

Finding a Voice: Why Boys (Don't) Sing

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Abstract

While the question "Why do boys stop singing?" has been extensively studied, this paper asks the specific question "Why do males keep singing?" Interviews were conducted with 18 boys and men ranging from early adolescence to working adults. From the adult group, focus was on two men who had stopped singing but had returned to it after a number of years as well as two men who had remained singing throughout their lives. Among the younger males, the focus was on boys currently experiencing a voice change, boys with changed voices who had remained singing through the voice change, male singers studying music at university, and finally young men in other fields of university study who remain actively involved in choral music. The results suggest that, in spite of the sociological, psychological, and physiological factors that hinder male choral involvement, boys who continue to sing do so for definite reasons. The findings of this study led the authors to develop a conceptual framework that may support the increased, sustained involvement of males in singing.

Introduction

The research indicates that females outnumber males in school vocal programs by a ratio of 5:2 while the ratio is 5:1 in elective music courses (Gates, 1989, p. 37 and Swanson, 1984, p. 47). At the same time, the global percentage of singers who are male is only 7% (Noble, 2002). With limited male involvement in singing, Adler (2002) notes that "we risk losing a valuable part of our culture, with links to our cultural history and those of other cultures" by not encouraging boys to actively take part in music and singing (p. 6). More importantly, "to deny students the opportunity to participate in this activity would prevent them from exploring those cooperative expressive aspects of themselves and others with which they cannot connect through competitive activities such as sports, or through 'academic' subjects (Adler, 2002, p. 7)." Recent research has shown that males stop singing due to historical, sociological, psychological, and physiological reasons.

Historical factors

Although it may seem difficult to see how historical factors may hinder male choral involvement, one only needs to investigate standard European traditions, which dictated that a boy should stop singing as soon as his voice broke. An early twentieth century manual for boychoir conductors states:

Some choirmasters retain a boy in the choir after the voice is broken. This should never be done. It is likely to injure the vocal tone for ever after. Many otherwise fair musicians have been deprived of vocal power by this reprehensible practice. A boy whose voice is changed or broken ought no more to be allowed to sing than a man with a fractured limb ought to be permitted to walk or use it. There is no doubt that many valuable voices are lost through overstraining their powers at the period of the break... Although it has some scientific defenders, it is to be deplored (Martin, 1901, p. 21).

In earlier times, young men would have returned to singing through church or social activities, however, with the increase in diversity in Canadian society coupled with the demise of the church as a central place in dominant society, and the subsequent increase in popular media entertainment, such return to singing simply does not happen today.

Sociological factors

Ideology and social patterns have shifted within the last 75 years in our increasingly secular society:

Male singing has all but disappeared from taverns; singing in gatherings of fraternal organizations and service clubs is perfunctorily engaged in for largely forgotten purposes; and male singing in church congregations and sporting events arguable lacks not only skill but spirited commitment to singing or the social benefits of this activity (Gates, 1989, p. 37).

This decline of male interest in singing may also be linked to the *feminisation* of singing. It is uncertain as to how this understanding of singing as a feminine art came to be, although it is likely due to the notion of the fine arts as traditionally being suited to feminine culture. An article from 1924 sought to attract females to music education:

How long must our girls break their heads over Algebra, Geometry, Latin and other subjects that prove useless to most of them, that they loathe and despise forever after? Will higher mathematics make these girls better companions for their husbands, better mothers for their children? Why don't we give them more Music, Literature, Dramatics, or Art—more training in activities that they can use through their whole lives (Meissner, p. 51)?

While not directly relating to males, this excerpt provides some insight into the gendered nature of social behaviour in the early twentieth century; more mathematical subjects were associated with men or male jobs. Koza (1993) suggests that the relatively new phenomenon of male resistance to singing was based on the categorization of singing as feminine and the construction of paradigms that placed females (or anything feminine) in the “undesirable other (p. 220).” Radtke (1950) states that “boys of this age, too, frequently use as an excuse for not singing the argument that singing is anything but masculine. It would be well, therefore, for boys to see and hear only the best examples of masculine singing (p. 48).” The classification of

singing as a feminine art has appeared to feed a sociological cycle; that is to say that the perception of singing as feminine initially hindered some male choral involvement, and through social interaction (for example, peer pressure, parental pressure), that perception was further enhanced, thereby decreasing involvement even more. When a perception becomes part of the human and societal psyche—be it natal or learned—it occurs even before formal schooling. Mizener (1993) notes that “at all grade levels, girls general hold a more favourable attitude toward music than do boys,” also commenting that numbers decline with each successive grade (as the perception has more time to spread) (pp. 233-234).

Sexuality is yet another sociological factor in male singing. In Adler’s (2002) study, he notes that 90% of the boys in choir have been subjected to homophobic harassment. While Koza links this harassment to misogyny, Adler contends that “anti-singing homophobic labels are not used to devalue the singers by likening them to girls or women, but because their participation in gender-incongruent activities is judged to be a sign of unsuccessful masculinity (p. 260).” While singing is viewed as a feminine activity, boys who participate in singing are labelled “gay” or “fag.” The labels can have an incredible negative effect on the self-esteem of singing boys, particularly at an age when boys are developing their identity and search for acceptance.

Physiological factors

These are the most readily apparent factors with the voice change particularly obvious. Many adolescent boys experience a gruelling voice change and often endure long periods of unstable vocal production causing some boys to stop singing as they begin to feel uncomfortable with their *new* instrument and experience an uneasiness to utilise it (Beynon & Keating, 2000). A 1997 study showed that five out of six males perceived their voice change as a positive experience, yet the number of negative comments related to the voice change was eightfold that of the number of positive comments (Killian, 1997, p. 529). With adolescence comes increased muscle growth and increased hormone production. Boys often begin to express greater interest in sports particularly since they are currently experiencing problems with their vocal instrument. Hormonal changes also lead to an increased interest in pursuing romantic/sexual relationships. For the heterosexual male at least, this often creates a desire to appear more masculine to the opposite sex, and the young adolescent may try to reject all aspects of his life that appear to be effeminate (relating back to the sociological rationales for decrease male choral involvement). Boys’ voices are changing earlier than previously recorded (Killian, 1997, p. 363), suggesting that in future they may drop out of choirs sooner than before.

Purpose of the Study

It is apparent then that these historical, sociological, physiological, and psychological factors intertwine to create a fairly substantial case in influencing the young adolescent male to stop singing. We accept that we cannot alter history, nor can we have much influence on the physiological changes that affect the adolescent male. And it seems unlikely that a change in the social norms related to singing will change in the near future. Since the impeding factors have been extensively studied already, perhaps we should begin finding reasons why boys continue to sing. This study seeks to identify why some boys continue to sing through adolescence and into adulthood. It looks at male choral singers at various stages in their development and at different levels of choral involvement in an attempt to find common factors that stimulate male interest in choral music.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was chosen deliberately to maximize the voice of the male singer participant and to focus on dialogic interactions and interactive discussions. Because trust and honesty were an important component of this qualitative study we decided to work with male singers with whom we have worked.¹ We reasoned that they would know us well enough to talk candidly and openly about the issues being raised. Thus, as researchers, we became participant observers in the process as we explored significant questions and issues together. We decided to work with defined groups of singers for this study and Heywood carried out the interviews and focus groups. The six groups were comprised of:

1. Two adult males who had returned to singing and are members of Heywood's church choir
2. Two working adult males who have sung from childhood into adulthood, both of whom are members of the Amabile Boys and Men's Choirs
3. Three university music students, two of whom are voice majors and one of whom sings in Amabile
4. Three university students in chemistry, health sciences, and philosophy, one of whom sings in Amabile
5. Three secondary school students, ages 13 to 15, whose voices, while still in the process of maturing, are new members of the Amabile Young Men's Ensemble
6. Five young adolescents from 11 to 14 years of age, in the actual process of changing voices and moving into the Amabile Young Men's Ensemble.

Interviews were conducted in two phases, first in individual interviews and then in focus groups. Adult participants were asked about their current work, musical activities, hobbies, music preferences, previous musical learning, and their opinions on their past and present choral experiences. Post-secondary participants were asked about their program of study, current musical activities, hobbies, music preferences, secondary and elementary school music programs, opinions on past and present choral experiences, and their voice change. Younger participants were asked about their current school music programs, their elementary school programs, other musical learning, career plans, opinions on current choral experiences, and their voice change. The second phase consisted of focus groups with the post-secondary and younger participants, allowing the participants to discuss the phenomenon of singing with each other. With the younger participants, we were interested in seeing how the presence of their peers influenced their responses, and so some of the questions asked in the first phase were repeated again. The time difference between the two phases may have allowed for a change in perspective on singing in the younger singers, as their voices and bodies may have gone through more or less significant changes in that time. Generally, questions in the second phase focussed around the voice change and the influence of peers, parents, and teachers.

Upon reviewing the interviews from the first phase, themes were identified as common if they applied to the majority of a certain participant group or the majority of the entire participant pool. The common themes were then related back to the original concept of

countering the negative factors. Did these common themes play a part in overcoming the aforementioned challenges? Were certain themes only beneficial when in conjunction with other themes? What further questions could arise from the data? Any further questions were addressed in the second phase—the focus group interviews. Again, common themes were identified. Links were then created between the themes common to the different participant groups, to see if themes were slightly altered depending on the age of the participants. Finally, special focus was given to rationalising the implications of the data and formulating new ideologies and methodologies that would benefit both school and community programs.

What They Said: Results from the Interviews

Group 1

Andrew (age 50) and Bartolomeu (age 30) are both working men at very different stages in their career. Andrew, an environmental services engineer, and Bartolomeu, a registered nurse, meet regularly for 90 minutes on Monday nights for church choir rehearsals. Both men were exposed to music in their younger years, but life situations caused them to put their musical learning on hiatus. “I sang in the church boys’ choirs from grade 4 to grade 6 recalls Andrew. He also remembers the choir going to camp for a week and that being a very positive experience for him. However, by the seventh grade, Andrew’s willingness to participate in choir waned. “It wasn’t cool to be a singer. Singers were being bullied.” Bartolomeu, while having little formal music education in his school in the Azores, pleasantly recalls listening and watching traditional gatherings of the elders of his town where music, both instrumental and vocal, was the focus. Unlike Andrew, Bartolomeu continued to sing in a choir throughout his adolescent years, but his musical experiences ceased when he came to Canada at the age of 19. Now in their adult years, both men have returned to pursuing music as a hobby in their life. “I used to play soccer, but now I am too occupied with family and work,” remarks Bartolomeu. “I used to participate in Scouts,” says Andrew, whose sons are now grown. While both maintain busy lives, they still see the need for music in their lives, perhaps rekindling a childhood attraction to the art. Though they each experience certain problems trying to fit church choir into the regular schedule, they make a supreme effort to commit to it and make it a part of their lives. Bartolomeu now brings his two daughters with him to rehearsal and it has become a family event. “I really enjoy singing in a choir,” he comments. “It is a good stress reliever for me. I enjoy the people that I am with. I enjoy the challenge of trying something different, something that will take me to another level.”

Group 2

Carter (32) and Daniel (33) have maintained their involvement in choral groups from childhood into adulthood. Carter, now a detective constable, was originally an elementary school music teacher. Daniel works as a bartender at the same private golf course where he worked in high school and throughout university. In an average week both commit about 5 hours to choral singing. For both Carter and Daniel, musical learning started early. Carter became involved as a cantor for school masses in grade 4, and credits his secondary school music program for enabling him to continue his musical pursuits, and to allow him to continue in sports while doing music at the same time. “My music teacher was good with it; the coaches—not so much.” Daniel too credits the good work of his elementary school music teacher. He then

became highly involved in high school and community groups. Both singers also talked a bit about their voice change. Each remembers the voice taking about two years to settle; Carter at 17 and Daniel at 15. They both kept singing and pursuing other musical ventures during the voice change.

Carter and Daniel seem to share interests that spark their choral involvement. "It's a family experience almost," states Carter who values the social experience of choir. "There were time constraints on my Tuesday nights rushing from orchestra rehearsal straight to Amabile, but the social experience ensured that I didn't skip out on it." Both participants commented on the laughter shared by members of the group. "Take the aspect of fun out and it's just not attractive to guys," states Carter. Daniel fondly recalls music field trips to Chicago and Boston, though his most positive experiences has been putting on shows, where the cast becomes really close.

Carter most appreciated that singing was something completely different from what he did in life; it was not work related. Though he finds his musical commitments time consuming, he takes great pleasure out of doing it. "I've done it for so long, and there's comfort in doing the familiar." Daniel appreciates the relationships formed with other choristers. "The camaraderie is most important. I come back every week because of the people here."

Group 3

Eric, Fletcher, and Geoff are university students majoring in different fields. Eric, a chemistry student with a minor in music, works at his church as a cantor and accompanist, sings as part of a barbershop quartet and sings in Amabile as well as another choir conducted by André. Eric attended a choir school in his younger years where he studied vocal music, strings, and theory from grades 5 to 8. His musical experience prior to the fifth grade, however, was somewhat lacking. "It was basically non-existent. I had a music specialist, but it was mostly just singing and once a week. [The arts school] provided lots of interesting opportunities." His high school experiences were equally engaging due, he says, to excellent music teachers and his peers. Eric has studied voice privately.

Fletcher auditioned for voice at the University of Western Ontario but instead chose to pursue a degree in health science. Still, Fletcher sings in the university's top choir and in his church choir. In his earlier years, Fletcher remembers recorder classes in grade 6, writing a musical in grade 8, and playing guitar and in band at high school. However, it seems to be his personal musical pursuits that have driven him to continue to pursue music. He has played piano since the age of four and has also been involved on a Worship Team at the university. Fletcher still plays intramural hockey in addition to his musical activities and enjoys taking time to listen to music. "I like mostly oldies, like the Beatles. Oh, and Josh Groban is phenomenal," he says.

Geoff has been at Western for eight years, pursuing degrees in both biology and philosophy. He recalls some singing in school before grade 6 but only remembers recorders and band class after that. His high school program was quite advanced, and Geoff took part in band for all five years of high school playing the clarinet. However, his choral involvement only started in his final two years. "I heard they needed basses, so I signed up. I had sung in a rock band with some friends from school, so I knew I could sing." Geoff recalls positive experiences from choir, particularly trips to Toronto, but he found it difficult to catch up, coming into choir so late in the game. "I only picked up singing after the voice change. I started guitar in grade 10 and I wanted to be able to sing along so I joined a church choir the next year and then eventually school

choir." Since then, Geoff has been an active member of the university's interfaculty choir (serving as the choir's president at one point) and sings in his church choir with his mother.

Eric enjoys the variety of groups with which he sings—the intimacy of the chamber choir, the socialization of Amabile, and the entertaining repertoire of his barbershop quartet. Geoff shares some of Eric's sentiments with regards to having fun. "The social aspect of choir is by far the most important. It's a lot of fun singing with friends." Fletcher's interests are different. "I like the challenge! I like working at such a high level and with other high-level singers. I would want to keep pursuing music lesson so that I can keep up."

Group 4

Hayden, Isaac, and Jacob are all university music students—the first two majoring in voice, and the last in organ. Hayden is studying theory and composition and is interested in pursuing a Master's degree in composition and orchestral conducting. He has a particular interest in developing film scores. Hayden describes himself as a "choir geek," being involved in five different vocal ensembles—a men's choir, a chamber choir, a vocal jazz ensemble, an early music ensemble, and the university's top choir. He commits 13 hours each week to rehearsals, in addition to his voice lessons, classes, performances, and his own personal composing projects. Hayden used to participate in sports (soccer and badminton) but now has very little time for that.

Isaac is studying voice performance and is also heavily involved in vocal activities. He also sings in the university's top choir and early music ensemble as well as the university opera, a venture which on its own takes up 8 hours of his week. Isaac also practices his singing for 6 hours each week in addition to class and work commitments. He has had some pretty incredible musical experiences, singing with the Toronto Children's Chorus as a child, playing handbells, performing in musical theatre productions, studying violin, and piano and learning Highland dancing. Singing took a backseat, however, during his voice change. "I didn't like singing with my new voice at all. I became very focussed on baseball during that time." Isaac attended a performance by Michael Schade halfway through his grade 12 year and then made the decision to take up singing again. He transferred to an arts school where his dad was the vocal teacher and set on for his new career path, aspiring to become a music teacher himself.

Unlike Hayden and Isaac, Jacob's vocal pursuits exist only in choir. At the university, he studies organ performance, but does have a keen interest in choral music. When he was younger, he was a member of the prestigious Canadian Children's Opera Chorus. He participated in his high school music program, accompanying the choir and playing trombone in the concert band and stage band. He also played for the Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra and a brass quintet. Jacob does not pick up his trombone anymore, but plays as a church musician and performs in a few organ recitals. When asked about his future plans, he jokes "I don't know; I'll probably starve in a gutter somewhere." Jacob hopes to couple his performing with some teaching.

The personalities of these three individuals are quite varied and likewise their reasons for choral involvement cover a vast spectrum. "I have a lot of friends here and we all have common passions," says Hayden, who appreciates the social atmosphere the most. Isaac cites performances as his most positive experiences. "I really enjoyed doing *Joseph* [and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat] with Donny Osmond, *Mahler's 8th* at Roy Thompson Hall, "the War Requiem," and singing the role of the boy in *Elijah* with a lot of big names." Jacob too recalls good performances, but his major interests lie in the discovery and performance of new and interesting repertoire.

Group 5

The younger participants of the study can be considered “at-risk” singers—those who are currently involved in choral activities, but due to a variety of factors, may choose to cease their involvement. The sentiments are shared by Swanson (1961) who calls this age group the time when “potential basses can be won or lost (p. 48).” While it is possible that the older participants may also experience changes in their lives that will affect their choral involvement, and while these younger singers may plan on being fully committed to choirs for years to come, they are still at a dependent stage in their lives where they may leave singing due to external forces. They are vulnerable to exposure to some of the factors that hinder male choral involvement. The first three singers were secondary school students whose voices have undergone the most difficult parts of the change and have more or less settled.

Kyle is a grade 10 student at a Catholic high school with plans to study biomedical engineering at university. He is in his fourth year with Amabile and now sings bass. He entered the choir as a treble though his voice was changing at the time. Kyle is active in his school’s music program, singing in the vocal jazz ensemble and participating in school musicals. In terms of choral involvement, Kyle was more active when he was younger. “I’ve done less singing since my voice changed. There haven’t been as many opportunities for me to sing.” Despite his involvement in the jazz program at his school, Kyle seems dissatisfied with the choral program. “I didn’t even join the choir. It’s too easy. It wouldn’t be at the level that I’m used to.” Kyle’s current focus is not music, however, but athletics as he is an excellent track and field competitor. From a social perspective, Kyle talks about having two separate groups of friends. “My sports friends know I’m in choir and sometimes they give me a hard time about it, but sometimes my musical friends (non-singers) give me a hard time too.” More than any of the other young singer’s interview, Kyle seems most averse to the idea of continuing in choir. “It’s not one of my favourite activities. I only do it because my mom likes me to stay in it.” Still, Kyle enjoys the sense of pride he gets from a good performance, the choir trips, the sound of a male group, the chance to sing solos, and the skill-building.

Liam is also a grade 10 student at a public high school just outside the city boundaries and the only guy in his vocal class. While Liam has little problem being the only guy among a class of 32 girls, he does say it has some negative aspects as well. “I end up singing alto most of the time,” he adds, explaining that it is not conducive to his vocal development. Liam also does not take kindly to the negative reaction he sometimes gets. “The jocks definitely make fun of me for being in choir.” Despite this, he enjoys his choral activities. He is in his fifth year of singing with Amabile and is proud to be part of his high school choir, which is widely regarded as one of the best in the area. “My friends in choir are great. They’re all goofy,” he says, commenting on the social atmosphere in his groups. Choir is something he hopes to do for the rest of his life. “Will I still be singing 25 years from now? Definitely!”

Marcus is a grade 9 student at a public high school with a vibrant music program, and he seems to be making a point to be involved in every possible ensemble—the junior band, junior jazz band, concert choir, and senior jazz choir. Rehearsals tend to take up much of Marcus’ life. Marcus credits his involvement in many of these groups to the role-modelling of his older brother. “My older brother was involved and that really influenced me to become involved because I really look up to him.” Though Marcus does not take well to having to wake up early for school rehearsals or for church on weekends, he thoroughly enjoys all of the groups. Most of

all he appreciates the various types of music he gets exposed to from all the different ensembles. Marcus hopes to study music at university and become a music teacher or a pilot.

Group 6

The final five participants were all boys currently dealing with changing voices. Nigel, in grade 9, has been singing with Amabile for 6 years. At school, Nigel sings in the concert choir and in the tenor/bass choir as well, but he did not sign up for vocal class. "I'm too lazy to do vocal class," he says. Like Liam, Nigel enjoys the sense of pride gained from belonging to a good ensemble. "The choir at my school is really good, so I get to boast that I'm in it." Unlike Liam, Nigel does not recall experiencing any intense negative sentiments about his singing from his classmates. "I don't have any problems because everybody likes me!" he jokes. Nigel would love to see other boys in his school become involved in choir though. "There are 140 people in the choir and only about 40 guys. I'd like to see way more guys in choir." Nigel also appreciates the mentoring he experiences in the Amabile program, where for an hour a week, high school singers rehearse with university and post-university singers. "It's good because you get a lot of experience singing with them."

Austen, also in grade 9, has sung with Amabile for 5 years, first as a treble for 4 years and now in the tenor/bass ensemble. However, he maintained his treble voice for a long time, even while developing his bass range. At the age of 13, Austen is already one of the lowest singers in the choir, and yet just over a year ago, he was a boy soprano soloist in the opera *Tosca*. Austen most appreciates the friends he makes in choir as many of them are his closest friends in life as well. He is also active in his high school choir, an experience he enjoys because of his "crazy" teacher. In a school choir of 35, Austen is one of 12 boys, but he says he enjoys the sound of a mixed choir. He hopes to continue singing in his adult years.

Paul is a grade 9 student at a Catholic high school and in his second year in Amabile. In his first year, he sang alto in the treble choir but now sings tenor, along with his older brother in the tenor/bass choir. Paul attended an arts school from grades 5 to 8 where he learned to play the viola and sang in choir. Now that he is in high school, he continues to play and sing and is also interested in joining the junior band once he gets more wind instrument experience. "I see myself as a creative person. I don't do art, but I like drama and music. It's something that I'm really good at and it's different from what my friends do." Even though Paul's voice is in the process of changing, he stills receives accolades from his singing from his school music teacher. "My teacher told me that I had a good voice, so I've kept at it." While Paul is still comfortable in either his treble range or his new tenor range, he much prefers singing lower and is looking forward to developing his new voice, and to becoming even more involved in musical activities.

Quinn is another grade 9 student, but unlike his fellow participants, his voice has not yet changed. Quinn is in his second year of singing in the Amabile treble choir, and although he does not yet have any notes in a baritone range, he does notice that his treble range is gradually lowering. "I sang first soprano last year and now I've moved down to second, and I just sing alto at school." He adds, "I'm okay with being one of the oldest in the treble choir." Quinn enjoys his school music experience, large to the efforts of his teacher, whom he describes as "awesome." He also sings in his church choir, which also does concerts sometimes. Quinn most enjoys the aspect of performance. "I love singing in front of audience. I like to be the centre of attention." He hopes to study business, music, and French at university.

Roger, at 11 years of age, is the youngest of all the participants with a changing voice. At his public elementary school he enjoys creative subjects. "There isn't really much music in the

school. We start recorder in grade 5 and then there's band in grade 7. There's no singing." Roger gets his fill of singing from Amabile where he is in his second year. In his first year he sang in the treble choir but experienced great difficulty in matching pitches. The issue turned out to be partly related to Roger's voice going through a change at the time. None of his conductors were really considering that option as he was only 10 years old. Roger is the youngest singer in the tenor/bass choir, but has had a very fulfilling experience singing with the older men. "I really like the happiness of learning parts and I like performances." Roger's father is a choral teacher. He takes private voice lessons and is interested in musical theatre and opera. He spends some of his spare moments working on set models for shows he likes, and hopes to have a career in theatre in his later years.

Finding Common Ground: Analysis and Discussion

While the data generated in the interviews was far more extensive than that described in the previous section, the information shared here is included to support the development of the seven themes that emerged in the study related to why these males continue to sing. While each of these themes intersects with each other, they have been ordered purposefully and hierarchically because each theme seems to lead the singer to a higher level of achievement and autonomy. Males in this study continue to sing because of:

1. Social interaction
 2. Activity and life balance
 3. Musicianship
 4. Feeling valued
 5. Leadership
 6. Emergent perceptions of masculinity—personal, social, and institutional
 7. Paths of resistance
- 1. Social interaction**

The first and most basic theme identified was that of the social atmosphere of the ensemble. For the boys and men in the study, it is not enough to come to sing with a group of other people; it is more about the group of people with whom you sing that keeps the males involved. Boys in the Amabile program seem to become each other's best friends through life, and so involvement in the choir typically continues way past adolescence, if for no other reason than to associate with the same group of people. From a performance perspective, having a group of people who are comfortable interacting with each other socially will aid the choir's performance, just as any team works best if the members can cooperate well. For some singers, especially during adolescence and the difficult voice change, the social aspect is the only reason they remain as singers. It is only later that other values emerge to keep them singing.

2. Activity and life balance

According to these participants, both singing and non-singing activities in choral programs are important to support continued singing. For example, the adolescents in this study who seemed most keen about singing came from vibrant high school programs, while the high school participant who seems most likely to leave singing mentioned that the choral program in

his school was not very good. While activity may be a key component to keep males singing in youth and an essential component of their life balance, the older participants in this study credited singing as adults with providing some sense of positive balance in the complexities of their daily lives. There are several aspects in singing that contribute to a sense of activity and life balance for these singers, such as socializing (as mentioned above), performing challenging and meaningful repertoire, and the feelings of well-being that come as a result of singing, to name a few.

3. Musicianship

The subject of musical development came up in almost every interview with these male singers. As a result of their involvement in singing, each of the participants discussed their growth in music and their aspirations as musicians. They noted that one of the reasons for singing was to become better musicians themselves. In turn, their musical development supports the overall performance level of the ensembles through their own contribution as musician. The high school and university students in particular were keen on being challenged and developing their skills for both personal and ensemble development. At the same time, it was critical to the participants that they feel valued for their musicianship and it was primarily their musical contributions in the ensembles that kept them singing.

4. Feeling valued

Feeling valued and receiving the positive reinforcement associated with being an important and contributing musician in the ensemble were key factors to each of these respondents. This reinforcement comes not only from conductor, but notably from peers within the organization. For many boys and young men, the most influential peer reinforcement comes from outside the ensemble and, in our current society is often negative, homophobic, and emasculating. Young men who sing require constant reinforcement and encouragement to overcome the negative stereotypes they have to endure on a daily basis. A parent of one of the young men in this study noted, "Some of these kids get way too much bullying at school because they enjoy singing. And for some, choir is a refuge from all the teasing and abuse they receive on a daily basis for being singers."

5. Leadership

Positive reinforcement is the one means to support young males 10, 13, or even 16, who are insecure about themselves, their bodies, and where they fit in the various social systems, until they reach at point where they emerge as leaders of their own selves, and then leaders of other musicians and peers. It takes courage to sing in current society as a male, and that courage usually develops into self-confidence, strength of inner character, and the emergence of leadership characteristics, which, in turn, leads to a deeper commitment to the activity of singing.

6. Emergent perceptions of masculinity

Permeating all of this discussion is the question of the male singer always interrogating who he is and who he is becoming. In fact, participants in these interviews often report that while

their comments may support this study, the questions also require them to interrogate themselves as to who they are, not only as musicians but as men as well. In the growing body of literature on masculinities in the wider research world, there is no doubt that there are competing images of masculinity especially in the influential media that impacts society. Males who sing are constantly exposed to these conflicting conceptions as they engage in such a non-traditional activity as singing, and find themselves constantly questioning their developing sense of masculine identity. As they observe social and institutional norms of masculinities according to traditional masculine hierarchies, male singers find themselves questioning traditional ideologies and trying to make sense of their place in male hierarchies. Adler (2002) created a typology of male singers he interviewed that followed the traditional hierarchy of masculinities, ranging from the jock singers, to the social singers, the social isolates, the neutral singers, the non-singers, the partial engagers, and the bad-ass singers. Systemic and institutional values and perceptions by others of themselves as males and as singers are significant themes. And as young male singers work through this contested terrain they learn to intrinsically value their art of singing—or not.

7. Paths of resistance

Once males value themselves as singers and they are committed to the art of singing as a normal and normative activity for males, they find ways to resist and subvert societal norms traditionally associated with male singing. As the very basic level, they are open and confident about being seen as singers in the larger public and ignore any negativity they may receive from others. As one of the young men with whom we work said:

It was grade 11 when I decided to *out* myself as a singer. I am not gay but was always accused of being gay because I sang in the school choir. I joined the school junior football to prove that I was a real man—and maybe to prove it to myself too. Finally I decided that my best armour was just to be myself and to be open about what I do and who I am. The remarkable thing was it was relatively painless thing to do, and I was accepted and had the same friends in and out of choir (personal communication).

At the next phase, they find ways to challenge the norms—at the very basic level through being very public about their art and the highest level by recruiting others to join them. Once they intellectualize what it is they do and why they sing, their commitment grows into a true quality of life.

Summary: Finding Your Voice and Negotiating an Identity as a Male Singer

The males in this study have been open and explicit about why they choose to sing. We have taken the participants' commentary and elicited a series of themes, which we ordered hierarchically to show a correspondence to the levels of commitment to singing. We need to understand each theme as one step in a hierarchy toward male independence, interdependence, and valuing of singing as an integral activity of living. The subsequent and final step in this paper is to take these themes as outlined above (that is, Social interaction; Activity and life balance; Musicianship; Feeling valued; Leadership; Emergent perceptions of masculinity; and Paths of resistance) and merge them into a conceptual framework that shows the navigational

complexity and path of singing for males. In developing this conceptual framework, we would maintain that there are two basic, hierarchical planes of involvement in the normal patterns of male singing.

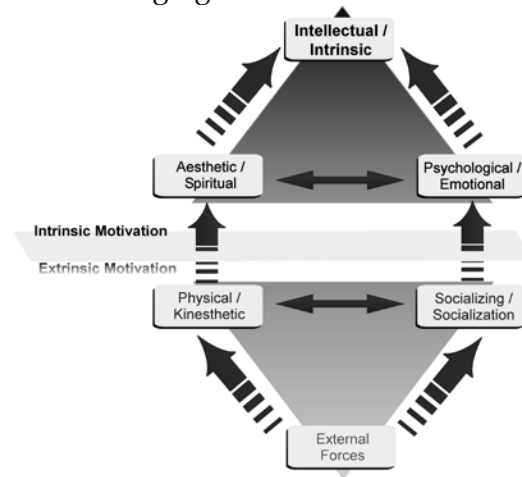
First, there is participation on a lower plane that is based on dependency, routine, enforced participation, and basic transference of the musical experience—or, best described as commitment that is based on compliance and curiosity. Usually a boy's mother will have decided that either her son has some talent as a musician or that her son can benefit from involvement in a musical group and chooses a boychoir for any number of reasons (Swanson, 1961, p. 63).² We frequently see resistance on the part of many boys who come to choir and more often than not, they will tell us—for several years—that they are in choir only because they were forced to be there. This resistant compliance, however, requires acquiescence on the part of the chorister and almost always inspires some curiosity in the singer, providing an opportunity for the artistic director, staff, and choristers to engage the boy or young man in the ensemble. While many aspects within the choir are going on at the same time, this is when social activities that are physical and energetic are needed to engage the chorister in the life of the choir and he meets new friends and begins to forge new friendships with other singers. The chorister begins to commit to the choir (or not) in a variety of ways, not through just singing in the traditional choral environment where he is passively engaged in the process. As involvement deepens, some level of commitment begins to emerge, and for each chorister the timing of the commitment varies by age, personality, sense of innate independence, and the connection in the various stages as noted above.

At this level, we must always remind ourselves that the power to participate resides not with the young male singer, but with an authority figure such as parent or teacher. And, depending on the child, the experience, while involuntary may still be enjoyable which we may confuse with commitment. At the same time, the educational process in the choir is most likely based on a highly structured hierarchical model between teacher/conductor and the boys, with the mode of teaching mainly through transmission of knowledge. In this mode of learning, the conductor needs to work consciously to develop socialization activities within the rehearsal and outside the formal rehearsal or performance context in order for the new and young singers to feel part of and to begin to bond with the group, if not the activity of singing, so they begin to value the activity in their lives and to work on their own sense of musicianship. As they gain confidence in themselves and begin to value themselves, they will develop leadership initiatives that enhance their involvement and increase their sense of value to the ensemble and to their peers. Their commitment to singing, peers, and organization will increase as they move up through the planes of involvement.

At some point, the singer's commitment needs to move to a higher plane based on emergent independence, a sense of personal fulfillment, self-actualization, and transformation of musical experience. For most singers, the connection is with the ensemble, but for some, the connection and commitment are to the art of singing—and the artistic director needs to be able to recognize where the level of commitment lies for each singer. The goal is ultimately to move the commitment to the art of singing and making music to an aesthetic experience at the spiritual level of the individual. It is critical to remember that male singers—and perhaps all singers in choirs—still require the same activities and commitments from the lower planes such as regular opportunities for socialization, excellent and challenging repertoire, interesting performance opportunities, and now even the chance to show their leadership skills as rehearsal and performance conductors themselves of the ensemble as they choose, arrange, and even compose the music of performance.

Finding a Voice

For males to continue singing, they need support to find a path in singing where they can develop both a sense of independence with self and music and a sense of identity and leadership significance with the music and within the ensemble. At this point, their level of commitment becomes forged in dedication, obligation, responsibility, and devotion to the ensemble and/or the art of singing. At the same time, they will begin to have a sense of comfort and confidence of who they are growing into as men, and will take whatever path needed to reach a plane of self-actualization. Through this process they will likely find their *voice* and a continued commitment to the art of singing.



Limitations of the Study

- Males in study come from privileged environments where parents care to provide opportunities
- Working in well-established choral organization as young boy singers

Endnotes

1. André Heywood is the conductor of an SATB adult church choir and has been a member of the Amabile Boys' and Men's Choirs for the past 12 years. Carol Beynon is one of the founding directors of the Amabile Boys' and Men's Choirs and has worked with the choirs for the past 17 years. In interviewing singers we know and conduct, we acknowledge that there may be a perception of us as figures of power and control. However, these choirs are purely voluntary endeavours and we made very clear that participation was entirely voluntary. The participants were keen to be involved and seemed comfortable with the questions and process throughout the data gathering process.
2. From extensive experience with recruiting boys and young men to singing in the Amabile organization, we note that almost always it is the mother who decides that her son should be involved in the boys' choir program. In fact, we frequently meet with resistance from the father who is at best ambivalent about his son's participation or more frequently, opposed to his participation. This topic is certainly worthy of study in the future.

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