

The Community Choir

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ABSTRACT

Literature reveals the impact of singing on mental, physical, social and cultural health. It is argued that culture emanates from an extended dependency on the mother where the child develops a rich symbolic life. The opportunity for play diminishes in capital economies, and government policy increasingly recognizes the role of cultural activities such as singing that promote social connections. The antecedent of the community choir is explored with singing highlighted as a catalyst for social change. The study discussed finds that the community choir encourages a sense of belonging with health and wellbeing benefits, and where high musical standards can be achieved. Singing is identified as a research method applied by the scholar practitioner, which is a model open to further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws from my research investigating the community choir, which analysed questionnaire responses from four Directors and forty one choir members belonging to five choirs across regional NSW and metropolitan Sydney. The investigation found enjoyment to be a primary motive for joining and continued commitment, and respondents also indicated group cohesion and a sense of belonging as contributing to personal wellbeing.

The general view of the choir member is that the individual is part of a cooperative where harmonious relationships achieve musical goals. The research also shows that vocal training and prior musical experience is not a significant factor to membership. The majority of respondents reported no formal musical training before joining, although continued membership is an opportunity to enhance musical skills. Over time the community choir can become restrictive where less experienced participants can be viewed as potentially jeopardising a finely tuned balance created over many years. The following paper outlines literature and research on singing which provided the context for the study.

SINGING HEALTH

Studies validate the impact of singing on physical and mental health. Reports demonstrate that singing heightens breathing and body awareness, tones abdominal muscles, can bolster the immune system, lowers blood pressure, relaxes muscles and improves cardiac output (Stacy, Brittain & Kerr 2002; Clift & Hancox 2001; Hunter 1999). Research by British psychologist Neil Todd established that the sacculus, an organ in the inner ear responds to frequencies commonly found in music connected to a part of the brain responsible for registering pleasure (Marks 2000).

A US study measuring the Immunoglobulin A (IgA) and cortisol levels in the saliva of 32 singers before and after two rehearsals and public performances, in conjunction with analysis of qualitative participant responses, demonstrates the benefits of singing in coping with performance as well as life stress (Beck et al. 2000).

The effect of singing on mood was researched at the Sydney University National Voice Centre, premised on previous findings that music produces emotional reactions in listeners and that these responses are accompanied by significant physiological changes. Based on mood profile questionnaire responses, the researchers found that the singing group compared to the listening group showed greater positive changes in mood. The study maintains, 'it is surprising that so little research attention has been paid to the impact of singing on human emotion or mood, given the importance that is attached to singing in a number of cultures' (Unwin, Kenny & Davis 2002, p.176).

A Swedish study investigating 12,675 people concluded that singing can contribute to living longer (Bygren, Konlaan & Johansson 1996). Choir members corroborate this finding, where one participant in particular speaks of being diagnosed with a brain tumour and reports that singing has contributed towards her recovery, while another participant with bi-polar attests that singing mediates her distress and increases her feelings of self worth (Tattam 2003).

Professionals in the field of trauma report the effect of developing and implementing vocal training that can unlock anxiety and tension. McNamara (1997) details rehabilitation voice workshops conducted by psychologists,

education and field workers at the front line of war ravaged Bosnia. A collection of essays by noted women experienced in voice work describe their insights from training methods developed, which strengthen the voice and that have regenerative impact (Armstrong & Pearson 1992). Rodenburg (1996) also recounts her practice of training professionals to realise their vocal potential and outlines practical techniques that can unlock anxiety and tension, which corroborates Linklater's (1976) examination of vocal methods designed to release the body's deep seated habits which can inhibit natural vocal ability.

Studies investigating response to the mother's voice in the final pre-birth trimester demonstrate that vocal sounds are linked to the emotional, endocrine system (Tattam 2003). The biology of humans differs from that of other animal species in that cultural expression is viewed as emanating from the extension of the symbolic relationship initially shared with the mother (Dissanayake 2000). British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) examines the extended dependence on the mother and concludes that during this phase, the child does not discriminate between subjective experience and objective reality, believing in its own omnipotence. Symbolic objects sustain an imagined life during the transition phase of separating the inner life from external experience, and Winnicott argues that the aesthetic dimension of cultural expression is a direct response to this encroaching 'reality principle' (Fuller 1983, p.16).

It is an increasingly common feature of capital economies that occasions to play diminish with the transition from childhood to adolescence with the requisite graduation into adulthood and its associated economic preoccupations (Lohrey 1997). A life rich in cultural symbolic expression can provide an antidote to the disconnection people often feel in capital economies.

SINGING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Research on singing that corroborates the impact on physical, mental and social health has contributed to the growth of community choirs in Australia. For example the Victorian government has invested in training community choir leaders in programs that link art and health with the aim of building communities. A review of these programs shows that singing promotes social connections where participants express feelings of liberation in literally finding voice (Tattam 2003).

Another case study is the Adelaide based *Tutti Ensemble* that evolved from a response to a need expressed by residents of an intellectual disability centre for a singing group. Since its inception in 1997, the group has grown to over a hundred members mostly from the wider community, attracted to the ensemble by the creative challenge of developing repertoire and pieces that are inclusive. The ensemble provides a model of social inclusion and artistic excellence that meets the cultural and social needs of a widely diverse group of people (Rix 2004).

In the globalised economy, the elevation of art above the common contrasts with traditional cultures where individuals are selected to develop mastery of a given skill that serves a collective purpose (Barnwell 1992, p.56). Songs in pre literate and non-industrialised societies chronicle the everyday, with the songs mutating each time they are sung (Armstrong 1992). For example folk songs brought to America by indentured servants migrating from Scotland and Ireland changed to reflect the poor and difficult environment settled, and the hardship and struggle experienced (McClatch 2000). The film *Lost Highway* (2003) documents how recordings in the 1920s drew popular attention to the songs of the Appalachian Mountains pre-empting the transition of the music to the

commercial country-western music scene. However there has been a contemporary resurgence to the participatory foundations of this style of folk music.

Community singing bonds people in a sense of social unity and purpose, which is believed to have provided the impetus for Switzerland's modern structure as a democratic state. The Berlin *Singakademie* was established in 1787 after court musician Carl Friedrich Fasch began conducting singing classes for wealthy bourgeois wives. Fasch set up classes to supplement his income that had become seriously dented by the Seven Years War, and within four years the academy accepted men. Over the next 40 years similar choirs sprang up throughout Germany, Switzerland and later in France, Austria and England (Lohrey 1997).

SINGING RELIGION

The practise of collective singing draws from the Christian hymnal where religion has played a significant role. The Italian term *a cappella* originally applied to early 17th century choral music although the belief arose from reconstruction by historians, that the Christian fathers banished instruments viewed to be associated with the devil. The unadorned human voice was seen as the only pure vehicle for worshipping God and 'with the Reformation, popular religious songs and chorales were sung by the Lutheran congregation unaccompanied' (Backhouse 1995, p.166).

More recent research explains that friars practising contrafactum (the absence of contrast between secular and sacred styles of music from the early 13th century) frequently introduced religious text to popular secular songs with the argument 'Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?' The Red Book of Ossory (Bishop's Palace, Kilkenny) includes 60 Latin lyrics in two hands of the late C14 as an example of this move from secular to religious text, with the accompanying note:

Be advised, reader, that the Bishop of Ossory [the Franciscan friar Richard de Ledrede, d. 1360] has made these songs for the vicars of the cathedral church, for the priests, and for the clerks, to be sung on the important holidays and at celebrations in order that their throats and mouths, consecrated to God, may not be polluted by songs which are lewd, secular, and associated with revelry, and, since they are trained singers, let them provide themselves with suitable tunes according to what these sets of words require. (Wessex Parallel WebTexts 2004).

A *cappella* has come to classify any music sung by the unaccompanied voice. According to Jay Warner's *Billboard Book of American Singing Groups* (1992) the contemporary application of the term *a cappella* was coined by Irving 'Slim' Rose, 'a record company owner looking for a catchy new word to describe his release of some unaccompanied tracks by the Nutmegs' (Backhouse 1995, p.169).

Contemporary *a cappella* derives from black Gospel singing, which is a style that continues to flourish. It is an oral tradition due to singers generally having no formal musical training. Black gospel is subdivided into a number of genres, beginning historically with the Spiritual, Concert/Arranged Spiritual, Jubilee, Hymn and Gospel Song (Backhouse 1995). Black religious quartet singing, a sub genre of black gospel music, became popular in the 1920s as community-based church oriented unaccompanied singing. The two distinct folk and jubilee styles thrived concurrently between 1920 and 1950, confined to specific geographic locations and distinguished by

harmonic and rhythmic variations. The gospel style of the 1950s succeeded the folk and jubilee quartets as it was more universal and is the era when the black religious quartet reached its peak in popularity (Dent 1997).

The community choir repertoire draws on songs from South Africa and Polynesia where white missionaries along with touring black minstrels introduced four part harmonies. The Virginia Jubilee Singers caused a sensation on their tour to Africa and Australasia in the late 1800s, with a fusion occurring between traditional styles of singing and Christian based harmonies. A 1939 recording by Zulu tribesman Solomon Linda with his group the Evening Birds entitled *Mbube* surfaced in the United States as 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight. The song became such a hit that it soon came to refer to the whole style: Strong bass, falsetto solos and I-IV-I-V7 chord pattern. Joseph Shabalala founder of *Ladysmith Black Mambazo* is recognised as Solomon Linda's successor, and has refined the earlier four part harmony to what is now known as 'iscathimiya' meaning 'tip toe guys' reflecting the ornate movements which accompany the group's songs (Backhouse 1995).

The community choir founded on a folk style of participatory singing can disguise a level of musical training and vocal technique required to achieve high performance standards. For instance Bernice Reagon (1993), founding member and Director of *Sweet Honey in the Rock* accords a strict approach to choir rehearsal as a requisite to the success of the group. She aims for singing as a:

... discipline, as a philosophical guide and a force in one's life...I searched in myself...for an honesty and integrity of sound that many of my workshop participants knew nothing about. They would give me melody, harmony, rhythm, and style, and I kept asking for the rest of it. I wanted to feel and hear their soul in their singing. The talk of older women in church kept coming back to me as a standard, 'The child's got a nice voice but I don't feel nothing' (15).

SONGS OF CHANGE

The African American musical tradition is inherently multidimensional emanating from conditions of oppression. From the 1830s African slaves and their supporters developed a secret network called the Underground Railroad. Songs such as *Steal Away* coded messages that were unable to be openly transmitted where the words *Jesus* and *home* symbolise yearned for freedom in the North, and *I ain't got long to stay here* meaning flight northward was imminent (Wright & Edward 2002, p.1).

Songs encoding subversive social and political messages can draw a community of participants in solidarity, giving voice to those who have become marginalised from mainstream social, political and cultural engagement. The documentary *Let Freedom Sing! How Music Inspired the Civil Rights Movement* (2009) demonstrates how music mobilised social change with songs that carried cultural political meaning. The civil rights anthem *We Shall Overcome* for example evolved from two gospel songs typical of slave 'sorrow songs' where the words are ambiguous and the meanings multilayered. *I will overcome* and *I'll be All Right* in Protestant theology conveyed the message that the individual is the site of redemption. The song evolved from carrying a message of hope, to cultural political expression when the black Food and Tobacco Workers Union adopted it in the 1930s and 40s. 'The politics here are contained in the memory and the message, not in the "we" created through collective singing' (Eyerman 2002, pp. 447-448).

The documentary *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (Hirsch 2002) traces the role that singing has played in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid. The process of dispossession, urbanisation and consequent labor migration in South Africa has seen a shift in how the varying tribal groups inhabiting alien urban environments have organised choral competitions dating from the 1930s that serve to express regional and group identity (Erlmann 1998).

African American quartet singing has provided the bedrock on which the modern style of *a cappella* singing is founded. In the late 19th century, African Americans generally held the barber trade and strong evidence suggests that the white secular Barbershop style of quartet singing grew from these origins (Backhouse 1995). The American doo wop and barbershop quartet forms of unaccompanied singing have been overtaken by contemporary styles which feature the voice imitating rhythmic and timbral qualities of instruments, notably by performers *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, *Take 6* and *Bobby McFerrin* (Eichenwald 1997).

The film *Too Close To Heaven: The History of Gospel Music* (1997) depicts the transition of American gospel music from religious, congregational style singing to secular popular music. The style of singing has mutated further where:

...rap music has signified the rise of a generation still rooted in tradition but shaped by a new set of values and informed by an ever-changing technology. They have given up the melody and gone back to basics with the rhythm. The rhythmic song-speech of the African griot, Black preacher and Black orator are all there... (Barnwell 1992, p.57).

The contemporary community choir draws from a repertoire steeped in Christian tradition that can signify extemporal, non-specific spiritual analogies of release from psychological burdens. These historic and cultural foundations can communicate messages of transcendence to those participating as either member or listener (Unwin, Kenny & Davis 2002). The community choir today is viewed as a place to 'express unconditional love, of being free from resentment and recrimination, from the burdens of history or anxieties about the future: of being, simply, and for the moment, free' (Lohrey 1997, p.182).

Globally there has been a growing trend in the popularity of community singing due in part to the commercial success of the style and the media's interest in the changing *a cappella* scene. Tattam (2003) asserts that the growth of community choirs singing *a cappella* with gusto rather than chanting hymns prove to be a tonic for the mind and body and the buzz is out about the participatory arts.

In Australia Clarke (1995) confirms that the ordinary untrained non-professional can achieve proficient musical ability where choir members also attest to the ancient joy of singing that gets the group on a high. Clarke's report on Sydney based *a cappella* community choir Café of the Gate of Salvation, highlights the group as a successful social and musical experiment that emanates a sense of community while still being committed to a degree of excellence.

SINGING RESEARCH

The literature outlines a view of the impact of singing on mental, physical, social and cultural health. However the diversity in theoretical and methodological approaches in research conducted on the impact of participatory singing to date, indicates an academic field in the early stages of development (Clift et al. 2010).

The study I conducted investigating the community choir (Slottje 2004) corroborates the literature reporting increased sense of wellbeing as a benefit of participating in collective singing. The choir is found to address individual members' physical and emotional wellbeing, with fun and enjoyment featured as principal dynamics in the longevity of the choirs investigated. Participants generally concur that singing is a vital form of self-expression contributing to their physical and emotional wellbeing where enjoyment of singing is emphasised as a motive of membership, primary to public performance.

The community choir's overall musical creative output directly relates to the level of social cohesion and personal enjoyment experienced by individual participants. Members tend to be attracted to certain choirs, contingent on the group's social life, creative output, and to an extent the style of repertoire. The study confirms that applied vocal techniques and musical training can lead to enhanced individual and group musical ability. However there appears to be a tendency with long standing choirs advanced in musical skill, to become restrictive to new members.

The role of the choir leader is highlighted where there is potential to grow a group's musical proficiency. The four directors surveyed hold tertiary musical qualifications, however all had little to no choral directing experience prior to being involved with their respective choirs. Although the directors viewed their community choirs as essentially democratic, they recognised their leadership role in being responsible for the artistic direction that required competence, so as not to compromise the social and musical life of the group.

CONCLUSION

The study discussed outlines evidence supporting the premise that singing facilitates physiological, psychological and social benefits, as well as potentially triggering cultural change. The research also shows that the community choir provides opportunity for individual and collective musical skills enhancement. This investigation provided a foundation for my doctoral dissertation (2009) that describes singing as a narrative art where it is argued that meaning is embedded in pre-lingual codes that transmit knowledge cross culturally and trans-generationally. It is proposed that singing as applied by the scholar practitioner in the production and analysis of creative works is a research model open to further investigation.

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