

Perspectives of Aging Adult Choral Musicians: Implications for Meaningful Lifelong Participation in Ensemble Singing

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Lifelong Music Learners

The educational community has come to embrace the concept of lifelong learning as central to its mission. Responding to this broader view of teaching and learning, music educators have sought to address the ramifications of lifelong learning upon their own practices (Nazareth, 1999; Boswell, 1992; Myers, 1992). The unique needs of aging adults have been considered, and new opportunities for lifelong music learning have been proposed (Ernst, 2001; Kellmann, 1986; Gibbons, 1985). Music educators seek to find effective ways to promote music learning opportunities for members of society who are no longer in school. A variety of entry points are necessary in order to accommodate the age and skills of persons whose abilities and experiences extend across a wide range (Nazareth, 1999). Singing is perhaps the most universally accessible means humans have of making music. Choral singing engages the largest number of people without requiring extensive amounts of training or an immediate need for instruments (Ternström, 1991).

According to Nazareth, lifelong music education refers to "music learning that occurs as a result of deliberate effort and conscious long-term involvement on the part of the individual" (1999, p. 17). What can we learn from those who willfully pursue music learning opportunities into the latter years of adulthood? Choirs from around the world have members who have been lifetime participants. Ernst (2001) reminds us, "In many cultures, the oldest singers are the most revered because of the wisdom and years of life experience that they bring to making music" (p. 50). How can we retrace the steps taken by these seasoned musicians in order to learn how to set young learners on a similar course? The perspectives of aging adult learners can provide valuable insight into how educators might help young people begin their journey on the path to lifelong learning.

Older adults who remain involved in choral singing have found the pursuit to be meaningful in a way that sustains their interest and involvement. Jellison (2000) explores what is meaningful about the experience in terms of the principle of transition:

Transition, simply defined, is the movement of individuals across a variety of school and nonschool environments throughout life. When adults participate comfortably, successfully, and as independently as possible in meaningful music experiences, those for which they were prepared in school, then the transition from school contexts to adult contexts in communities and homes is successful. (p. 111)

What factors and influences allow some aging adults to maintain interest and participation in choral singing while others do not? In this study, the reflections of three lifelong singers are closely examined to discern the factors that contributed to their persisting interest in musical learning through the practice of choral ensemble singing.

Methods and Mentalities

Numerous studies of aging adult singers have been designed using surveys as the primary means of data collection (Rybak, 1995; Darrough, 1990; Patchen, 1986; Gilbert, & Beal, 1982; McCulloch, 1981). These studies operate from the mentality that the study of sample populations can yield generalizations about the nature of aging adult musicians. Koch (2000) challenges this mindset in the introduction to his book on aging: "Social gerontologists, psychologists, and ethicists of varying persuasions typically focus on the grand picture, the statistical pattern, or the class-based survey report. As a rule, they are not intimate with the people whose lives their work supposedly describes" (p. 9).

By contrast, I conceptualized the present research with the assumptions of post-positivism in mind, openly acknowledging the belief that social reality is constructed and interpreted differently by different individuals (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). I was interested in finding existing cases of aging adult singers and trying to understand how they came to be lifelong learners of music. Case study methodology provided the framework for gathering data that would unearth the particularity and complexity of three specific cases (Stake, 2000). The voices of these participants are what constitute the significance of the research findings described below.

For this study, I conducted three in-depth interviews and participated in two observations of rehearsals. The interviews were with Dr. Hugh Kaiser,¹ director of the Symphonic Choir; Joan Gardner, retired music librarian who sings with the University Chorale; and Tom and Marie Carr, a married couple from Danville who have sung with the Symphonic Choir for the past five years. These aging choir members provided reflections on their past and current experiences. These shared insights shed light on the influences and factors that may have contributed to their choosing to remain in choral performing groups as aging adults.

The central question of this study concerns the factors that contribute to a maturing person's decision to participate in or continue to participate in a choral music performance ensemble once formal schooling has come to an end. An intensive look at these three cases provides a sense of what it is about the choral singing experience that keeps these seniors involved and engaged.

The Setting

At the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, the Symphonic Choir has been established for the express purpose of providing an ensemble setting where singers of all ages can voluntarily participate in the performance of choral masterworks with an orchestra. Dr. Kaiser, the director, explained the purpose behind the formation of the Symphonic Choir:

I think the intention of the ensemble is to give a broad range of people whose needs couldn't otherwise be serviced by choral ensembles in the school of music an opportunity to do something of that sort. As I see it, [the choir membership is made up of] three large constituencies. There are community people who aren't necessarily associated with the university; there are university faculty, staff, husbands and wives; and there are, in large part, undergraduates who need the credit.

The average age of these singers ranges between 45 and 50 years old. Slightly less than half are in their 50s and 60s. Dr. Kaiser also includes adults from the community as singers in the University Chorale, which is primarily made up of graduate students. Both choral ensembles provide opportunities for lifelong participation in the art of singing.

Meeting the Participants

Dr. Kaiser agreed to be a participant in my study and suggested Joan Gardner and Tom and Marie Carr as appropriate candidates for me to interview, as they are singers who were part of the more mature population in the university choral groups. Brief descriptions of each participant will enable the reader to perceive the characteristics of each voice represented in the responses included below.

Tom and Marie Carr

When I met Tom and Marie at a coffee shop in town, they seemed slightly out of step with the cosmopolitan university crowd that occupied most of the tables. I did not feel comfortable asking Tom and Marie their ages, but could guess that they were in their early 60s since they mentioned having retired. Tom was a tall, broad man with salt and pepper gray hair that was mostly concealed by the fedora he kept on his head throughout our meeting. Marie wore her fine-textured, dark brown hair in tight curls. Her smiling eyes appeared as inverted crescents, highlighted by colorfully framed glasses situated on her round face. Throughout the interview she laughed freely and warmly, often retiring to a pose with her chin resting on her hand. Dr. Kaiser had introduced me to Tom and Marie at the start of the previous Tuesday's Symphonic Choir rehearsal, and Tom launched into his thoughts on the matter before I had the chance to even utter an opening question. Dr. Kaiser described Tom and Marie by saying, "They tell me they come [from Danville to Champaign] because they just get a little bit more out of it. They come early. They always help set up the chairs in the evening for rehearsal." I learned that Tom and Marie had traveled to Europe for the first time in their lives when an invitation to sing with a touring choir was extended to members of the Symphonic Choir.

Joan Gardner

Joan had sung with the University Chorale for a performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers* early in February, just prior to the beginning of this research. As a fellow member of that ensemble, I noticed her poise and intelligent sensibilities. When I asked Dr. Kaiser about my intentions for this study, he immediately thought of Joan.

Joan has sandy gray hair, carefully curled and styled at ear-length. She dressed modestly and made conservative use of cosmetics. Her radiant smile was intensified by the delicate crows feet at the edges of her eyes, alluding to a youthful spirit lingering somewhere not far below the surface of her aging countenance. Her mouth resumed its warm smile after each of her responses. She was soft-spoken and gentle, but her words were measured and deliberate. She had worked in the music library of the University of Illinois School of Music since 1963 and had partially retired as of January of 2000. She told me of her plans to work part time through May of the year 2002 before fully retiring. Two days after our interview, she would be heading on a trip to South Carolina for a convention of the Society for American Music. At times during the interview, her responses and voiced affirmations almost seemed to have a

melodic ring to them. I knew she must sing well by the way she used her speaking voice. Dr. Kaiser described her in this way: "Joan Gardner is a very special person because she's an excellent musician. She has perfect pitch. But she's also extremely kind and thoughtful, and a probing kind of person."

Dr. Hugh Kaiser

As a member of the University Chorale, I have had the opportunity to come to know Dr. Kaiser directly. When I met him for our early-morning interview, his hair was wet and combed, unlike the tussled and carefree way it ordinarily falls around his head. His office was large, with a desk and computer in one corner and a conference table in another. There were piles of papers and manuscripts spread randomly across all available surfaces, and I felt at ease because the piles were much like those occupying my own office. During the interview, Dr. Kaiser took the seat facing me and reclined comfortably in his chair. He spoke soothingly, his answers thoughtful and concise. His posture and demeanor were relaxed and unpretentious. His command of language was evident in the clarity of his responses. Joan Gardner described Dr. Kaiser in this manner: "What I really appreciate about him is his calm, businesslike way of working up a piece; and the fact that he does it in such a musical way. He's so calm about everything, and a very skilled conductor."

When asked to account for the enrollment of community members in the Symphonic Choir, Dr. Kaiser proposed the following:

They really enjoy having the experience of singing a big work with an orchestra. I think it elevates them into another realm of intellectual and artistic activity that they don't otherwise have. I suspect that it recalls for them certain kinds of archetypal experiences of that sort that they had when they were younger, and they left because they had to get on with their lives. That's my strong suspicion. Very few of them, I suspect, come to it brand new, without having had some kind of background in it.

Musical History

While interviewing Tom and Marie Carr and Joan Gardner, I found Dr. Kaiser's statement to be true. Musical activities were part of each participant's early life experience. Other research supports the fact that early music training affects continued participation in music (Rybak, 1995). All three participants were able to recount significant musical experiences from their youth.

Marie: I grew up with classical music. My father and mother liked good music, so I always was exposed to good music. [Through the] Danville Music Cycle I saw Beverly Sills, Bizet's *Carmen*, Verdi's opera *Il Trovatore*, and Ravel's *Bolero*. My background was in piano and violin. So I knew that, and I could read music. I didn't know if I could get my voice to read music. I knew I could read music with my hands on a violin or piano, but as far as being able to get intervals with my voice, I didn't know if I could because I hadn't been in high school chorus or anything. It was just the church choir and then a little chapel choir at college when I went to Lutheran University. And so I was always involved with good

music. I played in the orchestra in the high school all four years. I had piano lessons. So [my experience] was all instrumental. And when I went to college, I got involved with a little chamber group because we just wanted to keep playing our instruments and the cantata group was doing Brahms' Requiem that year and the orchestra mostly was Chicago Symphony, but we got to play along with them, so that was kind of a thrill. So good choral music has always been something that relates to me because it's not fluff. I like it.

Tom: I took voice lessons when I was a teenager. Well, the teacher I took it from was named Otis Gruber and I think he was the great, great, great grandson—well he was either four or five greats—grandson of Franz Gruber that wrote "Silent Night." I earned, over the years, an appreciation for great music. I sang classical things when I was learning, taking voice lessons. [And I realized I] never got away from singing, because I sang every Sunday at church [throughout my life].

Joan: [In my schooling], there was one music teacher and he did everything. Kindergarten and on up, including the band and the choir, everything, so he was stretched very thin. I can't say that we spent much time, if any, on appreciation, or even learning to read music. This was just something that I guess there wasn't time for. I think musically I wasn't influenced as much by that as simply by the fact that I had taken piano lessons and violin lessons and flute lessons as a youngster, beginning at an early age. Everybody took choir because it was an easy way to get a quarter unit credit (she laughs). I sang alto in those years because I could read music and the young women who could read music were altos and the ones that had to learn just the melody were the sopranos.

As an undergraduate I thought I would be a German major, but then I switched to become a music major when I was a junior because I really had enjoyed my music history courses at Swarthmore College, which was my undergraduate college. I knew I was very interested in music and I liked the choral experience and I liked singing. So, my courses there were simply all the music history I could get and three years of music theory. And while I was there I took violin lessons from someone in town who happened to be a player in the Philadelphia Orchestra. I went off to college and that really was opening up into a much larger choir experience because we sang music of great composers, and even music in languages other than English, and this was just a wonderful experience for me.

These rich experiences seemed to instill in Tom, Marie, and Joan a propensity for continued involvement in music making.

The Symphonic Choir in Rehearsal

The Symphonic Choir officially begins its rehearsal at 7:45 p.m. on this Tuesday evening early in February. I arrive at 7:25 p.m. and hear singing that causes me to wonder if I have miscalculated the starting time. I enter the large orchestral rehearsal room from the halls of the

production department of Crawford Center for the Performing Arts and see 13 people scattered among the four rows of 100 or more chairs set for the evening's full rehearsal. Nine of them appear to be middle-aged or older. All are extremely focused and attentive as Dr. Kaiser guides them through a series of vocalization exercises. "Don't worry about being too precise," he gently urges. Afterwards, Dr. Kaiser explains to me that he provides this optional vocal coaching session a half hour before each weekly rehearsal for those who wish to "take more time, to make improvement." He says he is able to provide them with more pedagogical guidance during this time and concludes, "I think it makes a difference for them."

Soon participants begin to arrive for the full rehearsal and I notice small groups beginning to mingle. An elderly woman thoughtfully adjusts the collar of a man in a familiar sort of way that leads me to believe he is her husband. A young college student converses with an older man seated nearby. Most, however, seem to be talking with others of a comparable age. Dr. Kaiser steps onto the podium, and with a simple "Good evening everyone, let's begin," the rehearsal commences. He asks them to slowly twist at the waist as a preliminary stretching exercise. I overhear a woman with snow-white hair turn to her friend and say "This is something we do in exercise class." As I slowly scan the room, I estimate that there are about 20 participants over the age of 50, maybe 40% of the group of 50 or so gathered to rehearse. They begin to work through a portion of Elgar's oratorio, *Dream of Gerontius*, and I am struck by the beauty of the sounds they are making. As I look across the group, I realize that other than outward signs of aging such as gray hair or tilted bifocals, the vast age differences have little bearing upon the music the group is jointly producing. I hear a few voices that seem to warble a little more than others, but they are not necessarily those of the older population. Dress, posture, and work habits are relatively similar across ages, and all singers are legitimate contributors to the unified choral sound I am enjoying. The image is quite remarkable since it seems a rare occasion that people of diverse age groups would perform a cooperative task of this magnitude. Dr. Kaiser has high expectations: "Give me your eyes here please. I see some closed mouths. That's not good enough for Elgar," but soon offers fatherly affirmations: "That's very nice. Nicely done."

One week later, I return to the rehearsal in progress. Dr. Kaiser calls for 16 volunteers to sing through a selected passage to demonstrate to the group what they know. Marie Carr is one of the first to volunteer. The group of 16 is a cross-section of the widespread age differences represented by the group at large. In some ways it is a microcosm of the full choir, with participants spanning multiple generations. I observe Marie closely as she gingerly reaches up to adjust her glasses before they begin. She sings with conviction, opening her mouth widely and placing a final "t" with clarity and precision. She tosses her head from side to side, convincingly expressing the drama of the music. The seated members of the choir applaud the group's efforts, and Marie smiles as she takes her seat.

Points of Entry

Each participant in the study chose to take advantage of opportunities to continue singing in ensembles. They were motivated to join choirs, overcame their inhibitions, and found the time to actively pursue the practice of choral singing. When asked to elaborate on what led him to join the Symphonic Choir, Tom stated:

My sister was singing in [The Danville Festival Singers] and she convinced us to go hear them do *The Messiah* the Christmas of '89. They performed it at the St. James church in Danville. So many people showed up, there were probably 1000 to 1200. There were so many that showed up that they literally had to refuse entry to some people. [They] really just couldn't get them in the building. And it was *exciting!* I don't know that I had ever heard *The Messiah*. I might have, but I probably fell asleep for part of it, but this time I didn't. And some of the people in the chorus who were singing had such excited, happy looks on their face. They looked like they were just having a ball.

So then they had in the program [an advertisement for] anybody who wanted to join for a spring [performance.] It said: "Come and sing with us. No auditions." That got my attention. Well, [had] it said come out and audition with us, we wouldn't have done it. It would have been too scary.

[Four or five years later] We came over here [to Champaign]. We knew a gal that would sing with the Symphonic Choir. We heard about it, so she told us how to get over here, where to park, how to get in where the room was. We didn't have to audition here either for the Symphonic Choir. Then the last couple of years they've started auditioning [to] just try to place your voice.

Tom's description suggests that his perception of the rewards experienced by the participants he observed made the prospect of joining sufficiently enticing. The gratifying nature of the experience was evident to him and other members of the audience as they witnessed the singer's expressions of joy.

It was through Tom's comments about his fear of auditioning that I learned what could be a deterrent for some who might otherwise choose to participate in choral singing:

I got to tell you this, that when I finally realized we're going to have to audition for Symphonic Choir, even though I'd been singing for a couple three years, I was really nervous about it. I had to psyche myself up to go to the audition. But what I did was I finally convinced myself: Wait a minute, I've sung in Europe in Vienna in a great cathedral where Haydn sang as a member of a choir when he was a young boy...and I'm a tenor. We also come early and help set up chairs for the place. They're not going to not take me. So that was the approach I took. But then as a back up plan, I told myself: Well, if they say "Well, you just didn't make it," I would then ask them: "Well, what do I have to do so that I can take the audition again and make it?" [And I'd] do that. But, I made it. So once you get through an audition, then the second, it's not that big a deal. But that *first* one, it's scary.

Tom faced a critical moment when confronted with the need to audition. What would have initially prevented him from entering the experience now became a test of his sense of belonging and of his perception of his ability to make a legitimate contribution. Fear of failure often paralyzes young and old alike. The initial open invitation allowed Tom to participate without auditioning and gradually build personal confidence in his ability to make a significant musical contribution in a choral setting. When he was faced with the audition requirement, he

was able to safely work through his fears and emerge with an even greater sense of self-confidence as a singer.

Due to their age and altered circumstances, these participants found they had time available in their schedules for choral singing. Of all factors influencing their choice to sing, this was the only one that could be linked directly to the flexibility of their current station in life.

Marie: Tom and I got going in that [singing in the Danville Festival Chorus] in 1990. I looked at him that night at the St. James church in Danville at the break in *The Messiah* and I said to Tom, I said "We can do this," because our kids were grown and off on their own.

Joan: I figure I'll have time now to do this kind of thing [sing with the Graduate Chorale], so I'm really very pleased about that.

As Dr. Kaiser stated, after college choral singing experiences, most must "get on with their lives," and free time is a scarce for many who are raising families and entering the work world. Finding time for musical pursuits can be problematic for adults, but students who experience the rewards of participation in music at an early age may be more likely to create time in their schedules for such activities.

Appealing Factors

There are many factors that draw individuals to participate in choral organizations such as Symphonic Choir. I found that most of these reasons and benefits were just as true for me as a younger singer as they were for the older participants in my study. These included opportunities for aesthetic experiences, desire for challenge, intensified emotions, and the opportunity to perform major choral works.

Aesthetic Experiences

Singers are often genuinely moved while performing great musical literature at a high level of excellence. The participants in my study attested to this experience in their vivid descriptions.

Marie: I guess, we sang "Resurrection" a year or so ago; Mahler's *Resurrection*, and all we do is that very last part, and so it didn't take us long to learn it. And I got on the stage at Crawford and looked out and "Wah!" (imitates her initial reaction to the immensity of the hall). That is something you only experience once, and it's a wonderful feeling because after that, you're used to it. But, we had not been with the orchestra before this one rehearsal time, and they started to play and there were more than one that, especially me, that commented later that we just had tears running down our face because it just, it just got to us, (her sentences seem phrased almost musically) for some reason or other that one especially just got to us. And then, just singing that music. I can't begin to tell you how I feel. When you get the shivers going down your spine, you know, there's something special

going on. But that doesn't happen all the time, just sometimes, so I know, every once in a while I know it's extra special.

Joan: I think that there was a concert that we did with George Hunter...it may have been an all Josquin concert and everything was just magical. It came together and it felt so wonderful.

Challenges

Humans are drawn to challenges, experiences that will cause them to cross outside boundaries of comfort. We seek opportunities that allow us to extend our own capacities. Choral experiences that most appealed to the participants in this study were of this quality.

Tom: Most people when they talk to me think that I probably sing baritone or bass. I can, but I prefer the challenge of tenor, because it was tenor that I sang in the voice lesson. I can't get as high as I could then . . . I can get to (pauses to think) high B. Carmina Burana had a high C one place for the tenors. You really didn't have to sing it if you didn't want to because you were doubling the sopranos, but there it was, that high C and (Marie finishes the sentence for him) "he had to go for it." I just like the challenge of it.

Joan: What makes it memorable is if you feel as if you've done it very well, especially if it has suddenly fallen into place and it is better during the performance than it ever has gone during the rehearsal. One other memorable experience, I can't tell you the name of the piece, but it was by Neely Bruce and it was done with the new music ensemble that Jeff Jones conducted. The piece was so hard that during the intermission just before the performance of this piece virtually everybody was pacing back stage with their score open, kind of doing last minute review of their parts. But it came off. It was a good performance and the composer who was here was happy with it. I like doing contemporary music because it's a challenge, and you figure you're doing something that not everybody else can do.

Dr. Kaiser: This semester [in Symphonic Choir] I really ratcheted up the intensity level. I told people that I was going to call on groups of people to sing, 16 or so, to show what they knew or didn't know for everybody else. I was afraid I might have pushed a volunteer group too far, but my sense from what I'm getting back is that they kind of liked it. All I can say is that it was really productive and they are just digging into the work and they're doing better than I thought they would at this stage.

Intensified Emotions

There is a thrill that comes from contributing to something of greatness. Perhaps the challenges brought on by the magnitude of the task of singing extended choral works with orchestra, when met, provide a rush of adrenaline that is both infectious and addictive. Like children who run to get back in line after exiting a thrill ride at a carnival, singers are prone to

repeat an experience that they have intensely enjoyed. The affective components of the experience serve to nurture and perpetuate the interest of the participants.

Tom: [I enjoy] just learning other languages, singing other languages. When we had to sing in Austria we had German Latin, or Deutsch Latin. You had to pronounce it different, 'cause that was probably the way they sang it, and so we sang it that way. I find that exciting.

Dr. Kaiser: Well Frank Lucas [current adult member of Symphonic Choir] told me it's just a real thrill for him. First of all, he was always surprised that we were able to successfully get these concerts off the ground. So the music itself represented a kind of a barrier for him to artistic experience that he just didn't know how to get through. One, I suspect, because he hadn't really had that experience, and two, because there were some pretty significant challenges. We did things like Persichetti's Celebrations. And you know, he'd keep coming up to me and telling me after rehearsal "I'm beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Tom: I just went in [to rehearse with the Danville Festival Chorus] and went through the first rehearsal with them, came home and told Marie: "You're going to love this." Because, [it was] just very enjoyable. They had a warm-up where you stretch, you know, and then warm up your voice. It was just fun.

Dr. Kaiser: Well, I see a lot of eagerness on their faces. They're just out there putting out every bit they can. It's so much fun to see people who go from being totally lost with a piece like Elgar's Dream of Gerontius to seeing them really get a lot of pleasure out of it. It's very gratifying.

Performing Great Music

In many cases, the caliber and merit of the music being performed is one of the strongest motivators and most notable rewards of the experience. Darrough found that musical reasons ranked highest among those offered by older adult chorus participants when asked about their sources of motivation (1990). Ernst (2001) echoes this sentiment by saying "The intrinsic qualities of making music have a high priority for most adults, who tend to be motivated by the music itself" (p. 48).

Marie: We went to the place where Beethoven had his apartment, which was out in the countryside at the time but which is now, of course, in Vienna, 'cause it's from where he looked out the window and realized the bells were ringing in the church [and he couldn't hear them]. What a gift God had given him that [while being deaf] he could still in his head know what he was putting down, and it's lasted all these years. It's not just a little tune that somebody – some Rap group or Rock group plays and will be forgotten in six months or a year, but has lasted, and people are moved by it. I guess that's it. That gets to me. (She seems genuinely moved even as she speaks.)

Joan: Performing a wonderful piece of music is a way to feel as if you've become familiar with that music in a way that is very special, that you wouldn't get if you were just simply a listener. You just know what's going to happen next. And you have almost a physical, kinesthetic appreciation of it that you wouldn't have if you were simply listening to somebody else perform it.

Dr. Kaiser indicated that the musical works being learned impacted those from the university who choose to participate each semester:

the community people stay, they're pretty faithful. To some extent, it's been my observation that the people in the university community, like the faculty wives and husbands, sometimes come and go with a little bit more ease. If they don't like the work, they don't come. They'll come back a few semesters later.

Benefits

The benefits of this kind of opportunity are similar for all participants, young and old, as well. These rewards include the opportunity to learn and gain new knowledge, to share music with an audience, the spirit of community, the opportunity to be a part of something unique and of high quality, the sense of accomplishment, and the enrichment of the experience. An added benefit for long-standing members is the opportunity they have to perform the same work multiple times.

Education and musical growth

Many comments made by Tom and Marie convinced me that they had rich opportunities for learning while participating in choirs in recent years.

Marie: When I found out that I couldn't sing the soprano [due to changes in range.] and I had to go down to the alto (she laughs), I had my moments when I'd be singing and all of a sudden I'd realize I was singing the soprano line instead of the alto. I had to learn to read that alto line. But it's not so difficult anymore.

Tom: That was the nice thing about the Danville Festival Chorus when it had choral or graduate students from [the University of Illinois] conducting it because we could learn from each other. Like with Andrew Bowers, he could get experience conducting choral groups, which is what he wanted. We learned from him. He tried to do his best obviously, because he's trying to get a degree in it, and so there's a synergy there between somebody that's trying real hard and people that want to learn, and so we teach him something too.

One thing I remember about [Andrew Bowers] that I thought initially was strange. We'd start rehearsing a new piece, we'd start at the back and we'd rehearse the last piece (he laughs) and he'd say, well, let's move forward, which meant he went up closer to the front of the book. He went through it. And he did that every time. I guess he learned it [at the university]. And I wondered, "Why is he doing

that? Why don't you start at the beginning, that's where you're supposed to start." Well, in a performance you start at the beginning. Then I began to realize that when I got to the end, I knew that part the best, because we'd rehearsed it more. We started with the last part. You know, you back up a little bit and then you go all the way through to the end. And when it comes to choral performing and people applaud at the end, then go home, they remember the last. They don't remember the first necessarily, 'less it was really bad. But if the ending was good, that's what they remember. And so I enjoyed doing it that way.

These interview excerpts clearly indicate that Marie and Tom were each willing to embrace the opportunity to approach the unfamiliar and thus experience the rewards of enlightenment.

Sharing Music with Others

Marie beautifully characterized the joy of performance when she was able to experience the transmission of her aesthetic experience to members of the audience.

Marie: And then when you perform it you just hope that what you felt goes out to the audience. One of our sons especially loves music. So we kept telling him "You're going to have to come down and listen to us." And he says "If you ever do Mahler's Resurrection, I'll be there." So, another year we'd say "You've got to come and listen to us if you can." "If you ever do Mahler's Resurrection." Well this [went on] through the years. So the year that they told us we were going to do that, Tom got out and says "We're doing it November whatever" and we never had to remind Steven that that was the date. He called and asked us if he could buy the tickets. And he even called himself and got the tickets. Came down and stayed at our house so that they could listen to us. And when we got off the stage, he and his wife were right there in the hallway and I could tell, his wife, you could tell she'd been crying. So I guess it worked, we must have gotten it over to her.

The opportunity to perform for an audience brings added meaning to the experience as singers share the gift of great music to friends, family, and the extended members of the listening audience.

Sense of Community

As people are invited to work towards a common goal in a like-minded fashion, there is a sense of unity and belonging that adds a powerful and lasting quality to the experience.

Marie: And I think when you get into a choral group and you've been there for awhile, you become friends with most of the people and some of them become a little closer and you just start getting a camaraderie. You just feel...you just want to do your best. So we see the people and everybody gives us a big hug and we give them a big hug and it's just a nice group. I think we have made more friends in the last ten years since we've been in music than we had in all the years before. I honestly believe that. We've very, very good friends. You know, how can you beat

that? Some place where you can meet nice people that are involved with something you're interested in and you have a common ground.

Joan: I think it's a wonderful way to have a group experience and to do something which gives you a real sense of accomplishment. I enjoy very much singing with a group; the *esprit de corps* that happens with that kind of performance, especially if it's a small group.

The sense of shared experience seems important to those who choose to return to the rehearsal room season after season. Challenges and rewards achieve a new dimension when experienced "in concert."

Rewards of Quality Work

Participants know when they are a part of something of the highest caliber. Contributing to something done at a high level of excellence is a significant motivator for those who sing in choral performances.

Tom: When you give a performance like we did of Beethoven's 9th [Symphony] and Mahler's 2nd [Symphony], *Carmina Burana* here in Crawford [Center for the Performing Arts], you know you're part of a world class event. 'Cause it really is a *world class event*. And we know that because we've been in Austria with the Classic music festival. The group did well over there because we were expected to, and so we did. And we do well here, so we know it's part of a world class event because we've seen other parts of Europe anyway and they were real good there, but it wasn't any better than you can do right here. And that's pretty exciting too, when you're part of something world class.

Dr. Kaiser: I have worked with lots of groups like Symphonic Choir, some smaller, some larger. And I've experienced both with my own directing and with other people's directing that it's possible to get groups like that to sing at a very high level of artistic accomplishment. I feel that it's my responsibility to not only place challenges in front of them, but be able to take them step by step through those challenges, so they can realize "I really can do it," or "I can do something I didn't think I could do." So that it has a personal element. That's why I do that little voice coaching. Some of those people, they don't know what they're doing with their voice. They have no idea, but they really want to. And I feel like I can show them how they could do that. I've taught a lot of voice, and I know what people can do with the voice. If people *want to*, you can do a lot of things. And people *want to*, so it's my conviction that that group ought to be able to sound nearly as good as Chicago Symphony Chorus. Now it helps a lot when we have the kind of motivation they have and, of course, when they bring in [the University] Chorale. And if everybody knows the notes to the same level and we really can focus on very specific and in-the-moment artistic goals, I think we can really do a lot of very good things. That's my goal.

Unique Experiences

A distinctive reward accompanies an activity when it is not the common experience. Marie and Joan both described the appeal of this realization.

- Marie: I think it just goes down deep inside of you when you realize that you're contributing to it. That this music has been around for so many years and yet when you've learned it and performed it, you've got a connection to the person that wrote it, to all those that have performed it through the years, that doesn't come to many people. It doesn't come to many people, unless you're willing to put yourself out and do it.
- Joan: I sang in several new music ensembles, the Kenneth Gaburo New Music Ensemble, and Ed London organized a group that he called the Ineluctable Modality. Both of these were very good groups. We felt as if we were doing groundbreaking types of musical performance. We were doing things that not everybody else was able to do and we really got a big kick out of doing that.

Issues Regarding Aging

There are, however, issues that are unique to those who are older and who are facing the physical challenges of the aging process.

When asked to reflect on the contribution she can make as an older member of a choral group, Joan joked, "My gray hairs make other middle-aged people feel less conspicuous. I suppose one has a longer perspective, however many more years you have lived." Joan had many thoughts and ideas regarding the aging process and its effects on the art of choral singing:

I firmly believe that people can keep singing way up until they get into their elderly years, provided they do it right and they keep at it. I think one more inhibiting factor of why older people don't join choirs is that there's this common perception that once you reach 40 that vocally you're over the hill and you shouldn't inflict your voice upon anybody else. I don't think it has to be that way (she says with a smile). But I think it's important that you sing the right way without a lot of strain and that you pay attention to blend. I'm sure you must have had church choir experiences where there are elderly people with vibrato a mile wide or wobbles or various kinds of tremolos. That doesn't have to happen. If someone wanted to do a geriatric choir (she seems to amuse herself with the concept), I think it could be done in a very good way, provided you let the group sit down and that you pay a lot of attention to matters of voice production; and that you don't compromise quality. I think that would be a very rewarding experience with older people.

There are some negative factors that come into play as one gets older, and you can probably guess what these are. I think these are some of the reasons why people drop out of choirs as they age. There are physical factors that are limitations. As people get older, they develop back problems and joint problems. Standing on risers can be very uncomfortable if you're doing that for any length of time. I think this is one important reason why many people when they get to be middle-aged drop out of the group experience like this. Because of the physical discomfort involved. Also, now this is not so

much of a problem, but I can see myself heading in this direction: As you get older, it takes your eyes longer to focus when you change from looking at various distances. So you're looking at the conductor, and then you go back to look at your words and music and your eyes take a second or two to zoom back in and refocus and, of course, when you're young, like you, that happens instantly. It's not an insuperable problem. You can just simply make sure you know the music and that's going to help you to get through those kinds of problems. Especially after page turns when you have to refocus again. I think if one were going to organize a choir specifically for older people, he would want to take into consideration the joint problems and back problems and eye problems, and arrange to sit a lot. And get scores where the words and the music are a little larger.

Beliefs expressed by Joan are supported by other research findings. The human voice, if treated properly, need not experience significant decline with age (Darrrough, 1990; Mehrling, 1989). Also, singers experience more enjoyment and success when grouped with others of comparable musical skill levels (Rybak, 1995).

Age Differences and Relationships Among Choir Members

Music educators have explored the benefits and challenges of inter-generational learning (Bowers, 1998; Frego, 1995; Wilder, 1985). What are the effects of having choirs made up of singers of a wide disparity of ages? Tom and Marie did not see this as a problem.

Marie: That's the great part. We've made friends with a lot of the younger ones and we're *still* friends with them. We've made some young friends and they always come up and say hi to us and we talk with them, ask how they're doing. You know, that's an important part.

Tom: That's an exciting part of it, the friendships. And the age differences don't bother me.

Dr. Kaiser characterized the potential for multi-age interaction, reflecting his thoughts on the potential difficulties caused by the gap that exists between generations.

Dr. Kaiser: I know before, the secretary here, who just retired, would talk to some of the undergraduates and some of them were really quite engaged by interaction. Up to the middle of the nineties, there was a policy to put a lot more of the entry level people [undergraduate voice majors] into the Symphonic Choir. And we found it didn't work very well, because they got in there and they saw all those people with gray hair and they thought "This is like my parents, I don't like this." So they'd just act out. You can imagine that when a freshman comes in and they think they're going to be a voice major at the University of Illinois, they have pretty high expectations, as they well should. They come in here and they hear some of those people. The first sound that comes out of their mouth is not very pleasant sometimes. And they just think "What is this?"

Perhaps the gap is more an issue of varied skill level, as Joan noted:

Joan: Well the age factor is not important to me. What's more important is the skill level of the other singers. I like to sing with singers who are as good as I am or better. And it's less rewarding to be with a group where you have to pound out every last phrase of music many times before people have it learned. 'Cause, well, it's just boring. Now I don't mean to be so hard on people. I have absolute pitch, and so it's relatively easy for me to translate what's on the printed page with actual notes that I sing. And, I know that it's harder for other people, and so I should be a little more patient, I guess. I have been in choral situations where week after week we go over the same lines with people learning it pretty much by rote, and that's not so enjoyable.

Requirements of Participants

It is clear that this kind of choral singing experience requires something of its participants. Self-discipline, high levels of concentration, and open-mindedness are all traits that must be present in those who wish to reap the benefits described earlier. Marie and Joan alluded to these kinds of requirements.

Marie: When we were in the Danville Festival Chorus, a lot of times we'd have our dress rehearsal and people would say "Oh (sigh), it's terrible" and I said "We're going to do alright." Because it was always as if when the performance came, when you suddenly knew "this is it," you've got to do it, and you're focused. Just, nothing else was there, it was just the focus, that you sang and you didn't pay attention to anything else. You just watch that director and do what he says, remember what you learned because, like Tom always says, we're a performance oriented group, when it comes right down to performance, we did it and we always felt great.

Joan: Oh sure, [I have to maintain a level of open-mindedness]. No, [it's not hard to do]. I've done it for so many years.

Adult learners must trust themselves enough to take on unfamiliar and varied challenges. If they can surmount this barrier, personal growth and fulfilment is likely to follow.

The Role of Director

Joan commented on the role of the director and brought to my attention the importance of leadership to groups such as the Symphonic Choir:

[My choral director in college] was passionately involved with the music. You could tell just by looking at his face how much he cared about the music. And this is important, I think,

for the people in the choir because it spurs you on to do your very best. And the same could be said for many other choral people that I've sung with since then.

Many of the directors [I have sung under] have wonderful qualities and then other things that are maybe only average. My undergraduate conductor's strong point was how passionately he felt about the music and the fact that he picked wonderful music to do. What is a little bit disconcerting is that he would lose his temper from time to time, simply because he cared so much about the music, and since people knew that this might happen, people were feeling inhibited from time to time. Kenneth Gaburo, who was the director of one of these new music ensembles, was just extraordinarily musical in the way he would interpret the music. And he made you feel what it would take to make it a memorable musical performance. He would spend a few minutes analyzing the piece so that we would all say, "Oh, so that's how that piece is put together."

Dr. Kaiser reflected on his role in the process:

I make it a real point to praise. Even if it's not good, if it's better than it was the previous time, I let the people know. They need to know that I'm not always the unhappy person. One of the things I've learned about that group is that there always has to be a really carefully metered out balance between the things which are very challenging and the things which you have done before which are challenging in musical ways but rather, so there's some real artistic gratification all along the way.

Other studies have verified the importance of a qualified director upon the quality of an aging singer's experience (Rybak, 1995; Darrough & Boswell, 1992).

When asked why he instituted the half hour vocal coaching sessions before Tuesday night Symphonic Choir rehearsals, Dr. Kaiser had this to say:

I could see that people wanted to sing but they just didn't know what to do. So when I would say certain things which were evocative of, well, just sort of technical ideas, they wouldn't know how to react to that. So I began to realize that what I took for granted in terms of their understandings of voice, from having worked with the University Chorale and voice students, those weren't sufficient to the task of getting these people off the kind of dead end way they were approaching voice production. When I lived in Montreal, as well, I worked with a large, French symphonic choir as a voice coach and also rehearsal [coach] and what we would do is we'd have hour-long sessions before rehearsals. Where one week I'd work with men for an hour, the next week I'd work with women for an hour and we'd have a two-hour sectional with the men alone, all of them required, and a two-hour sectional with the women required. And I saw what you could get with that. You could get a group that could really sing. And they were the same kind of people [we have here] and they did the same sort of thing. They would have their 120 or 130 of these sorts of people and at the end they would bring in 30 or 40 professionals like [Graduate] Chorale. And you would really get a very good product.

I really think some of the singers voluntarily come to the coaching sessions because it starts to make sense to do some of the things that we talk about technically in the music, certain very basic things: how to be sure to open inside, how to energize the sound, how

to sing between notes, how to sing groups of notes together. I think they appreciate how it connects up. That's what they tell me, anyways.

Mehrling (1989) concurs with the views expressed by Dr. Kaiser, stating "Proper exercise and training, geared towards the assessed abilities of the person or ensemble, can restore many lost functions and enable the singer and choir to produce considerable excellent results" (p. 25).

Implications for Music Education

From this study it appears that there are numerous reasons that aging adults continue to participate in choral music performing groups. The experience is undoubtedly invigorating, unique, enriching, and rewarding. Time, opportunity, and self-confidence are factors that affect participation. Moments of inspiration serve to draw participants and keep these learners engaged and returning to the task of performing great choral literature. Appropriate challenges that lay the groundwork for increased confidence are crucial to the ultimate fulfillment of the participating singer.

Most students participating in school choir will not pursue careers in musical performance. Music educators will readily admit it is not their intention to encourage every pupil to do so. It seems that the most appropriate and worthwhile long-term goal for the majority of students in the choral music classroom is the hope that they will follow in the footsteps of the three participants in this study who have actively and voluntarily continued to pursue choral singing opportunities throughout the span of their lives.

Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (2000) tell us:

Only a limited portion of our adult population now has either the time or the money to be involved in activities of art expression or as appreciative supporters of the performing arts. Widespread participation in the arts is possible only if children are encouraged to develop those roots of imaginative play that arise from stimulating sensory experience. (p. 424)

Young musicians, when provided with sources of artistic inspiration and guided opportunities for musical experiences and success, are likely to sprout roots that will serve as the foundation for the development of their own aesthetic values. Music will be counted among that which they most value in life, that which they cannot live without. If they, in turn, fully mature into lifelong learners of music, then music educators will have made a profound contribution toward the quality of the lives of their students.

In closing, I offer Tom's own words as a summary of why he continues to be a lifelong learner of choral music:

I remember at Danville High School we practiced with the orchestra and that was in the summer of '90 when the Danville Festival Chorus was doing Arts in the Park. They always do something with the Danville Symphony for Arts in the Park. Usually something like "Oklahoma!" or Richard Rodgers and Hammerstein songs—something a little lighter than the classic choral thing and this was the first time ever in my life I'm singing in a group that's got an orchestra and we're at Danville High School and I still remember where I was standing when all of a sudden the realization hit me "I'm performing with an orchestra."

They've got violins, bass violins, they've got horns too, and it was just exciting to experience that. And then, when you do a performance and you get to the end and you nail that last note—well, sometimes it's easy, but like Beethoven's 9th [Symphony], which we've done a couple of times, the last note was not easy, it's a high one, and you nail it and you know you've got it right and then the audience applauds and you stand there, you just soak it in. And I thought to myself "This is why I keep doing this," for that brief moment, and so I'm back again when they start rehearsing something else. And, yeah, that's worth it, that moment.

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Endnotes

¹ The real names of participants have been changed.
