

## Flow and the Choral Experience

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In 1994, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addressed a convention of the American Choral Directors Association and described the relationship between choral music and flow experience (Gilbert, 1995). The April 2005 issue of *The American Music Teacher* featured a report of research with adult amateur musicians that supports nearly all of the qualities associated with flow experience (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005). But, between those two dates, there has been very little discussion of flow experience in our major choral journals and at our conventions.

A contributing factor to that silence is, likely, the very complexity of the choral experience rather than any disagreement about the nature and validity of flow. Many researchers have examined the relationships between students and their teachers and then measured the impact of those relationships on the experience of the students during instruction, but not many of these have involved choral music. Far fewer researchers have documented the experience of teachers during instruction. Fewer still have examined the complex web of experiences that occurs simultaneously during choral rehearsals; a web that includes the conductor, the individual singers, and the ensemble as a whole.

This purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the theory of optimal experience, otherwise known as flow experience, and then review supporting research that is applicable to the choral experience. This will focus most directly on the experience of choristers during rehearsals.

### Chorister Experience

The attitudes, behaviours, musical values, and educational philosophies of conductors can greatly influence the experiences of singers in their ensembles (Gleason, 1993; Morgan, 1992). Choral singers report that their choral music experiences provide valuable opportunities to develop their musical skills, heighten spiritual expression, communicate with an audience, collaborate with others, and achieve artistic growth (Hylton, 1981). On occasion, singers sense that their moment-to-moment involvement

moves beyond the mundane and becomes an optimal experience. These experiences are so intrinsically motivating that people seek to repeat them again and again.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) has sought to define component characteristics of these experiences through his theory of flow, a theory that is supported by a growing body of research in music education and performance (Custodero, 2002; Freer, 2003). According to flow theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated to find experiences characterized by high levels of both perceived challenge and perceived skill, clarity of goals, deep personal involvement and concentration, self-directedness, self-awareness, immediate feedback, and a lack of awareness concerning time constraints. When in these situations, people experience a state of flow. The loss of these conditions disrupts the flow experience. The quality of experience has four primary designations related to challenge and skill: flow (both challenge and skill levels are high), apathy (challenge levels are low, but so are the skill levels), anxiety (level of challenge exceeds the skill level), and boredom (skill levels are higher than the challenge being presented).

Flow experiences are those where challenge and skill are matched. Over time, challenges will cease to be challenging, and individuals will need to seek new levels of challenge to match their heightened skill levels. Choral conductors regularly see the results of the challenge-skill balance in their rehearsals. For example, a piece chosen because of immediate appeal may prove unchallenging as rehearsals progress, resulting in boredom. In another instance, a conductor may choose a piece of unattainable sophistication, with the result being high levels of anxiety within the ensemble. This relationship between challenge and skills extends beyond the choice of repertoire. It becomes central to the dialogue that occurs between conductors, their ensembles, and the individual singers in their rehearsals.

### **Flow-conducive learning environments**

One of a conductor's roles is to define the environment in which singers rehearse and perform. Rehearsal environments may be described as being either unidimensional or multidimensional (Cohen, 1997). Unidimensional choral rehearsals include those in which the conductor stands directly in front of the ensemble, demands total focus throughout the rehearsal, and does not allow for the interactions and autonomy of the singers. A multidimensional rehearsal would be characterized by a variety of activities and groupings, higher levels of singer interaction and autonomy, and less emphasis on total conformity at all times. Research indicates that multidimensional choral rehearsals

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are more conducive to flow experiences than other types of rehearsal environments (Freer, 2003).

The flow experience is only possible when an individual's personal capacities are congruent with the opportunities and goals afforded by an environment (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989). We know, for example, that adolescent motivation and engagement are positively affected in classroom social environments characterized by high levels of teacher support and caring, the encouragement of interaction between students, respect for individual differences and ideas, a lack of competitiveness, and challenges related to future goals (Hektner, 2001; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Shernoff, Knauth, & Makris, 2000). Supporting these results is a study of the classroom environments of highschool musical ensembles. This study of student attitudes and musical achievement suggests that the relationships between conductors and students in the rehearsal environment are as important as clear classroom procedures and student autonomy (Hamann, Mills, Bell, Daugherty, & Koozer, 1990).

### *Characteristics of Flow-Conducive Rehearsals*

Flow experiences occur in everyday life and are not confined to classrooms, rehearsal halls, or performance venues. Flow theory has its origins in thousands of interviews that Csikszentmihalyi conducted with people who were asked to describe how they felt during optimal experiences. Those initial interviews have been followed by an exhaustive amount of research, and one result is the identification of several components of these flow experiences.

The first characteristic of flow experiences is that goals are clear. Flow-conducive conductors give clearly defined tasks, specific parameters for the completion of the tasks, and allow singers to take responsibility for setting new goals. The primary goal of musical performance is omnipresent, yet that goal is only achievable when conductors provide an appropriate sequence of increasingly complex learning opportunities.

A second characteristic of flow experiences is that feedback is immediate. Conductors in flow-conducive rehearsals frequently invite singers to provide feedback to themselves and to others. When the conductor provides verbal reinforcement, the feedback needs to be specific and related to the goal.

Flow experience requires that individuals simultaneously process information (awareness) and respond to that information (action). For example, conductors in flow-producing rehearsals are able to addressing the needs of individual singers while leading the full ensemble. Similarly, choristers must cognitively interact with large

amounts of incoming information in the same moment that they physically produce sounds responsive to that information.

Challenge and skill levels are matched and high in situations that produce flow. This is one characteristic of flow that has been documented in numerous studies of choral instruction (Stamer, 1996, 1999). People experiencing flow report deep concentration, an ability to control the experience, and the disappearance of self-consciousness. Singers in flow-conducive rehearsals often seem to be transformed upon entering the room, and never hesitate to sing energetically, to engage in physical movement, or to perform in front of a group.

### **Implications for Choral Conductors**

There have been several studies specifically examining flow experience within music settings (Custodero, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Freer, 2003; Kraus, 2003; O'Neil, 1999). These studies collectively imply that during flow experiences:

1. the music-making of individuals is inseparable from that of the ensemble
2. individuals are able to monitor and adjust their singing in response to the ensemble sounds around them
3. conductors are aware of the individual needs of singers within the larger ensemble
4. the repertoire and rehearsal techniques are artistically authentic and developmentally appropriate

Other points emerging from research in music ensemble settings suggest:

1. flow experiences occur most frequently during the final, extended performance segment of rehearsals (Kraus, 2003)
2. young and/or inexperienced musicians rely on their conductors to set goals (Kraus, 2003)
3. conductors prevent flow from occurring when they do not attend to differences in the skill levels of their singers, particularly with regard to pitch and rhythm (Rybak, 1995)

In other words, flow experience in ensemble rehearsals is possible, but only when individuals are presented with challenges that equal their skill levels.

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### Further Research

As stated, there is almost no research formally examining the experience of conductors during rehearsal or performance. But, particularly in North America, the choral profession has enjoyed the recent publication of various memoirs and commentaries by esteemed choral conductors. It is likely that many of these writings contain references to flow experience, although various writers may use different words and images to convey these ideas. An analysis of these conductor reflections, coupled with the ongoing research about the experience of participants in choral rehearsals, would provide a potentially significant contribution to our knowledge of rehearsal dynamics, the conductor-singer relationship, and factors that encourage lifelong involvement in the choral art.

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