive masculinity and generalizations about its representation and practice (1995). For Connell, even defining the term masculinity and developing a science of it, present significant epistemological problems. Adopting a "men's studies" definition, this paper investigates the vocal behaviour and identity of men who share the anatomy and physiology of the male body (Connell, 1995).

Apart from sharing these biological attributes, the men in this study share a common social setting in sparsely populated north-east Iceland, and a common pastime, singing together regularly in a male-voice choir. Men's singing in Iceland, as in Crete and Prespa, might easily be seen as an ahistorical phenomenon, but feminist historian Inga Dora Björnsdóttir (2001) offers an alternative view. Her study of the origins and development of male-voice choirs in Iceland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, clearly locates this phenomenon in the historical context of emergent national identity. Male voice choirs and their romantic nationalist repertoire, quickly spread to all social classes and areas of Iceland—agents in the production and representation of highly gendered symbols of nationhood, in the struggle for independence, and in the establishment of a particularly Icelandic, masculine hegemony.

Patriarchal power structures may still be the norm, 62 years after the founding of an Icelandic republic, but social changes accompanying Iceland's remarkable transition from almost pre-industrial revolution state into an affluent Western state, has challenged them. In 2002 men were given equal rights to paternity leave; in a 1996 international survey, Icelanders emerged as having least belief in gender-determined personality characteristics such as decisiveness, feelingness, intelligence, courage, patience, creativity, ambition, calmness and compassion (Gallup, 1996); and egalitarianism is widely seen as the most significant value orientation of Icelanders (Tomasson, 1980).

Where then does the vocal behaviour of men living in such a society and singing regularly together in homo-social settings, widely implicated as bastions of hegemonic masculinity, fit in with theories of gendered musical behaviour and meaning? What role does singing play in the construction and performance of men's gender identity?

In areas as diverse as politics, the work place, sports, the home and sexuality, researchers have observed the social construction, performance and function of masculine ideology and developed sociological and psychological models of its practice. Whilst music in all its many forms is one of the ways in which gender identity is created and maintained, research and discourse investigating this relationship has, for the most part, been a feminist-led challenge to the opinion that gender-specific musical behaviours are naturally determined expressions of innate femaleness or maleness (Dibben, 2001). The present paper engages in this dialectic through the study of Icelandic men's vocal behaviour and their discourse about it.

Theoretical Framework

Even though the researcher has lived in this particular "field" for 15 years, this paper is not primarily concerned with observation of men's vocal behaviour in the ethnomusicological sense. Essentially an "ego-logical" focus is adopted, listening to personal, psychological perspectives of lived vocal experiences (van Maanen, 1990, p. 54). It should be emphasized that the present study makes no attempt to draw generic

conclusions; it is idiographic. Data has been primarily collected in extensive semi-structured interviews with ten men who were encouraged to relate and interpret their vocal life-histories and everyday vocal experience (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1978). Subsequently, 25 men, who sing in the same choir, kept vocal diaries for one week, making regular entries about vocal behaviour and personal reflections upon it.

Following grounded theory analytical strategies, interviews were subject to line-by-line coding and categories were developed. Analysis of the interviews revealed that singing emerges as a strong determinant of self concept for all men in the study. Furthermore some of the categories developed from a wide-range of constructs, appear to relate specifically to gendered concepts of self. These categories were tested and refined through theoretical sampling of the men's vocal diaries (Charmaz, 2000). Seven emergent themes seem particularly relevant to understanding the relationship between vocal behaviour and masculinity and will be discussed here in relation to relevant literature and gender theories.

Men's Voices, Women's Choices

Several of the men in the study made unprompted comments about collective male vocal activity being perceived, mainly by women, as sexual display. For one of the men, the male voice choir's singing is explicitly concerned with sexual display and selection. Others reject this suggestion entirely. Whilst some men allude to singing's agency in heterosexual relationships, most appear to underestimate the significance of their vocality in their own sexual relationships.[1]

Magnus is explicit about the nature of this collective vocal performance:

> I mean in the choir, aren't we guys always the cockerel showing off? You see it in nature, doesn't that happen everywhere in nature? The male always has to display himself... has a specific routine.

In contrast Baldur argues that:

> There's absolutely nothing like that going on.... It's something that belongs to history if it is at all, totally not. I can't see anything like that at all.

By chance I overheard an Icelandic woman in her early twenties talk about the "hrútasýning"—"ram's show"—as she watched these 50 men line up for a recent concert. This highly gendered rural tradition, takes place every year to decide which rams are best for breeding. The woman refused to expand on her impromptu comment.

All the men interviewed claimed that male-voice choirs are much more popular than women's choirs, not least amongst women themselves. In some cases women's enthusiasm is unrestrained:

> I know lots of women that are absolutely unbearable if they've been drinking, they just want to listen to male-voice choir recordings. They never want to listen to a women's choir or even a mixed choir...men's voices, that's what they want to listen to, go absolutely mad.

When asked about the significance of singing in their own courtship all the men deny its having had any significance, but casual conversations with several of their partners indicated that singing was indeed part of the original attraction, even if men were not consciously aware of it. The potential agency of singing in heterosexual relationships is illustrated by one of the men who relates an encounter some 30 years ago. Singing's power as sexually selected aesthetic display seems to be recognized but repressed:

> I must have been 16, standing in a queue for tea. I was working at the herring processing plant. Forgot myself and began to sing a song. A Faroese girl behind

me, poked me and said "Will you sing a song for me? You sing so beautifully." I didn't. I often had to collect her barrels of herring or take her salt, and she'd always ask me "Will you sing for me?" I never did, except that one time, accidentally.

Objectifying Prominence in Vocal Public Life

Men's claims that male voice choirs are more popular than other choirs are not unsubstantiated. Women's choirs are much less audible in Icelandic musical life, the tradition much less widespread. When asked to justify the dominance of male-voice choirs, the men emphasize "objective" aesthetic criteria. In keeping with biologically determinist theories, men's voices are perceived as being more complex (Darwin, 1981); having much greater expressive potential, wider dynamic and pitch range.

A women's choir can never be as much of an instrument as a men's choir.

There's so much more width to the sound—the depth of the basses and the high tenors.

It's the sound, somehow it's just more exciting, more beautiful somehow, big and grand...rich, gentle and loving.

Only one man in the study sees this dominance as being related to social power structures, a conviction formed by a childhood spent witnessing and sharing his mother's passionate love of singing and observing the confinement of women's singing to specific social spaces.

Mother sang completely, gave herself totally... she always sang, all the time...but I don't remember anybody ever talking about founding a women's choir. I think it was considered unrealistic that women should somehow exclude themselves and get together to practice singing! They had other things to do, they weren't supposed to be meeting up together to go to a song practice, it just wasn't on!

Vocal Spaces

According to Lefebvre (1991) spaces are defined by the materialization of social being and can be seen as being "actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed in them" (de Certeau, 1984). For the purposes of this discourse, spaces are actuated by vocal ensemble; they are places where social being is vocally materialized. The men in the study talk at length about these spaces: Firstly they talk about highly gendered public vocal spaces clearly related to structures and institutions of hegemonic masculinity, though few of the men make this connection explicit; secondly they talk about private vocal spaces, providing psychological insights into more personal forms of masculine identity.

According to the men in the study lots of spaces in Icelandic communities are vocally materialized. Apart from the home, these are traditional work places, public meeting places such as community halls or "Þinghús" and churches. Only in churches do women enjoy equal vocal opportunities. As Baldur points out:

Around here men have been more likely to seek opportunities to sing together, except of course in church. It was pleasing both to God and man for women to serve by singing in church.

This sex-role script-following appears typical of the delineation of public spaces by the gendered vocal ensembles that actuate them:

> The guys, up in the mountain huts...or having brought the sheep safely down from the mountains, rejoice together by taking a song. It's the obvious thing to do when men come together.
>
> In a break at a dance or something in the community hall, maybe the guys have had a glass or two, get together in the corner and start singing.
>
> Or singing in the toilets at dances, you only ever hear it from the men's toilets.

Whilst public song-roles seem for the most part to reflect tradition divisions of labour, the script may be changing. Several of the men recognize that vocal ensembles in these public spaces need not be exclusively *homo*-geneous.

> Thirty or forty years ago no woman would have drunk out of a hipflask at a round-up, let alone sing with men who were a bit merry. Today she'll probably take a sup, you put your arms around each other and sing.

In contrast to the explicitly public nature of these vocally structured masculine spaces and the collective singing rituals performed in them, are men's private, vocal spaces.

As spring approaches hay stocks in the barn are depleted. The men speak metaphorically of "the sound of spring in the barn," where the increasing resonance of their own vocal being represents the approaching spring. Here, in the barn, as in empty milk tanks and in sparsely populated landscapes, the men seem to feel an irresistible need to make an impression on an acoustic space. In much the same way that a graffitist might make his mark in a subway or a caveman leave his handprint on a cave wall, these vocal gestures appear to be statements about personal identity. In contrast though, they are strictly private and temporary. Like the inability to pass a mirror without looking at one's self, the men vocally and aurally check themselves out—a reflective "Who do I hear I am?" If the acoustic is right the singer even gets to expand his vocal self, however fleetingly.

> I sing *by myself* and *for myself* when I'm in the barn.
>
> I sing aloud when I'm alone, maybe you're just testing yourself.
>
> I sing when I'm in the barn by myself—experimenting with the voice, even make up melodies and text spontaneously...out of the blue and then off with the wind.
>
> Bloody great to sing in empty milk tanks or silos, you think wow. You think you're pretty bloody good.
>
> It's pretty good to sing there with the rocks, and the mountains to throw the sound between.

The importance of these private acoustical spaces is underlined by one of the men in the present study who has moved from a rural setting to the small local fishing town and clearly misses opportunities for vocally materializing himself, for checking himself out and turning places into vocal spaces:

> I don't sing as much now we've moved into town, you're never really by yourself. Not that I desire to sing any less but it's different. People don't sing as much in urban areas.

Bodies and Physical Contact

Men in the study describe the singing of four-part harmony in embodied, even sensual terms, using metaphors of physical containment (Johnson, 1987). Singing together, especially, though not necessarily, with the aid of alcohol, facilitates physical contact not normally associated with heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. Men learn unfamiliar vocal parts by being literally "sensitized to each other's voices," in as close physical proximity as possible. They can be observed huddling together, arms around each other, there may be sustained eye-contact between individuals, even touching of faces. This physical intimacy appears to be an almost embodied metaphorical representation of the experience of singing in harmony with others and perhaps even serves to finely synchronize vocal ensemble and performance.

> As soon as a few guys get together with a little alcohol, they put their arms around each other and start singing.
>
> The harmony, landing inside of it, I fell for it straight away, completely absorbed by it.
>
> Being physically in the middle of these sounding bodies, especially when we're singing in harmony, ahhhhh.
>
> You feel much better in harmony with others. Then you get that kick, that's how it's supposed to be.

Male Vocal Therapy

Many of the men describe ways in which they use singing as a means of self-regulation of mood and emotion in their daily lives (DeNora, 2000). They see it as providing opportunities to unwind, forget about work-selfs and problems, to renew themselves in an almost spiritual sense, and as a means of expressing feelings creatively. More explicitly several men talk about how they have used singing in cathartic therapeutic processes at times of major life crises.

> It's a really good device, if something is wrong, if you feel bad, then it's really good to sing *yourself* away from it.
>
> At least I don't think about my work when I'm singing and not about my problems either.
>
> You feel completely different afterwards, it's an elixir, you release something somehow, become relaxed, even if you're totally knackered.
>
> There was no help in that sort of crisis (brother's fatal accident) so, so you just sang. And like with Páll who commited suicide just last year.... I wrote a song and sang it myself. *Singing still works*, it's amazingly good.

Singing as Agency in the Family

Singing's agency is not limited to male-bonding in homo-social settings or to heterosexual relationships. In different social frameworks, men use vocal behaviour as an empathetic mechanism of identifying with other people's feelings, situations and motives. Many of the men illustrate ways in which singing is a fundamental pattern of relating in the nuclear and extended family. In some cases singing is a central concept of family identity.

Earliest recollections of vocal interaction in the home include fathers as often as mothers, though one parent is usually seen as being more vocally active than the other.

> The family never came together without singing, people were happy and felt better, went happier home.
>
> Dad's family had a tune for everything.
>
> Dad was always singing, anything, everything, whatever, wherever, even in shops, I understood it completely.
>
> It was a principle of Grandma, if you felt bad it was good to sing...and we all sang, it was something in our particular clan...it was obligatory.

Several men claim to sing or to have sung with their own offspring much more than their partners. Whilst the specific details of this interaction remain unclear, Baldur, like several of the men, clearly sees it as a fundamental to his relationship with his one-year-old grandson. He goes to considerable lengths to nurture this vocal relationship, as the following extract, typical of almost all his daily entries, illustrates:

> Invited my daughter to supper, her husband is at sea. Little Gunnar has to have things to do, so after supper I provided for him; sat at the piano with him and played and sung. He moved around in time and joined in.

Mars and Venus

When discussing repertoire that men have found personally satisfying, none of the men mentions works that are directly associated with theatres of war, widely seen as key symbols of hegemonic masculinity (Morgan, 1994). Significantly or not, Iceland has no military, and whilst the men in the choir sing of "fighting for the right they adore" in soldiers' choruses from *Faust*, *Il Trovatore* or in *Men of Harlech*, singing these kinds of songs is not seen as being particularly satisfying, vocally or aesthetically, or as being relevant to issues of group or individual identity. On the contrary "peak experiences" are almost without exception concerned with unaccompanied four-part singing of sustained songs at slow tempi—frequently lullabies or contemplative themes.

> Singing "Kvöldblíðan lögnvær"—singing gentle, beautiful and clean, pure and beautiful. You're not less of a man for that, you're more.
>
> The other day when we sang "The Rose"—I was choked, I couldn't sing, it was so special.
>
> When you sing like that, you get this "ah, yes!" feeling—this happiness, there's no other measurement for singing except that feeling.

Discussion

In keeping with recently developed "masculinities" theories, the present study illustrates some of the complexities and contradictions of men's gendered identity (Connell, 1995; Brod & Kaufmann, 1994). One of the most commonly observed features of modern hegemonic masculinity is men's not thinking about what it means to be a man (Roberts, 1992, as cited in McLean, 1996). Perhaps it is easier, therefore, to deny that the high social status of men's vocal behaviour in Iceland, has anything to do with gender, whether determined by biology or constructed by social structures and power relationships. Is this

why men justify the prominence of men's voices in objective "aesthetic" terms and appear unconscious of the existence of gendered or even sexual delineations?

Rejecting biological determinist theories entirely though, is not an option. Men may see sexual display as a less worthy motive for singing or even deny its significance altogether, but biological function needs no conscious awareness (Darwin, 1981). Singing does bear the hallmarks of a biological adaptation—sexually selected indicators and aesthetic displays as courtship for sexual selection, and natural selection to minimize search costs for females may force males to form large choruses (Miller, 2000). Comments about women, and by women, suggest that they perceive elements of sexual display in men's collective and individual singing .

Men's vocal behaviour clearly contributes to, and is representative of, the socially constructed gendering of spaces, in particular, workplaces. Women's public voices still appear to be restrained by the kind of hegemonic masculine structures that male voice choirs in Iceland were instrumental in establishing. There is evidence that some men are, however, aware of a changing social and vocal environment as traditional sex-role scripts are re-written.

Further evidence of social and environmental influence on men's vocal behaviour is seen in how the specific rural setting, large level of personal autonomy, and sparse population, facilitates the private vocal marking of spaces. Kimmel (1994) observed how similar settings might be significant in the construction of a less competitive version of masculinity than found in modern urban marketplace man. Developing this theory vocally we might contrast men's vocal behaviour in the study with the modern urban "masculine" trend of marking territory acoustically with "ghetto-blasters." Certainly manhood in rural N.E. Iceland requires a different proof and allows for different kinds of male musical performance.

This is seen in the home too, where men do not necessarily follow the vocal score of traditional sex-role theories. In the privacy of the home or extended family settings, men's singing voices play essential roles in the construction of group identity and in the forming and following of family scripts or songs. Furthermore, men in the study challenge the view of vocal parenting roles as biologically determined, a view which seems implicit in the dominance of *mother*-infant communication research, and in suggestions that music most suitable for infants should be similar to the voices of young females or children (Trehub, 1990). Connell argues for change if men are to share the burden of early infant care; he has the tactile in mind when he claims that re-embodied masculinity and not just re-structuring of institutions is required (Connell, 1995)—Icelandic men illustrate the centrality of *re-vocalled* masculinity too.

The study provides further evidence of vocal agency in the construction of complex plural, masculinities: Firstly men in the choir reject simplistic theories of "hard and heavy phenomena" being indicative of true maleness (Tiger, 1969; Tiger & Fox, 1971; Bly, 1990). In Mieli's psychoanalytical theory (Mieli, 1980), such phenomena are the product of straight men's repression of what they see as feminine in men. Interestingly then, men's views of peak aesthetic experiences in the male voice choir and the "soft," sustained, contemplative repertoire that stimulates these experiences, reflect more closely the possibilities available in Jung's original theories of *anima* and *animus* (Jung, 1982), than mythopoetic versions of them expounded in Bly's Iron John (1990) or other populist "Men are from Mars" psychology. Secondly, men clearly use vocal behaviour as self-help therapy and are articulate about its agency in their daily lives and in the regulation of emotional life. Thirdly, whilst men's bodies are often conspicuously absent in concepts of masculinity—with notable exceptions of physical contact sports and war (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1987; Sparkes & Smith, 1999; Morgan, 1994; Connell, 1995)—and from discussion of music's meaning (Green, 1997), singing is seen here as highly embodied behaviour. The kind of physical contact singing facilitates—embracing, touching—albeit sometimes with the aid of alcohol, contrasts strongly with stereotypical models of relationships between heterosexual masculine bodies.

Conclusion

All of the themes above need much fuller discussion and theoretical refinement than space here allows. Furthermore, considering the impact of vocal behaviour alone on gender identity, and separating gender identity from other elements of self presents major problems for theorists suspicious of reductionist thinking. Despite these reservations evidence clearly illustrates the role of vocal behaviour in the construction and maintenance of complex and even contradictory masculine identities. Evidence challenges historical views of masculinity and yet supports singing as a biologically determined function in sexual display. On the one hand, a "vocal patriarchy" (Sugarman, 1997) continues to contribute to a cultural dynamic, almost inaudible to men in the study, but which sustains men's dominant position in social life. On the other, men's vocal behaviour is more than a representation of hegemonic gender ideology, and it reveals both feminine and masculine influences in vocal, social and mental lives. In spite of the study's explicitly homo-social setting, findings cast doubt upon mythopoetic theories of "weekend warriors" (Kimmel & Kaufmann, 1994) and challenge traditional sex-role stereotypes. Men's vocal relationships with young infants, their use of singing as self-therapy and as agency in wider social and emotional life, the importance of men's bodies and physical intimacy in singing activities, all illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of men's masculine identity and its vocal construction.

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Endnote

1. The sample quotes in this paper are taken from over 15 hours of audio recordings. Unless otherwise indicated, they should be seen as indicative of several men's responses.