

‘Singing: Interdisciplinary perspectives on a natural human expressive outlet’

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Editorial

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The title of this issue was inspired by a seven-year research project led by Dr. Annabel Cohen of the University of Prince Edward Island. Entitled Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS). The project is supported as a Major Collaborative Research Initiative by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It involves over 70 researchers from across Canada and around the world, all committed to investigating the phenomenon of singing. A co-investigator in the project, the guest editor is grateful to Dr. Cohen for permitting him to organize this issue around the three AIRS themes and to use her descriptive text to explain the scope of the project which coincides with the scope of this issue, focusing on the origins and implications of singing, a natural, human expressive outlet.ⁱ

DEVELOPMENT OF SINGING

Five papers address the development of singing with particular reference to the sub-theme on the acquisition of singing – “determining the universal, culture specific, and idiosyncratic aspects of the development of singing.”ⁱⁱ Colleen Whidden is interested in understanding the complex influences affecting participation in singing. Although singing is widely considered an enjoyable activity, some have self-identified as non-singers. Widden describes a study of non-singers of both sexes and varied ethnic backgrounds and ages. She concludes that participation in singing is “influenced by such ecologies as cultural perception, economic situation, familial attitude, historical context, and educational circumstance.”

Taking a different vantage point on the same issue, Carol Beynon and André-Louis Heywood write about “Making their Voices Heard: A Social Constructivist Study of Youth and Men Who Choose to Sing (Canada and US).” In the light of literature outlining the barriers that have inhibited males from singing in western cultures, they interviewed eighteen boys and men to gain perspective on their choice to sing.

Completing the section on factors affecting engagement in music generally and singing specifically, Eve Ruddock looks at how “Societal Judgment Silences Singers.” Participants in her study reveal that “pathological educational practice continues to estrange individuals” from this natural human activity.

In contrast to the inhibitions affecting singers and non-singers in western culture, two papers examine culturally robust genres that resonate with specific populations, both urban and rural. Eugene Dairianathan and Chia Wei Khuan examine the phenomenon of Shuo Chang (说唱): giving voice *to* and *through* Xinyao (新谣), a musical practice in Singapore. With reference to this vocal genre accompanied by guitars that originated the early 1980s, they ask such questions as, “How and why did Xinyao suddenly emerge and only among teenage students?” and “Why was it available in Mandarin and not Chinese dialects?”

In their paper “As the Wind Blows: Lament Lullabies of Akçaeniş,” Sandra E. Trehub and Rebekah L. Prince describe the melodies and lyrics of songs of women living in rural Turkey. In a tradition that readily re-uses simple melodies found within and across musical genres, these songs are identifiable by lyrics that are associated with individual singers and that fulfil an important function in the lives of Akçaeniş women.

EDUCATION

In a paper entitled “The playfulness of participatory singing performance”, Anne Power contributes to the second theme of the AIRS project – education, specifically “teaching singing and educating through singing.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Hers is one of three papers dealing with this theme. Making a distinction between presentational performance, characterized by a clear division between performer and audience and participatory performance in which there is no such division, Power proposes that both kinds of performance can be found in community singing. Using data derived from interviews with 33 choir participants, she notes that the predominant sense of playful discovery generated within participatory performance can carry over into presentational performance.

A second paper related to the theme of education is Diane Hughes’ contribution, “They just don’t sing along: teaching a song or teaching how to sing.” Her research into teacher perspectives on singing in Australian schools revealed a dichotomy between singing activities in which students are taught how to use the singing voice and those in which singing is not accompanied by this instruction. Pointing out that “facilitating a singing activity does not in itself constitute teaching singing, nor does it guarantee that the singing will be developmentally appropriate”, she advocates science-based strategies for student vocal development.

Anna Liduma presents an overview of how Latvian pedagogues promote the development of pre-schoolers’ vocal range and singing ability. Taking into account the related literature and her own study, she advocates adopting an individual approach to the development of each child’s voice.

SINGING AND WELL-BEING

Five papers relate to the third AIRS theme, Singing and Well-being, addressing various sub-themes in this category. Godfrey Baldacchino, gives a glimpse into how his research within the AIRS project has begun to investigate how singing can contribute to cultural understanding. His paper, on "Islands, Songs, Singers and Singing", explains how the island song project speaks to connections among islands, song and interculturality. Among other questions, he asks how, and to what extent, island song and singing may be "socially constructed 'in place'; an outcome of particular island contexts and concerns." He is also interested in the ways in which island song and singing may "portray and convey the concerns of island societies" such as environmental degradation and how they may reinforce island stereotypes.

The sub-theme of "singing and health"^{iv} is addressed in this issue by four papers. The contribution of Stephen Clift, Jennifer Nicol, Matthew Raisbeck, Christine Whitmore and Ian Morrison "Group singing, wellbeing and health: A systematic review", provides a context within which other papers can be situated. Clift examines 48 studies published in English from 1985. Despite the diversity and variable quality of the literature, he is able to conclude that "there are indications that singing can be beneficial for psychological and social wellbeing."

Elizabeth Slottje has also contributed a review of the literature focussing on the community choir. Slottje is interested in how culture develops from the child's extended dependency on the mother to cultural activities such as the community choir. She argues that the community choir "encourages a sense of belonging where high musical standards can be achieved."

"Harmony in The Community: Group Perspectives on the Health Benefits of Singing" by Kristy-Lee Riley and Heather Gridley describes a survey completed by 220 singing group members across the Australian state of Victoria. Riley and Gridley found that group singing led to "a sense of joy and accomplishment, denser social and friendship networks, increased satisfaction with lifestyle and sense of safety within a community and enhanced social capital through community participation."

An innovative perspective is brought to this sub-theme by Carol Dore, Janice Pascal and Susan Gillett in their paper "Community singing and social work: A new partnership." Although social work is not usually associated with community singing, Dore, Pascal and Gillett propose that "the goals of social work are compatible with the tradition of the community arts movement." Their research aims to "move towards theorizing community singing as a social work intervention."

ⁱ AIRS (2009) Website text. Accessed on-line.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid