Group dynamics and the small choir:
An application of select models from behavioural and social psychology

Paul E. Guise
University of Alberta

In the literature written for choral directors, there seems to be a common approach taken by many writers regarding the qualities and skills which determine a conductor's effectiveness. Books centre on a gestural approach to musical direction, emphasising physical learning as well as score preparation and other individual skills. The belief that "superior musicianship is the prime quality of a conductor" (Demaree and Moses 1995, p.4) is commonly held, and indeed is a driving influence for the behaviour of many choral directors. In combining this view with a narrowly defined gestural approach to conducting, choral directors and educators deny (or ignore) the fact that choirs are in fact complex groups of individuals. It is my assertion that any approach which fails to seriously consider group aspects of choral music making is incomplete and is unlikely to result in long-term success for the ensemble.

In the preface to *Choral Conducting*, Ericson et al note that, "a discussion of personal and artistic approaches and interpretations has not been included due to the difficulty in translating these dimensions into technical terms" (Ericson, Ohlin, and Spångberg 1976, p.3). While this does acknowledge that such aspects are important to consider, it does seem to suggest that they are less important than the mechanics of conducting. I believe this denies the success of those conductors who are less gesturally adept. There are many choral conductors who have developed reputations for excellence while having techniques which are less than flawless. If we hold the opinion that the road to conducting mastery requires mastery of technical gestures, then all 'great' conductors should therefore excel in the mechanics of conducting. Yet a review of the conducting styles of any number of 'great' conductors does not always support this theory. I believe that is because there are other, equally important, factors which define a good conductor; among the most important is an understanding of group dynamics.

A common factor in much of the literature available to the choral scholar is an unspoken assumption that all activities occur to serve the music. People are assumed to join choirs (or conduct them) for the sheer aesthetic pleasure of being involved with works of art. This view has long been held as a central pillar of arts education (Gramit 1998), although recent developments in fields such as arts theory and musicology suggest a shift in emphasis. Aesthetic experiences are still seen as important, as few would deny the effect music can have on one's spirit. But in addition to this come factors such as the individual's need for social interaction or the need to develop specific skills. This is a shift away from

art-as-object to a new art-as-subject approach, where the social implications of music making in a group are considered to be at least as important as any previously held views of the intrinsic value of music itself. In making this aesthetic shift we must now be aware of the ways in which people interact. Group dynamics and interpersonal relations can have an enormous impact on the way individuals view their experiences in a choir and can also affect their opinions of the music itself. Unfortunately, there are very few places from which musicians can obtain information on group dynamics in a format which applies specifically to their field. Therefore this paper will attempt to provide an overview of the available information.

Robert L. Garretson's *Conducting Choral Music* takes a broad approach to the functions and values of a choir. In the book's introduction, he includes a significant acknowledgement of group dynamics. Garretson also devotes the entire thirty-eight pages of chapter 7 to "Planning and Organization." Finally, while he has presented his belief earlier about the principle importance of *"aesthetic* and *expressive* values," Garretson shows that there is far more to the choral experience: "There are relatively few [individuals] whose initial interest is entirely *intrinsic* -- that is, whose desire to study music emerges primarily from a love of the music itself" (Garretson 1988, p.234).

In studying choral music and its practical application, I firmly believe that there should be a stronger emphasis on group dynamics and the individual and interpersonal needs of the choir. By understanding the needs of individuals the choral director can evolve from a group leader to a group facilitator, providing the choir with the assistance needed to satisfy individual goals as fully as possible. The study of the choir as a *group* of individuals, and not just as a medium through which the music flows, will allow choral directors and members to get a better understanding of those processes which can allow musicians, as people, to develop. To begin to look at the choir in this way, we first must determine those qualities which define a small group.

What is a group?

In research on management groups and other related action-oriented bodies, it is generally agreed that small groups consist of 2-5 members, middle-sized groups have 5-12 members, and large groups have more than twelve members (Dailey 1995, p.14-15). In the context of traditional choral music these limits may seem quite low, but there are recognisable group size effects which occur regardless of the purpose of the group. In other words, these effects will be similar whether the group in question is a choir, a board of directors, or a group of outdoor adventurers.

In this work, a small choir will be considered the same as a small or medium-sized group as indicated by the previous definitions, that is, any group consisting of four to twelve singers. Groups of two or three are too small to legitimately be considered *choirs* according to current musical thinking. As well, larger groups are not included in this discussion due to the extra complications generated by their 'compound group' nature. The following helps shed some light on group size effects and characteristics.

1. Middle-sized groups (5-12 members) tend to make more accurate decisions than groups outside that size range.

2. Small groups (2-5 members) are better able to achieve consensus than large groups.

3. Larger groups (11 or more members) generate more ideas, but as size increases beyond 20 members, the number of ideas relative to the number of members decreases.

4. Groups of 4-5 members foster greater member satisfaction than middle-sized or large groups.

Because of their very nature choirs are broken down into sections; thus the choral environment poses some additional difficulties when trying to determine group size effects. Large choirs act as compound groups, that is, groups within a group. Thus, while a 40-voice SATB choir will function as a very large group, it will also exhibit some characteristics of a 10-voice choir (assuming four 10-voice sections), and will occasionally act as a four voice unit (S-A-T-B). The director of such a choir may find it difficult to meet the needs of the membership, as it is unlikely that the choral structure can be tailored to small, medium, and large choir needs simultaneously. However, the current discussion should provide members of such large choirs a starting point from which to develop an understanding of the complex group interactions of such ensembles.

Why do people join choirs?

While the details may vary greatly from one situation to another, there is one basic reason why people join choirs: the satisfaction of needs. People choose their actions to maximise the benefit in doing a particular activity. For our purposes, the needs which cause people to join a choir can be chosen from among the following:

1. Social interaction
2. Association
3. Short term task refinement
4. Long term task refinement
5. Satisfaction of external/extramusical requirements

The need for social interaction appears in such forms as physical attraction (perhaps to find a mate) or the need to belong. Association can be based on the perceived ability of others, their status, attitude similarity, or economic, social, or other similarities. Short term task refinement may include the performance of a particular work or in a particular venue, while long term task refinement could take the form of achieving critical success or personal mastery of the voice. Finally, external or extramusical requirements take many forms, such as course requirements, peer pressure, family expectations, or holding a paying position.

These needs are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This will prove to be an important point, as the ability to cater to multiple needs provides the choral director with an opportunity to maintain a diverse, satisfied membership in the choir. By the same

token, the choral director's needs do not have to be the same as those of the members, as long as the path to achieving satisfaction is compatible with the largest number of possible goals.

The satisfaction of needs in a choral setting depends on several factors, including communication structures, levels of control and conformity, leadership functions and power structures, performance and evaluation, and rewards. We will now look at several of these factors in detail.

Communication within the group

Group communication varies considerably with both size and characteristics of group composition, and has a profound effect on decision making structures and techniques. Most choirs are built on a "wheel" communication structure, where a single director interacts directly with members and discourages intermember communication. Each of the spokes of the "wheel" can be of varying lengths, largely due to power relations, but fundamentally all communication goes through a central hub, the director. The "circle" format is quite rare, but there is no reason why it could not be successfully employed in a small choir setting. There are some choral groups who perform using this format, including Chanticleer and the King's Singers. As with the "wheel" format, certain members may take a more or less active role depending on relative levels of power, but use of the "circle" communication structure precludes the adoption of a single centre of authority. The aforementioned ensembles use a distributed power system to make decisions, provide feedback, and give leadership in performances, yet in different ways. The King's Singers use no large physical gestures in specifying tempo, dynamics and the like, whereas Chanticleer has certain members who share the task of leading the ensemble.

These structures do not necessarily remain fixed in all situations. For example, a choir may choose a "circle" for rehearsals and performances, but use a "wheel" in order to maintain an orderly, effective administration. Dailey notes, "In general, simple structures with high delegation characterise many of the most effectively managed organisations" (Dailey 1995, p.9/5). Further, it is important to consider all forms of communication, not just verbal interaction. As any conductor knows, there may be a great deal of non-verbal communication required to interact effectively with a choir, especially hand/arm and facial gestures. Several studies have shown that in cases where "there appears to be a contradiction between what is conveyed by words and what is conveyed by the face, the face is usually considered to be a more accurate guide to the *meaning* of what was said" (Alcock, Carment, and Sadava 1991, p.440).

Cohesiveness within the group

Cohesiveness refers to the attraction of *members* to a group as a whole and to each other (Jewell and Reitz 1981, p.25; Nixon 1979, p.76). Group cohesiveness is generally considered to be a positive attribute in group work, although there are indications that this is not always the case. The reason for this is that members of cohesive groups tend to

perform at a similar level, although it is the group norms which will dictate whether this is consistently high or low performance. "We would expect [...] to find cohesive groups among the best and the poorest performers in a given situation with other groups muddling along in the middle. And this expectation is usually borne out" (Jewell and Reitz 1981, p.27). For a choir, cohesiveness can work on two distinct, yet interrelated, levels known as "task-relevant [SINGING] and task-irrelevant [SOCIALIZING] matters" (Jewell and Reitz 1981, p.25). Choral directors frequently focus only on the first of these goals, leaving social cohesiveness to chance or limiting it to short periods of time. This is unfortunate, as development of group norms occurs in all group interaction, and both technical and social achievements intertwine, influencing one another.

Leadership & Power

For even a summary understanding of leadership, one must begin with a definition of power. Dailey defines power as, "the *capacity* to pursue a course of action of your own choice" (Dailey 1995, p.7/3). Note that this capacity does not need to be exercised in order for a power relationship to exist. There are several possible sources of interpersonal power:

Source	Example
Reward	A director providing a chorister with a favourable review as part of a formal evaluation
Coercive	One member suggesting to others that, despite auditions, an upcoming solo is 'theirs'
Legitimate	A director unilaterally assigning section leads
Referent	A member behaving in the manner of a well-respected former member
Expert	A member who has extensive singing/directing experience (adapted from Dailey 1995, p.7/3).

Not all of these sources of power accompany the title of manager or director, which can account for some choirs which have one person appointed as director, but another member who functions as the 'real' leader. There are also examples of choirs who have various members fulfilling different leadership roles simultaneously. There is no rule which states that a group must have only one leader for all circumstances.

Having looked into the power structures which can account for various forms of leadership, we should now move on to the roles of a leader. There are several opinions which deserve attention. "A group leader assimilates each individual's contribution to the

communicative experience by clarifying alternatives and their consequences, by analysing factors that enter into choice, and by relating information elements to the group objectives and to available resources" (Penland and Fine 1974, p.4). According to Osborn, one of the primary roles of leadership is to ensure that imagination is used toward creative ends and not just to predict outcomes. Referring to a corporate setting, Osborn writes:

> One of the needs of big business is to bring up the creative power of second-line executives. They sit in plenty of conferences, but they are too often tempted to use their imaginations merely to anticipate how their associates will react. Such anti-creative tendencies can often be overcome by active encouragement on the part of those at the top (Osborn 1963, p.377).

The musical parallel to this is the encouragement of innovative approaches to the many tasks a choir performs, be they musical, administrative, etc.. Directors should take care to ensure they receive plentiful, honest feedback from the choir, not just those responses the choir assumes the director would most like to hear. By creating democratic lines of communication within the group, the leader creates a means by which the choir can *develop the leader* to suit *their* needs, both as a group and as individuals. However radical it may seem, the role of a leader in choral music can perhaps be summarised as follows: "The best leader is the one that the group no longer needs" (Penland and Fine 1974, p.132).

Performance and evaluation

Referring to the previous sections, it might appear as though choirs had little chance of achieving even the most modest of goals. Clearly this is not so. "Powerful as influence processes in groups are, they do not immobilize the achievement of satisfactory performance" (Jewell and Reitz 1981, p.66). There are several reasons for this. First, groups can develop high-performance or low-performance norms which, if applied, will result in high- or low-performance output. Second, individual task familiarity can greatly affect performance, especially when the individual is at a significantly higher or lower level than the rest of the group. Finally, individual factors may have a more significant effect on task performance than do group factors, in which case those group effects mentioned above may function at such a low level as to be insignificant. Added to these complications is the issue of performance appraisal: how does one evaluate group success? To avoid the pitfalls of the evaluation process it is important to develop a system by which complete, accurate, and timely information can be distributed to group members. While many choir directors collect questionnaires and provide summarised information to their choirs, research suggests that such unidirectional evaluation, while of use in some arenas, can be ineffective for creative groups (Dailey 1995, p.4-8). As a way of addressing these concerns, Dailey suggests the adoption of interactive goal setting and frequent and accurate feedback. The methodology proposed is known as "management by objectives" (MBO), which is a seven-step process which feeds back into itself. The steps are as follows:

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1.   ANALYSE the mix of people, tasks, work methods and external demands
2.   PLAN goals, strategy, communication, and training
3.   DEFINE the members' tasks in terms of content, authority, and responsibility
4.   ARTICULATE goal difficulty, clarity, type of feedback
5.   AGREE (mutually) about goals, methods, performance measurement, and timeframe
6.   INFORMALLY review goal achievement, methods, and probable rewards, and REVISE goals and methods if necessary
7.   FORMALLY review goal achievement and rewards

(adapted from Dailey 1995, p.4-10)

When using the above guidelines one must be sure that there is an equal emphasis on both personal and organisational goals. This will ensure that group development occurs at a compatible rate to individual growth, which in turn will aid in the setting of challenging goals during the next cycle of the process.

Summary and implications

Functioning in a group is a skill which must be learned. As with many other skills, this learning can be effectively facilitated by the use of a well structured program which develops awareness of, and effectiveness in, the fundamentals of group work. The details of such a program would have to be tailored to specific situations, but all musicians could learn the basics of such an approach by simply being made aware that these group processes are occurring. For those pursuing formal music education, group dynamics must be learned alongside more traditional aspects of music education such as interpretation, performance techniques, and theoretical elements if the musical ensemble is to function consistently as an organic unit.

Music making is more than just an aesthetic experience. While musicians have traditionally been assumed to do what they do purely for the love of music, this view is no longer held to be a universal truth. There are many reasons why people choose to make music including social interaction, association, short and long term task refinement, and a variety of external or extramusical reasons. These reasons are a constant factor in group interaction of all forms. Finnegan points out a number of ways in which this occurs for musicians:

The choirs, the orchestras, the small and large bands, the many clubs, and the accepted musical occasions all provide settings in which people can act in many different and quite down-to-earth ways – finding opportunities, for example, to make friends or enemies; meet potential mates; keep up with the Joneses; escape from domestic pressures one evening a week; assert themselves, throw their weight around, or impress their peers; make useful business or social contacts; enjoy the pleasures of working in a co-operative venture or of agitating for changes; enter competitions; please their families, peers, teachers, colleagues

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or friends; get acclamation from those whom they admire; earn money or the appearance of money; have an evening out with friends... (Finnegan 1989, p.328).

In trying to understand these needs, one must keep in mind that the various needs of different people may be satisfied simultaneously. With this in mind, a choir director may be able to nurture long term needs in the choir while simultaneously satisfying short term needs such as course requirements. In doing so, the choir is more likely to remain a cohesive unit.

While this paper has focused on choirs with four to twelve members, group dynamics are important in groups of all sizes and types. The implications of the current discussions can be readily applied to symphony orchestras, jazz quintets, and rock bands. Indeed, there is no reason why one should limit the discussion to the performing ensemble, as group dynamics are equally applicable to a budget committee meeting or a faculty softball team.

While this paper may have answered some questions for its audience, it is my hope that the concepts expressed herein have developed further questions and issues. As research into group dynamics and the musical ensemble is quite new, there should be ample opportunities for further investigation.

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