

Emotional, Social, and Cognitive Enrichment Through Participation in Group Singing: Interviews with Members of a Choir for Homeless Men

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Group Singing as Adaptive Behaviour

Anthropological evidence suggests that music has played a significant role in all cultures of the world. In many primitive cultures active participation in musical activities is pervasive and all members of the culture are considered musical. The musical elitism that has developed in Western cultures intimates that musical ability is specific to a talented minority. As a result music has become passive entertainment for the majority, with only a small portion of the population actively engaged in musical activities. However, evidence from experimental and theoretical sources indicate that music is an innate and universal ability. It appears that similar to language acquisition, knowledge of music structure is neurally predetermined to occur without formal training through the process of enculturation. The ubiquitous and inherent acquisition of musical knowledge proposes that participation in musical activities may have adaptive characteristics. A study of members of a choir of homeless men indicated significant positive life transformations and provided a research opportunity to determine if group singing was a factor in promoting adaptive behaviour. A phenomenological approach utilizing a semi-structured interview was employed to extract emergent themes to explore the choristers' experiences in the choir. The resulting commentary and supporting literature suggest that group singing positively influences emotional and social processes. Active participation in music may act to alleviate depression, improve social interaction skills and promote ordered thinking. The findings provide a basis for the development of investigative instruments to expand knowledge in this area.

Introduction

Anthropological evidence suggests that all pre-literate peoples engaged in musical activities (cf. Alberti, 1974; Blacking, 1973). Cave paintings and the remains of musical instruments from as early as the Palaeolithic period demonstrate the importance of playing music, singing and dancing. Although it is clear that music played and continues to play a significant role in the life of the human race, the specific function of musical activities is less clear (Storr, 1992).

The elitist perspective of the Western art tradition has perpetuated a common notion that musicality is a special talent which is unique to a small percentage of the population (Sloboda, Davidson & Howe, 1994). It appears that the effect of musical elitism is the general acceptance of a role of passivity in music experiences. The notion of music as a specialist activity is in sharp contrast to the inclusive and pervasive aspects of music participation in some cultures (Blacking, 1973; Messenger, 1958). The omnipresence of music throughout the world, the innate and ubiquitous acquisition of musical ability (cf. Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983; Sloboda, 1985; Thompson, Cuddy & Plaus, 1997), and the universality of the human ability to sing suggest that music may have adaptive characteristics.

Although active participation in music is limited in Western culture, our daily encounters with music are abundant. For example, Davis (1985) as cited in Zillman and Gan (1997) has found that in the years from grade 7 to grade 12 American teens choose to listen to music for an average of 10,500 hours. Considering the magnitude of the listening experience, it must be asked if passive music experiences are qualitatively different from active participation?

Very little research in the psychology of music has been devoted to the passive versus active question. Although not music specific, Csikszentmihalyi (1997), in his development of flow theory, advocates the importance of active participation and mental absorption as compared to passive acquiescence and psychic entropy. According to Csikszentmihalyi meaningful life demands focussed attention and when attention is directed on a task that is optimally complex we experience total mental absorption or "flow." During flow the stream of consciousness is dedicated externally to the task at hand and concerns about the self are temporarily forgotten. Flow theory also suggests that physical and mental isolation contribute to the development of emotional disorders and encourage distracting and distorted thoughts.

Flow theory, therefore, is consistent with the concept that active involvement in music may be more adaptive than passive listening. For example, in group singing there is continual mental assessment concerning note, rhythm and pitch accuracy, proper pronunciation of words and the blend of the various sections. Each rendition of a song conveys new information which may be applied in subsequent repetitions resulting in a sense of progress, achievement and an increase in self-esteem. Group participation also decreases isolation by providing opportunities for socialization. The cognitive and social components of group singing may provide the necessary conditions to meet or approximate the beneficial effects of the flow experience.

The availability of a choir of homeless men who had experienced positive life transformations since joining the choir provided an opportunity to explore possible adaptive characteristics of active participation in group singing.

Method

Because of the research deficit in amateur group singing, the purpose of this study was exploratory in nature. It was considered that a phenomenological approach which focusses on the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants would be the most appropriate format for this investigation. A fairly comprehensive semi-structured interview was employed as the research instrument to determine the perceptions of the choristers with regard to the life transformations that had occurred since joining the choir. The interview was divided into five sections: Section 1 explored the early life of the members of the choir and was further divided into sub-sections relating to family life, school life and the extent of musical involvement in the early years; Section 2 investigated education and employment and events that led to the descent into homelessness; Section 3 examined the decision to join the choir and the choristers' first impressions of the choir; Section 4 focussed on the choristers' perceptions of the experience of singing; and Section 5 explored the progression of the success of the choir and the resulting personal changes. It was hypothesized that the analysis of the perceptions of the choristers might provide emergent themes that could begin to form a foundation for further studies in this area.

Participants

The participants were 7 of the 19 male members of the Homeless Choir. The ages of the participants ranged from 45 to 59 years ($m = 52.14$ years). All of the participants had experienced intervals of homelessness that extended over periods of a few months to eleven years. In addition to the problem of homelessness the interviewed choir members also had experienced problems with one or more of the following: poverty, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, parental abuse, mental disorders and unfortunate life circumstances.

The Choir members were contacted through correspondence with their director. Volunteers were requested to participate in a semi-structured interview for a study in psychology. Two comfortable rooms in the mission house which sponsors the Choir provided a non-intimidating environment for the interviews. The interviewer spent several hours with the Choir members prior to conducting the interviews to establish a comfortable level of rapport. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form requesting permission to use the information contained in the interview for purposes of publication in the academic forum. The contents of the consent form, which explained the nature of the study and the participants right to discontinue at any time, were read to each participant before the interview began. The choir members were assured that their names and other identifying information would remain confidential. Each tape recorded interview took approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

Documentation Techniques

Each interview was transcribed to facilitate the analysis process. Throughout the paper, when referring to direct quotations and personal information from the transcripts, the names of the participating choristers have been replaced by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The names of places and friends or associates of the Choir members were also replaced by fictitious names in the interests of privacy. When these later changes occurred the substitutes were [bracketed].

It is important to note that the participants were native French speakers and, therefore, any speech idiosyncrasies that appear in quoted excerpts from choir members are associated with being interviewed in English, their second language.

Emergent Themes

Watching the members of the Homeless Choir singing together is a pleasurable experience, but the pleasure derived from this experience is not due to the quality of the musicianship of the performers. Some of the choristers acknowledge that many in the choir are not skilled singers:

Bernard: Me, I'm not a big singer. Some people, two people. . .they sang for twenty-five years. . . . They are good singers.

Raoul: Most of the guys who are in the choir sing with their heart, with their guts. They are not great singers and they probably never will be. They're just singers. (*and later he adds*) the strength of the choir is the people, and they don't all sing bad at the same time.

However, the lack of musical expertise is eclipsed by the vocal freedom and enthusiasm that dominates practices and performances. Observation of the choristers indicated that group singing appeared to be an agreeable activity for the Choir participants. However observation alone is a limited measure of an individual's experience. Examination of the interviews revealed insightful information related to the group singing process. Perceived benefits were found to fall within four central categories: (1) benefits that appeared to be similar to outcomes derived from clinical therapy, (2) beneficial effects attributed to reciprocity between the choir and the audience, (3) benefits related to group participation, and (4) benefits derived through directing mental energy on a specific task.

Clinical-type Therapeutic Benefits

The choristers discussed many clinical-type therapeutic benefits which they associated with participating in the choir. Of the content of the interviews that was directly related to the effects of the choral experience, over 50 percent of that content mirrored beneficial clinical-type outcomes. Five of the seven participants specifically used the word 'therapy/therapeutic' to describe the singing experience. The choristers perceived that singing in the choir improved self esteem, helped them overcome shyness, allowed them a period of release from their problems, helped them to feel rejuvenated and offered them an opportunity to explore emotions that had been buried for many years. Following are a small sample of the statements that reflect the powerful therapeutic effects that singing has had on these men:¹

Jean: (Singing in the choir) It's a new start, so I forget everything, if someone told me uh your wrong, your blah, blah, blah, [] I'm deaf . . . I can't hear you . . . you can't attack me because (through singing) I'm immunated against your blah, blah, blahs.

Patrice: The song Ma Mère Chanté Toujours - My Mother was Always Singing, when I learned (that song) I needed three days, I was crying, that's all, because it was something that was not fixed with my Mother and I said oh wow, phew, okay now I can live . . . I can know when I sing it, I live it, the expression doesn't hurt me any more . . . I fixed that, you express, you cry . . . you are expressing it, and that's what people feel, they feel this emotion, this therapy that happened on me.

Simon: Since I started with the Choir, it's like a second life for me. [] Music changed my life and it's starting to change my thoughts, my way of thinking I guess and the way I act. I am less aggressive and more sociable, kinder; I know I have a long way to go but I realize that when I started in the Choir, I was very rrrrrr, I was bad. Now, I'm not as bad as I was so this means that the music has changed my character. It has made me a more gentle person. And now, I love to sing. I realize that music should have been part of my life a long time ago; maybe my life would have been better and I would have been a happier person.

The evidence from these statements suggests that group singing in a non-clinical environment can affect positive outcomes with connotations similar to therapy in a clinical setting. These clinical-type benefits appear to be a direct consequence of the purely musical

component. The interviews also indicated that the reciprocity between the choir and the audience may have contributed to positive outcomes for the participants.

The Importance of the Audience

Because of emotional problems and addictions many of the members of the Homeless Choir have not been able to conform to roles accepted by society:

Jean: The system . . . has been built for the community . . . the whole one, but there's so many . . . there's so (*many*) different character within the community, the system is good for a couple one but for about the half of it, its garbage, its not properly fit for those kind of character, so that's why I, I went down the drain, and I lost even my dignity. People used to spit on me on [First Street] because . . . you're nothing.

Through the choir it appears that these previously destitute and powerless men have found their voice in a society in which they were often despised and ridiculed. While they are singing their addictions and traumas are overcome and the disencumbered selves are allowed to soar beyond the mundane yet ever constant demands of extreme poverty. The use of the singing voice has provided the members of the Homeless Choir with a vehicle to express what is worthwhile within themselves and to share this worth in a public forum.

Bernard: Yes, yes and the choir gives me lots of joy, because I give . . . give to the others, I try to sing to tell them you have a chance . . . there is hope for you and when I give joy to the people I feel happy . . . I feel good because I gave to them.

Henri: Well it doesn't matter what public, when you sing in front of the public you tend to express something you know, you make them feel something, you want to give something that you have, [] it is kind of a relationship with the people.

Patrice: I love to sing, it gives me a lot and . . . when we sing, when we give a concert we do give, but the public also responses. He gives us clapping, he gives us smiles, [] he give us back a lot of things and this energy stimulates [] that's what is important, [] I feel WOW what a great thing happened tonight, I don't know exactly what happened but something happened, you're right, I'm happier and we express something that people, some people like.

The members of the Homeless Choir are no longer merely freeloaders and bums but messengers of hope for others who struggle to find a place in a society that, as Jean suggested, does "not properly fit." Whereas the musical component appears to provide self-awareness and understanding, the significance of the public component appears to be related to creating life meaning and hope for the future. The natural separation which exists in the performer-audience context may provide these disconnected individuals with a safe social parameter that enables them to experiment with and develop appropriate interaction skills. Connecting with the public seems to be an important aspect of the singing experience for this group of men, but the choir members are also learning to relate to and accept each other.

Normalization through Group Process

In the initial months of the Choir, functioning within a group context was very challenging for the participants as is reflected in the following statement.

Jean: (At the first rehearsal) I checked one (then) the other [] one guy with his 10 ounces of booze in his jacket, the other one was smoking as a chain, the other one was yelling all the time and . . . phew (he thought) this is not for me.

The discomfiture encountered in this setting may have been related to the difficulty that some street people have with affiliation (Morris & Heffren, 1988). This difficulty is indicated in the comments by Patrice and Raoul:

Patrice: Most of those people in missions are disconnected from their own emotions, that is the only way to survive.

Raoul: When a homeless person is with another person communication is seldom good.

Now the choristers are able to interact appropriately during practices, performances and group meetings. The following statements reflect the social evolution that is taking place within the Choir:

Jean: So I had to rebuild my own thoughts, you have to work all together now . . . and it's easier that way when you abandon everything. OK I'm free . . . I'll join you, I'll go with you, I'll sing with you, I'll have fun with you and we're going to share trouble with you.

Louis: I made a lot of progress uh on myself OK, trying to change what is possible to change and more listen (listening more) to the needs of the others.

Perhaps group singing, which requires coordinating ones actions with those of the group, has helped Choir members restore harmony within the self and with the outer world. The choristers are gradually developing respect for each other, and instead of fighting and arguing they are now able to work toward a common goal. Trevarthen (1999), speaking from a psycho-biological position, suggests that shared musicality, whether instrumental improvisation or singing, is therapeutic because "it attunes to the essential efforts that the mind makes to regulate the body in both its inner processes and in its purposeful engagements with the objects of the world" (p. 198). The attunement process, suggested by Trevarthen, may assist in coordinating social relationships among the Choir members.

Group Singing and Cognition

People on the streets are constantly searching for ways to procure food, shelter, clothing, toilet facilities, cigarettes and drugs. These survival aspects of street life require considerable ingenuity but they do not challenge cognitive ability in the same way as meaningful work or hobbies. Group singing also requires directing energy to internal cognitive systems. Attending to the multifarious elements of the music and memorizing the repertoire demand considerable concentration:

Simon: We have at least fifty songs. And right now we're learning some new ones, we're slowly changing the repertoire. By next spring or the first part of next summer, our entire repertoire will have been changed. We're learning new songs each week. (*Later he comments*) When you like to sing, it's very easy to learn a song by heart. It can take at the most two weeks. We have sheets with the music and the words and we practice at home.

Raoul: He (*his friend in the Choir*) taught me the notes, I learned the piano, the flute and the bass. Each day he taught me something different. They (*guest directors*) show me how to sing and how to control my voice, sing high, sing low, etc; there is so much to learn in the music field, it is so vast.

Flow theory suggests that "in apathy, worry and boredom the self is usually at centre stage" and the personal reflections that are generated during these times are negative and serve to exacerbate concerns about the self. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggests that the cycle of mental self-indulgence can be overcome through "investing psychic energy in goals and relationships that bring harmony to the self indirectly" (p. 136-137). The transformation that occurs while the members of the Homeless Choir are singing may be directly connected to the cognitive component. At least for a portion of the day the choir members can enter the world of music, and while they are absorbed in the singing experience concerns about the self may be forced to recede into the mental background.

Discussion

The themes that consistently emerged from the analysis of the content of the interviews appear to indicate that amateur group singing, without the assistance of a trained director or a professional music therapist, promotes adaptive behaviours. Furthermore it appears that the adaptive behaviours precipitate from the emotional, social and mental engagement that result from participation in the choir. These advantages are consistent with the tenets of flow theory which suggest that investing cognitive energy in a task or social interaction can promote understanding, creativity and productivity and, thereby, enhance life satisfaction.

In the introduction it was indicated that there is a paucity of research questioning possible differences between active and passive involvement in music. The evidence from this exploratory investigation appears to indicate that participation in group singing may have adaptive characteristics that emanate directly from active involvement and social interaction.

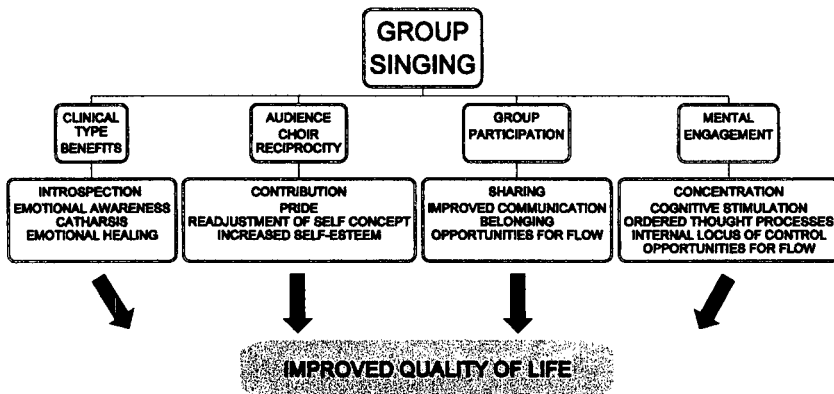
Patrice: Not just listening to music, which is very good, but doing music, oh what a difference, what a great difference it is, thanks god. And then I feel I participate in something, my whole body participates in something, I feel that you create something.

At a more global level it may be proposed that membership in the Homeless Choir has improved the life satisfaction of the participants. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) reports that quality of life is "determined by our thoughts and emotions; by the interpretations we give to chemical, biological and social processes" (p. 4). Since joining the choir the members of the Homeless Choir have developed an optimistic interpretation of their present and future life.

Conclusions

The effects of the emotional, social and cognitive aspects of group singing appear to have contributed to a dramatic improvement in the quality of the lives of the men of the Homeless Choir. Increased understanding of self and of others may have enabled these individuals to shed the yoke of homelessness and to move toward active engagement in life as compared to the inertia that seems to accompany acceptance of the homeless condition. The findings may also provide a preliminary framework for continued research to further develop and refine a theory of the adaptive characteristics of group singing. Here we present a working model of the basic and tentative foundations of a theory of the *Adaptive Characteristics of Group Singing*. Future research with diverse groups of singers may reinforce specific components while causing others to be amended or discarded.

Figure 1: Adaptive Characteristics of Group Singing



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Endnotes

- ¹ The quotes included in this paper are only a small sample from the contents of over 100 pages of transcripts from the interviews with the members of the Homeless Choir.
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