Communities of Singing: A Democratic Approach

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Introduction

Philosophical justifications for communities of music makers have been influenced by writers who espouse the value of aesthetic education (Reimer, 1989; 2002); a praxial philosophy of music education (Elliott, 1995); and the development of attributes, dispositions, and virtues that reflect independence of critical thinking, all within social and cultural contexts (Bowman, 2002). Such contributions provide the music education field with guidance when philosophical, curricular, and pedagogical issues are examined.

Directly related to Bowman's work and not unrelated to Reimer and Elliott's thinking, are the opinions of those who write about democratic environments in which spaces are created for all voices within a musical community to be heard as musical decisions are made and experienced (Jorgensen, 2001; Allsup, 2003).

It is within this arena of thinking (i.e., creating spaces in democratic environments, with some assistance from the field of social psychology) that I would like to examine communities of singing and entertain reasons for empowering choral members to be active, reflective music makers. First let us identify the stakeholders and roles and expectations of each.

The Stakeholders

- Conductor (the leader who makes decisions about repertoire, interpretations of the music, and sometimes finances. Basically he/she is the musical expert, thus the conductor).
- Choir Members (those interested in making music, and have a variety of musical experiences and expertise).
- Audience Members (family and friends, and interested people from the community who are curious or have heard previous concerts and are motivated to return to subsequent performances).
- Supporters
  Emotional. Family and friends.
  Musical. Community members who enjoy musical experiences as audience members, all with varying musical expertise and understandings.
  Financial. Choir members, conductor, family, friends, people in the community who support artistic endeavours, cooperate sponsors, and government funding. Eligibility for certain monies may be dependent on membership (professional, semi-professional, amateur), quality of product, and level of grantwriting skills and innovation. A recipient may experience certain regulations and expectations in terms of programming, location, and quantity of performances.

Identity

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on identities of the conductor and the choir members.

The *conductor's sense of identity* can be shaped by the process of music-making (i.e., by the quantity and quality of involvement) and product of music-making (i.e., the performance). The involvement of choir members during the process and product depends on the expectations of the conductor, which are dependent on the conductor's beliefs about the process and involvement of music-making. The conductor's value of performance

through singing and the processes that occur in preparation for the performance will, then, influence the approach taken before, during, and after rehearsals.

The *choral members' identity* occurs at two levels, as individuals and as a group. At the individual and group levels, identity is largely framed by the quality of experienced performances and responses from the audience. The breadth and depth of experiences differ across individuals, thus, the relationships of those experiences between individuals, and the individual and group differ. The responses are regarded in a variety of ways, often within the context of perceptions about the musical prowess of the audience member.

At the individual level, each choir member may experience "a class system" of musicians within the choir, which may be created through auditions that determine membership and/or placement in the large ensemble, and as a soloist or a member in a smaller ensemble (e.g., duet, trio, quartet). In addition, each choir member in the large and/or smaller ensembles, and as a soloist, may experience varying levels of involvement during decision-making processes about the programming and location, and interpretative aspects while realizing the music, i.e., framing and solving musical challenges.

Intentionality: Practice Guided by Philosophy

The intent of involving people in singing activities needs to be clearly understood and valued for the context in which the singing is to occur. Knowing the stakeholders and intent of each from all perspectives facilitates making decisions about participation in specific choral groups.

In music education and music performance, we have been extremely successful at building choral groups that re-create music of Western and non-Western traditions at exemplar levels. These top performing groups provide models for choral sound, blend, balance, interpretation, and representation. Our music education students learn from such groups as choral members, student teachers, apprentice conductors, and audience members. The members of such choirs strive to achieve high performance standards, and as a result, listen and respond with intensity as the conductor guides them through technical and musical challenges as required by the repertoire.

In music education courses, we have been encouraging students to grow as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1987), and to participate in choral settings as thinking musicians (Younker, 2002). Part of their music education experience involves participating in choral ensembles in which, for the most part, are conducted by exemplar choral conductors who make the musical decisions. By the very nature of the performing groups in schools of music, performing groups have multiple performing dates; thus, the product drives the process. Occasionally students experience ensembles in which they are participants and have ownership over musical decisions; however, they are often student-run ensembles. What the students do not experience are explicit understandings about how to run choral programs in school-based or community-based choral settings that may differ from the traditional choral programs in which the conductor's role is to make all musical decisions, that is, involving choral members in the process of framing and solving musical challenges.

Please note that I am not suggesting we no longer have choirs of this tradition, but am suggesting that there may be other forms of choral ensembles for those singers who are interested in other kinds of experiences and in which all members have voices in decisions made about the music.

Alternative Approaches to Singing Communities: Creating Musical Spaces

Why would we value community-based choral settings in which participants were active music makers involved in framing and solving musical challenges (thus, making musical decisions), and what might that look like? How might we involve all voices within a choral ensemble so that all voices are heard, thus reflecting a true democratic environment in which all voices are heard and valued in shared decision-making? Within such

collaborative partnerships, levels of trust and respect go beyond "normative music education" (Allsup, 2003, p. 34). Such an environment involves a dance or dances in which the players exchange, respond, provide, and care; thus the players engage in acts of reciprocity (Younker & Burnard, 2002). The conductor and choral members are learning and making music with each other as opposed to the conductor doing music to the members. Within such a democratic environment, all voices, weak and strong, in and out, and others, all voices often marginalized within performance based ensembles, are heard and valued. Each member learns from the other while generating, evaluating, and converging on musical solutions to musical "problems" or "mystiques." Thus, through such experiences, the members can experience self-actualization, reflecting a community, which involves each member caring about what each other brings to the experience. Listening to other voices can provide a deeper understanding about own perceptions, as noted by Campbell (1998) when writing about the child's voice: "The music children have within them, as well as their thoughts about music, are starting points for understanding their values, their knowledge, and their needs. Their voices, as much as the voices of experts, should help to determine something of an educational plan for them, for this is how a musical education can be in touch with their lives and experiences" (p. 5). If we adopt the same frame of mind for such communities of singing, the philosophical reason becomes clear.

Such experiences resemble the thinking of those who purport reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933/1991), problem posing (Freire, 1970), and constructivist thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Reflective or critical thinking is a characteristic of democracy in that all voices are heard and respected as ideas are generated, evaluated, and tested. In later writings, Dewey (1938) emphasized the importance of including the student (in this case each choral member) in the formation of the purposes that direct her activities in the learning process (p. 67), a point that represents the cornerstone of progressive education. Including the student in these processes can result in her active co-operation while formulating the purposes that are involved in her studies. It is crucial that the student understands what a purpose is, how it is formulated, and how it functions in an experience. The choral experience would be making explicit how musical challenges are framed, negotiated, and solved.

"Creating and opening spaces" (Allsup, 2003) in community singing groups in which actions of discovery when making musical decisions reflect "a material process of democracy" (p. 35) (i.e., "democratic action"). Thus, the choir members begin to experience their musical worlds created from participation in identifying and solving musical problems, thus experiencing the constraints and freedoms of music-making (Burnard & Younker, 2002).

Involving them at all levels of such experiences is made evident through the stories of rich collaborations while making music in settings that blend community and formal institutions (see Veblen & Johnson, in press).

From the large ensemble, small ensembles can evolve (e.g., trios, duets, octets, triple trios, quartets) in which musical decisions can be negotiated. In these rehearsals, choral members are engaged in reflective discussions and demonstrations while exploring the expressive possibilities of a piece of music. Through informal verbal and non-verbal exchanges each member would assess what was heard, provide feedback, compare descriptions, and make decisions about what was suggested. Throughout these processes each would be actively involved with the musical materials while developing her understanding of the piece. This interplay can inform all members about musical understanding at the individual level as voices as choral musicians are discovered. What results is a continuum that comprises of decisions, directions, reflections, and evaluations that occur while musical decisions are negotiated.

This kind of musical thinking is modelled in the large ensemble setting and thus could be made explicit by the conductor through a sharing of the processes. In addition, the conductor could serve as a coach for the smaller ensembles by providing critical information as the needs arises, particularly as groups are in beginning stages of making musical decisions or confronting increasingly difficult musical challenges as presented by the music. In any case, the conductor/podium is then dismantled and the mystique is dissipated.

Such experiences not only contribute to the growth of musical thinking at the individual and group level but also can minimalize decisions made and accepted as a result of influence and peer pressure. Justifying and understanding musical decisions about interpretive expressions of music require critical and musical thought as opposed to blind acceptance. As music educators, we strive to empower our students to become musical thinkers, thus should have the same goal for choral members in communities of singing.

Implications

Research about the growth of musical understandings within vocal ensembles could inform the profession about understandings of music at the individual and negotiated levels; of the individual in relation to group and vice versa; and identity, thus voice, at the individual and group level. Such research delves into the study of behaviour and cognition *in its social context*, which has become a noted feature of various branches of psychology in recent years (Hargreaves & North, 1997). Making sense of self and others comprises the field of social cognition.

The levels of analysis of such inquiry could include the inter-individual and situational level, one of four "levels of analysis" as proposed by Doise ([1986], as cited in Hargreaves & North, 1997, p. 6) in social psychological research. This level comprises processes that occur between different individuals (the conductor and choir members) within a given situation (a rehearsal or performance in a large choral ensemble, a small choral ensemble). These situations do not take into account positions occupied by the participants outside of the situations, thus identifying processes that are shaped by the choral experiences as musical decisions are negotiated. Another level of analysis might be at the social-positional level (Doise, 1986) at which the differing kinds of group membership could be examined. Such an examination would include how musical identities are shaped resulting from large and small group experiences. Perceptions of such identities could include not only musical but social posturing by individuals who have greater levels of musical expertise and perceptions of those who have lesser levels of musical expertise. Another level of inquiry, an ideological level, would have a focus on "broader cultural systems of beliefs, representations and norms that people take with them into... situations," (Hargreaves & North, 1997, p. 7), specifically choral situations.

Conclusions

It is imperative that we understand the intent of choral ensembles, whether they exist in public school or community settings. The level of success experienced by choral members and conductors in highly intense performance situations is commendable. Our music education students have multiple exemplar conductors under which to study and ensembles in which to sing and to observe. In addition, there are choirs that have, as an integral part of their community, training choirs in which young choristers are nurtured in the technical and musical expertise required to sing in the most "expert" groups.

What we can focus on, as a profession, are those ensembles in which the members desire processes that involve all voices, particularly as musical decisions are framed, solved, and negotiated. Research into such ensembles might shed light on different musical understandings than those acquired in the more traditional choral settings, understandings that might transfer into experiences of listening to musical performances of other like and different ensembles. Facilitating music makers to be musical thinkers while performing or listening could enrich and enhance the musical community at large. And, in the spirit of Jorgensen (2001), could build musical thinkers as performers and listeners thus being involved as a profession in an ethical process that results in a "good" product.

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