

How can I keep from singing: A lifetime of sweet singing in the choir

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*O the rising of the sun and the running of the deer;
The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir.*
(Refrain from *The Holly and the Ivy*)

As often happens with research projects, this study has evolved from several seemingly unrelated events which converged and suddenly became inextricably linked. The genesis for this study occurred in the early 80s when I took a new organist/choirmaster position at Cochrane Street United Church in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. I was lured to Cochrane Street, not by the choristers, but by the magnificent four-manual Casavant organ and the extraordinary acoustic in this Byzantine edifice. At the first choir rehearsal, I met three women that would permanently alter my perception of the often maligned 'mature' church choir soprano. There, in the front row, were three sopranos who, in their early seventies, had been together in the same church choir for almost 50 years. During my subsequent ten year employment at Cochrane Street United Church (1982-1992), all three celebrated their 80th birthdays. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, their individual years of participation in this particular choir has increased to 60 years. As these three choristers continued to make a vital contribution to the Senior Choir (and two continued to sing lovely solos), I became increasingly aware of how unusual it was to have, not one, but three octogenarians that I was not anxious to retire.

At the time, I was the Music Education Consultant for the Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. As we began to develop Ensemble Performance courses in the early 90s, I became interested in the notion of voluntary, continued participation in all musical ensembles and, in particular, continued participation in choirs, both K-12 and post-secondary. More recently, as the role and status of music education within the K-12 curriculum is challenged and threatened, it is obvious that there is an increasing imperative for inquiry into lifelong participation in a choir. This study is further fueled by the recent campaign by MENC, the Barbershop Society (SPEBSQSA), Chorus America, Sweet Adelines International, and the American Choral Directors Association to "build up the common life of singing in schools and communities" (Whitlock, 1996), Bannan's (1993) attack on indifference toward choral singing in Great Britain, and the publication of a report in the *British Medical Journal* suggesting that cultural activity (i.e., singing in a choir) may have a positive influence on

survival and increase resistance to a broad spectrum of diseases (Bygren, Konlaan, & Johansson, 1996).

During the 70s and 80s researchers examined music participation by identifying causal factors related to retention and drop-out in the performance groups. Much of the research related to music participation was positivistic and limited to the variables identified by the researcher. While these studies provide the basis for a typology of music participants in societies (Gates, 1991), thus far the research design has not provided an adequate means for exploring the complex and interactive context surrounding the music participation phenomenon. Further, studies on music participation, in general, and attitudes toward choir participation, in particular, have generally focused on instrumental and choral music education at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels (Mizener, 1993). Rarely has music participation been examined from the perspective of the seniors in society (Larson, 1983).

Drawing upon music participation theory and the sociology of leisure, this interpretive inquiry examines the life context within which participation occurs, specifically singing in a church choir. It is an exploratory case study of these three women who have sung in the same church choir for 60 years. The inquiry focuses on the meanings that emerge from the phenomenon itself and examines the individually-defined benefits of participating in this particular choral experience. I hope that this inquiry into the musical life in the Cochrane Street United Church choir might provide some understanding as to why people continue to participate in choral music making.

Recognizing that participation in any musical ensemble is complex, multi-dimensional, and contextual, I will first describe the musical background of each of these three choristers.

Elizabeth Purchase

Elizabeth Purchase, born in St. John's in 1910, grew up in the family residence on the corner of King and Gower Streets. Christened at Cochrane Street United Church, she is the only one of these three choir members who spent her entire life in this congregation. Raised by a church-going family, she was brought to church at a very early age. "Mom said I'd never make a squeak....but she had to put her hand over my mouth because I would be singing."

Elizabeth's early schooling was at Carew Street School and Holloway Methodist College. She recalls that the only music in the school was singing before prayers. When she was 15 years old, the organist and choirmaster, Arthur Mews, asked Elizabeth to join the choir. She was not entirely enthusiastic about the invitation.

I felt that I was supposed to go. My father was supposed to make me go, but he couldn't make me go because I wouldn't go. So he said, "If you don't go to choir practice, you go up to bed." So, I went up to bed and he went on to church. But the next time, I said, "Well, if I'm going to have to go to bed, I might as well go to church." That was the beginning of my choral singing at Cochrane Street.

Once Elizabeth joined the choir, she thoroughly enjoyed it. She was working as a floorwalker at The London, New York and Paris on Water Street. She had to work Saturday nights, but as soon as the department store closed, she would race up over the hill for practice.

As a young adult, Elizabeth took singing lesson from Brenda Marshall who lived next door to Cochrane Street United Church on the corner of Cochrane Street and Military Road, now Emmanuel House. She frequently sang solos, her favourite being *His Eye is on the Sparrow*. Her favourite choral music is the music of J.S. Bach. "I adore Bach's music. I would go up to my neck in water to hear it. I have tapes piled up at home of Bach's music."

Mary Garland

Mary Garland was born in Hatchet Cove, Trinity Bay, in 1911. Her early musical development was nurtured in an unusual dual church tradition as her mother was Anglican and her father was Methodist. Her earliest musical training was from her aunt who was a teacher and had an organ. Every Saturday, Mary would go to her cousin Maggie's house in St. John's Within to practice something to sing at the Methodist church on Sunday morning. She and Maggie continued to sing together throughout their childhood, singing between Hatchet Cove and St. John's Within. On Sunday afternoons, Mary would go with her mother to the Anglican church. She recalls a woman who sang the hymn *Thine Forever, Lord of Love* to the tune Newington. "I would come home and try to imitate her. I would say to myself, 'I've got to sing like her'." So, not yet ten years old, Mary was already captivated by singing and took some singing lessons from Edna Robbins in Hatchet Cove.

At age 16, Mary's father became paralyzed and she had to quit school to take care of her father. The following year, in October 1928, she came to St. John's, "living in service." She had friends in St. John's who attended Cochrane Street United Church, so she began going with them. Soon, someone said to her: "Your voice is good enough for the choir. I'll introduce you to the organist." Mr. Mews called Mary into his office after Sunday School and asked her to sing "When He Cometh." He said, "You come to choir practice on Thursday night." So, Mary joined the Cochrane Street senior choir in October 1929. She was surprised that she had been asked to join the choir; she had never sung parts before and they were singing anthems in four parts. "I felt it was special. I was excited, but I didn't let on." Always interested in learning more about singing, Mary studied voice with Brenda Butler, a graduate of the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, and Elsie Wilson, the assistant organist.

In addition to her involvement at Cochrane Street in Sunday School and the United Church Women, Mary had a Mission Band in the 30s. Between forty and fifty children came to Cochrane Street on Friday afternoons from the Bond Street schools. Although she had never studied piano, she could play a little: "I knew enough to play a little for them to sing." They would rehearse and then would have a film. The Mission Band would perform in her Sunday School class and in the Christmas and Easter

programmes. Mary's musical commitments were not limited to Cochrane Street; she also sang in a choir at Memorial College directed by Eleanor Jarrett. A seasonal choir that drew from all denominations that met only in the spring of each year, they performed most sacred repertoire in an April or May concert.

Grace Oakley

Grace Oakley, also born in 1910, grew up on Coronation Street in the west end of St. John's where her family attended Wesley Methodist Church. She started piano lessons at age seven, studying with Miss Adey who lived on Springdale Street, practicing on a reed organ, the only keyboard in her home. At the point in her studies when she began to consider taking an examination, she realized that she could not prepare for the exam on the organ. She convinced her father to exchange the reed organ for a piano at Hutton's Music Store. She continued to take piano lessons through high school, studying with Miss Pardy and Miss Wadden, and took three Trinity College examinations.

All of Grace's musical training was through private teachers as there was no music in the schools she attended. "There was no music in Centenary Hall on Gilbert Street . . . no music, no concerts, nothing." But Grace was always interested in music.

It was more for myself...to play for the Sunday School at Wesley. I would play for the Mission Band, a group that met during the week for singing and some activities. They gave two concerts a year. I used to sit in church and dream of the day when I would sing in a choir. It was something I wanted to do. I was doing a lot of singing, but I didn't have an lessons. But I felt that I had voice.

Grace started to sing in the Senior Choir at Wesley before she was twenty years old although she had never taken any singing lessons. When her father died in 1937, she had been thinking a lot about taking singing lessons. So, at age 27, she auditioned to began lessons with Eleanor Jarrett who had just returned to St. John's from studying music in Europe. Shortly after, Arthur Mews, Eleanor's father and organist at Cochrane Street, called Grace and wanted to know if she would be interested in joining the Senior Choir at Cochrane Street. Grace had certainly heard of the choir and knew that it would be a learning experience for her. She decided to make the move from Wesley to Cochrane Street where she eventually became a soloist.

While she had done some solo singing earlier, "now it was different because I was training." She recalls her first solo: "It was a tremendous experience...the Thanksgiving service for the Sunday School. I sang *Thanks be to God*. It was my first solo at Cochrane. It took me a long time to fight being nervous. I had a battle, but I finally overcame it. I got more confidence as I went on."

I stayed in the choir because I just love it. Singing in the choir was something that I dreamed about from a very young age when I would hear my sister sing. As a child I used to love to go to church to hear the choir sing. I would say to myself, "Will the day ever come that I will be singing in the choir?"

Music participation theory

Drawing upon the work of Shamir, Ruskin, and Stebbins in leisure theory, Gates (1991) has constructed a typology of music participants that I have found useful in framing this study. In identifying types of music participants, he suggests that we cannot expect everyone in society to find active participation in musical activity interesting or beneficial. There are sufficient sociological differences between participants and audiences, or "spectators" as he labels them, to designate them as separate groups. The benefits that attract and continue to reinforce the efforts of members of one group are irrelevant to the other. Gates suggests that individuals who find participation in a music group rewarding often never become avid spectators or consumers of the same musical ensemble. This is evident in Grace's description of her feelings during a time when she was ill and could not sing: "If I sit in the congregation, I cannot get myself accustomed to going and sitting and just listening." Mary says "there are times I wouldn't go to church if I wasn't in the choir. When I was sick with my arm, I would go to church and say to myself, 'There aren't many up there this morning; I should be up there. I know that piece; if I'm any good I should be up there.'"

Gates (1991) also draws a distinction between professionals and members of a society who support them. He identifies these two groups as the activity's professionals (those who make their livings in the activity) and the activity's publics (those who support the activity economically and psychologically). Within this social system are six groups: professionals, apprentices, amateurs, hobbyists, recreationists, and dabblers. The differences among these types are based in theoretical variations in cost-benefit relationships as perceived by participants.

Amateurs, largely non-paid participants, interact with both major groups: professional and publics. They are the most knowledgeable and critical part of the activity's public; and sometimes they join the activity's professionals, or take their places, in performances for the public. In a sense, the amateurs create a third group because their interactions differ from that the activity's professionals and publics. Amateurs fall in the middle of the social system that Stebbins (as cited in Gates, 1991) calls the P-A-P system: professional, amateur, public. Amateurs pattern their behaviour on the professional musician's model of instruction, practice, rehearsal, and public performance. In many church groups, conductors and singers adopt professional standards of musical skill and often use professional patterns of rehearsing and practicing to get skilled results in students.

The choristers at Cochrane Street are clearly amateurs. It is interesting to note the degree to which all three women felt the need to take singing lessons in order to join the Senior Choir at Cochrane Street. Mary reported: "I used to sit in church and dream of the day when I would sing in a choir. It was something I wanted to do. I was doing a lot of singing, but didn't have any lessons. But I felt I had a voice." All three spoke highly of Arthur Mews as a wonderful musician and organist, "but he never had a degree." Nonetheless, there was a 'professional standard' under the direction of all the organists at Cochrane that was clearly unique. Grace divulged that her singing lessons with the

organist at Wesley "did more damage than good." Mary told the story of Marjorie Mews (daughter of Arthur Mews) making a mistake when singing the solo in *Seek Ye the Lord*. "The words in the first two phrases were the same but the melody was different. Marjorie sang the two the same. She was so embarrassed because she was a *musician*."

In addition to these types of music participants, Gates (1991) identifies ways musicians view music: as work, as serious leisure, as play, or as survival. These perspectives are determined by the content of the "cost-benefit relationships." Music is seen as work by professionals and apprentices, as serious leisure by amateurs and hobbyists, and as play by recreationists and dabblers. Music as survival is not perceived to be a viable research construct in human populations.

Singing in the Senior Choir is clearly serious leisure for all three women. It is "distinguished from play by the extent to which an individual participant accepts quite high costs in knowledge, skill, time commitment, and persistence contrasted with those activities s/he regards as play . . . In a serious leisure activity, the participant is willing to support costs that exceed benefits for extended periods, sometimes for years" (Gates, 1991, p. 13). Grace describes the cost for her: "You have to be devoted to it. Nothing else ever came first on Thursday night, ever. If anybody asked for something else, Thursday night was Thursday night and we knew where we had to go . . . and the same for Sunday morning. I think I was too devoted . . . lots of times I should have been at home. I think of things now that I did . . . I wouldn't even tell Wince . . . but he would never ask me to leave what I loved."

Much of the research in music participation focuses on why people drop out of musical ensembles. This does not reveal much about those who are retained. Dropping out is one outcome of music participation in some people, staying in is an outcome in other people. For amateurs like Elizabeth, Mary, and Grace, who see music activity as serious leisure, "ceasing musical activity is not easily done; dropping out exacts a relatively high emotional cost" (Gates, 1991, p. 13). So, information about dropouts will not necessarily tell us much about those who continue to participate simply because the two types of people respond differently to the same phenomenon. An alternative framework is needed to get beyond the surface level of participation categorization and to establish the role of music in the respondent's life pattern.

Meaning of choral singing

A study by Hylton (1981) substantiates the view that there are multiple outcomes or benefits of participation in a choir. The themes that emerged from Hylton's investigation of high school participants' views of the meaning of high school choral singing experience are achievement, spiritualistic, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological, and integrative. Each of these is confirmed in the voices of these three senior choristers.

Achievement reflects a need on the part of the singers to try, succeed, and get better. Singing in the church choir provides opportunities for achievement in this non-competitive situation. The self-esteem that results from musical accomplishment may contribute greatly to an individual's sense of well-being resulting in feelings of accomplish-

ment, success, and pride (Hylton, 1981). "These dedicated singers are proud of their achievements in choir, and their identity as a choir member may be a significant part of their self-esteem. These are people for whom the prospect of sitting out in the congregation 'not doing anything' is not a pleasant one. Many literally live for Sundays and choir rehearsal nights." (González, 1990, p. 63).

Singing in the choir is something that I wanted to do and enjoyed doing. I really, really enjoyed it. And not just choir singing, but doing a lot of other singing. (Grace)

Every Sunday was a musical highlight. The anthems that we used to sing were beautiful. (Mary)

As might be expected, singing in the church choir reflects religious or *spiritual* meanings. All three women speak of the relationship between music and their faith in terms of the validation of religious systems through music that expresses religious beliefs. There are common purposes in religious services and musical performances. The songs and hymns convey the story of faith. When Mary, Grace, and Elizabeth sing hymns together, they sing that story into their hearts. They internalize those songs and their lives are shaped by the story they tell.

In the things I am singing, I think I can express the meaning of it because I believe those words. I think I express them better in singing than in speaking. Something happens within me; it's more than getting up and singing da, da, da. It's more than just having the congregation listen to us sing. I am experiencing something that they don't know anything about. That's where I learned a lot from my mother. She had a lovely voice and she was good living and her singing meant a lot to me because she was sincere about it. I learned a lot from her.

Choral performance is viewed as meaningful insofar as it affords opportunities for *musical growth and development*. In a certain sense, the meaning of church choir singing experiences may be viewed as inherent in the music itself. Activities of the group provide a way of heightening perception of musical phenomena and a means of developing each singer's own musicianship (Hylton, 1981).

The training was exceptional. My heart and soul was in singing. I paid attention because I didn't have the music that a lot of them had. But there were a lot of them like myself. I knew some of the notes so I could sightread a little. During the rehearsal I would pickup more notes. Mr. Mews would go over it once and then I could get it. I had a good ear and a good memory. Someone once told me that I must have been a good listener in order to remember. (Mary)

Singing is a means of reaching out to others. These statements concerned the expression of feelings and ideas to an audience - the *communicative* power of music (Hylton, 1981).

Mr. Mews wanted your expression so much. You had to express what you were singing. You had to put your face to the expression to sing it. (Mary)

Singing is an enhancement of the text; the scriptures and poetry are better expressed through music. I don't think I would want to be in the choir if I didn't feel that way about it, if I didn't think it was going to put something over.

Singing in the church choir *psychological*; it is introspective and related to the development of self. Choral experience is viewed as meaningful to the degree that the singer achieves personal satisfaction from it. Choral singing experiences provide a means of exploring one's own identity and determining individual strengths and limitations. (Hylton, 1981). "Singing is a unique and major source of the most important kind of knowledge human beings can achieve: self-knowledge" (Elliott, 1993, p. 133).

I couldn't live without it. It puts you in another world. I can't explain it . . . it does things to me inside. (Elizabeth)

It was an opportunity to express myself and an opportunity for people to get to know me. You are known more because you are like in the public. (Grace)

It's a job I took on. I am getting something out of it. I get a satisfaction, a meaning for it. I like the singing. . . the singing speaks to me. (Mary)

Participating in and interacting with the group is viewed as meaningful in terms of the social aspects of the experience. Music contributes to the *integrative* aspect of a church family by providing an experience in which members of society gather to engage in activities requiring the cooperation and coordination of the group (Hylton, 1981). "Singing is a communal activity. We sing together with other people, and the shared songs reinforce our relationship with those people" (Bartlett & Ruebsaat, 1981, p. 16).

We are just like a house group; we get down there and it's gobble, gobble, gobble...each one's got their own chairs. (Elizabeth)

I developed good friendships with everybody. Everyone in the choir was personable to me; everyone was so nice and accepted me when I joined. (Mary)

These themes are not surprising. The challenge facing us is how to provide opportunities in all types of choral settings in which young singers will develop as amateurs and value choral singing as serious leisure.

Throughout these 60 years, the voices of Elizabeth, Grace, and Mary have grown, and so have their friendships. Their voices are a tribute to their personal faith and their love of music and their church. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing believe that "singing fortifies health, widens culture, refines the intelligence, enriches the imagination, makes for happiness, and endows life with an added zest" (Gregg, 1998, p. 49). These goals are clearly demonstrated in the choral lives of these three women.

The lived stories of these singers reveal an extraordinary and unique "endless song". May it be true for each of our own choristers that they cannot keep from singing.

My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentations;
I hear the real, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation;
Through all the tumult and the strife I hear its music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing?

What though the tempest loudly roars, I hear the truth, it liveth;
What though the darkness 'round me close, songs in the night it giveth;
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging;
Since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

When tyrants tremble sick with fear and hear their death knell ringing
When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging;
When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?

I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin, I see the blue above it,
And day by day this pathway clears, since first I learned to love it;
The peace of God restores my soul, a fountain every springing,
All things are mine since I am loved, how can I keep from singing?

Quaker hymn from North Carolina, melody composed by Rev. R. Lowry and words composed by Anne Warner (1864). Verse 3 was composed by Doris Plenn, raised in North Carolina, who learned the song from her Quaker grandmother. She wrote the new verse when friends were imprisoned during the McCarthy period.

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