

Learning through participatory singing performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores different kinds of performance found in community singing. Through data consisting of reflections from members of choirs and choral directors, a number of features are examined that relate to the lens of participatory performance (Turino, 2008). The research design gives rise to some findings about the participants' and choir directors' views about learning involved in community singing.

LEARNING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY SINGING PERFORMANCE

There has been a renewal of interest in community choirs in the last twenty years in Australia. For some people this arises from a desire to improve their musical knowledge and skill. Acquiring vocal technique involves developing a special form of the musical intelligence (Gardner 1993) in which the singing voice is used in skilled ways for goal-directed musical purposes (Rao 1991). Developments in voice science, technology and research now present a clear understanding of what is needed to promote best voice use and maintain vocal health (Callaghan, Hughes & Power 2009). Through the advent and development of voice science in the latter decades of the 20th century, the larynx can even be viewed “in operation” and that awareness potentially leads to understanding and greater care taken in singing (Phonetics 2008). While there is a need for such care for the vocal mechanism, there are often other priorities that engage attention in community choirs where social outcomes, including building inter-cultural acceptance and strengthening a community ethos, may be a focus as singing is ‘one of the glues of cohesive culture’ (Goodkin 2005, p. 29).

In this paper, I want to focus on two kinds of performance that are found in community singing. A difference exists between *presentational performance* where the roles of audience and artist are clearly defined and *participatory performance* where there is no audience-artist distinction (Turino 2008). Turino, in fact, considers these two kinds of music making as different fields of artistic practice. He identifies certain features found in participatory performance. First, as there are only participants and potential participants, there is a concentration on the other people in the performance and on the activity in and of itself. Second, there is an ethos that everyone can, and should, take part, without any judgment about ability. Third, the inclusion of people with a wide range of abilities creates a sense of welcome but also may provide constraints or limits on what can take place musically. For example this may mean the music will be of a repetitive nature as it will then be memorable and require less attention to notation. Consequently, participatory performances usually include a variety of roles demanding different levels of specialisation so that people can join in at a level that ‘offers the right balance of challenge and acquired skills’ (Turino 2008, p. 31). The heightened concentration on the other participants is one reason that participatory music is such a force for social bonding. *Presentational performance*, in contrast, refers to situations where one group of people, the artists, prepares and provides music for another group of people, the audience. The notion of artist encompasses someone who has developed their skills and expressive ability over time. It should be noted that these two kinds of performance are not intended by Turino to be mutually exclusive and that these different fields of artistic practice can operate at different times in communal music-making.

Community music is defined as ‘music-making practices that strengthen a community and support its musicians’ (Whiteoak & Scott-Maxwell 2003, p. 158). Within that broad definition, there are many general benefits that encompass skill development, pride in cultural identity, creativity, celebration of cultural diversity and the creation of pathways for young people (Cahill 1998). In terms of skill development, a developmental model of singing practices acknowledges that singing skills progress (Thurman & Welch 2000). The act of singing involves the whole person: the body responding in particular ways to express thoughts and emotions, verbal meanings and musical meanings. While singing involves language and music, the body registers internal sensations of vibration, movement and sound, and it attends and responds to external sensations such as the sound of its own voice and the sight and sound of other singers and instrumental accompaniment (Callaghan 2000, p. 16). Personal development is also facilitated through membership of a musical community (Campbell 1998). People’s passions and intense commitment are key factors in the making of community (Berg 2002).

Research on learning involves investigating the human relationships within which learning occurs (Rogoff 1994; Renshaw 2002). In the field of music pedagogy, research has found that pre-service teachers best understand creative music teaching and learning through fostering relationships in group activities that promote creativity and show students that their ideas are valued (Power & Auh 2001). Mentoring experiences also have something to add to the human relationships in which learning takes place. Mentoring is a developmental process, aimed at sharing knowledge and encouraging individual development. The relationship between mentor and mentee creates a non-judgmental and safe environment, based on empathy, trust and mutual respect. It is designed to foster personal growth and to help an individual place their creative development in a wider cultural, social and educational context (Renshaw 2009). There are funds of knowledge that learners bring to collaborative learning experiences (Moll et al. 1992). Participation in music activities as both lifelong learning and leisure may occur because of the opportunities for meaningful learning experiences and practical enjoyment of creative activity that they offer (Kelly 1990; Aspin 2000).

Collaborative learning experiences have aroused significant interest from international and local government authorities investigating the benefits of community arts experiences. The European Commission Green Paper (2010) calls for 'more intensive, systematic and wide-ranging collaboration between the arts, academic and scientific institutions' (p.9). In the United Kingdom, there is a particular focus on developing musical leaders within the community supporting participation and talent development (Price 2005). In Australia, local government acknowledges the essential connections between art, culture, human rights, community, governance, democracy and social policy (Hawkes 2002). In Victoria, Australia, Hawkes theorises the foundation of community building as lying in the participatory arts, uniquely providing tangible evidence of the power and joy of co-operation and states:

Support of professional practice is a laudable policy, but far more important is offering all citizens and their offspring the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice - to make their own culture. Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, well-being and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes (Hawkes 2002, p 2).

Making music has a restorative power that helps in the processing of problems and in galvanising a person's creative response (Austin 2002; Diamond 2002; Zubovic 2003). Music-based cultures have a central role for the development of cultural belonging, agency and self-esteem among disaffected youth (Green 2001). Studies relate leisure activities to the framing of self-identity and the pride that is a by-product of that (Heath & McLaughlin 1993). It has been found that participation in leisure activities can provide opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth (Kelly 1990). Additional research suggests that the significance of leisure activities for youth lies in the opportunities to engage in transitional activities that link play and adult responsibilities. Furthermore, transitional activities may not only motivate participants but also 'require discipline and engagement in a world of symbols and knowledge' (Kleiber, Larson & Csikzentmihalyi 1986, p. 175).

Broadly, the study is located within current socio-cultural connectionist theories of learning. These theories are particularly concerned with the ways social networks facilitate the development and exchange of resources, especially knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). This paper draws on research conducted with community choirs led by two directors. In doing so, the paper provides critical reflection on *presentational* and *participatory performance*. The question that motivated this research was to find what characterised learning through community music making and to examine such learning through the lens of *participatory* and *presentational performance*. This overarching question about learning raised associated questions about social experience and life fulfilment. In

summary, this research provides new information about knowledge accessed for individual advantage, and verification of other research about knowledges accessed for community advantage (Heath & McLaughlin 1993; Cahill 1998; Campbell 1998; Green 2001). It confirms the importance of nurture and support found in community music making; and it aligns with the key characteristics of community networks, identified by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992). Moll and colleagues see the network of the community as thick and multi-stranded, having knowledge about the learner in many spheres of activity.

METHOD

The research was conducted by interviewing 31 participants randomly selected in two choirs with a schedule of five questions. The two organisations were identified from local council websites and through the Council Arts and Events Co-ordinators. The rationale for selection involved the inclusion of both a female (Choir A) and a mixed voice choir (Choir B) who rehearsed in areas within an hour's travelling time from the researcher's workplace. Other criteria involved the choirs performing for community events and being led by different directors. Participants included both choral directors and choir members. Questions were addressed to both directors and choir members who might be expected to have different views about learning goals, social experiences and the outcomes of community music making. Interviews took place at rehearsal venues. The project was conducted over two years (2008-9) in Western Sydney.

Choir A

The female choir (about 40 singers) explored the sound particular to Bulgarian folk song, with many women identifying with this cultural heritage. The repertoire included Balkan and Bulgarian folksongs (and most recently Italian folksongs). The choir director is an expert in the Bulgarian vocal style. She began with a study of classical singing in both Sydney and London. In 2008 she completed a Master of Applied Science (music research) degree at the Australian Centre for Applied Research in Music Performance at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney University. Her research was an in-depth study of the characteristics of Bulgarian Folk Singing. In the choir she directs, harmonies were in at least three parts. The singers showed themselves as vocally competent. The average age of the choir members was 32. Some of the members had been with the choir for eight or more years. They had developed vocal experience and were observed to be capable of quickly following the choir director's instructions.

Choir B

The mixed voice choir (42 members) was working during the interview period on a cappella repertoire that included African songs such as Sho Sholoza and Sinje-nje-nje (Traditional Zulu). The choir director has performed and taught choral singing throughout Australia and internationally for over 15 years. After her own Conservatorium training she began her singing career with a highly acclaimed female vocal quartet for which she contributed original music and arrangements. The choir clearly enjoyed music that was rhythmically energetic and that encouraged them to move as they sang. They were drawn from a homogeneous ethno-linguistic community. Harmonies were mostly two-part, with the occasional addition of a solo line. Ages of the choir members ranged from 19 to 62. Some members had little experience and a few had many years of choral singing. Women made up two thirds of the numbers but the group was well balanced by the men in rehearsal. A female and a male soloist confidently added to the sound.

Data collection took the form of structured interviews, taped and transcribed. The themes were drawn from the interviews using content analysis. Discourse Analysis was subsequently used to consider whether there were shared understandings of terms used (Davies, 1994). This is in line with analysis of conversation (Gillen & Petersen 2005, p. 149), the process used here unravelling the discourse shaped by its purpose.

Interview questions

1. Detail your involvement in community music: how long have you been with the choir? what had you done previously in singing?
2. What have you learned?
3. What are your musical preferences? Also describe the performance opportunities and audiences?
4. Comment on the social experience of group music making?
5. What does community music-making give you in your life?

This paper reports on data drawn from Questions 2, 4 and 5 on learning, social experience and the contribution of community music making in the lives of the participants.

THE VOICES OF THE MUSIC-MAKERS: LEARNING GOALS

In participatory performance, primary attention is on the music-making activity and on the other participants, rather than on the performance end-product. Themes emerged from Question 2 data that could be categorised in two broad areas, shown in Table 1 Learning Goals. The multiple responses were divided into two broad categories of individual advantage and community advantage. Individual advantage included learning new skills about how to rehearse, to improve vocal technique and make a “demo” tape after a recording studio workshop.

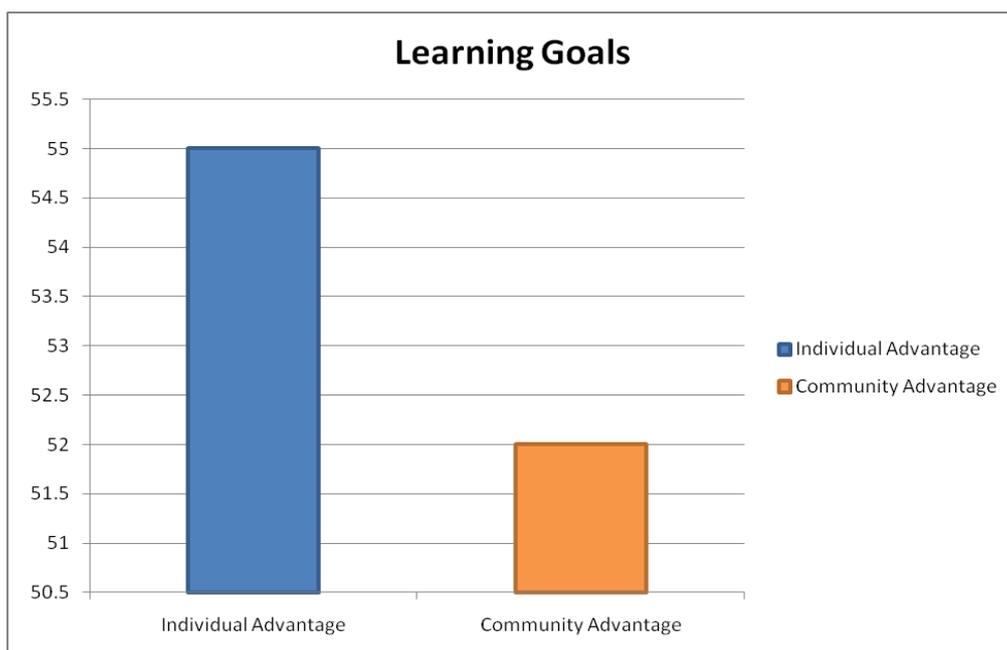


Table 1: Learning Goals

Lindsay (member of Choir A) spoke about broader learning issues. She talked about choral projects where groups came together for a weekend in a new location:

We learned something about challenge and responding to it, putting ourselves in a situation where there may have been difficulties and coming through it. Knowing we were going to be faced with challenge and weighing up that it was worth it.

Lindsay mentions two main concepts here: challenge and responding to that. She talks of decision-making about whether the challenge was worth it. She also talks as if the entire group shared her understanding of these terms. Lindsay has been with the choir for nine years. Since joining in her twenties, she has increased her choral training and choir membership forms a significant part of her life. However, the comment is best understood as a personal comment on her own learning through participatory performance. While it includes reference to the other participants and the collective response to challenge, she did not intentionally take on the role of spokesperson. Her comment draws attention to individual and collective learning.

While the data on individual advantage provides significant new information for mapping the kinds of knowledges being accessed, community advantage is something else again. This connects with Campbell's (1998) reflection on facilitating personal development through membership of a musical community and the need to take some responsibility for the greater good. Among those interviewed, such concern includes supporting young singers in a music festival, passing on skills and giving young performers a taste of professional experience.

SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

Evidence from this study confirmed personal growth through becoming part of a group. Personal growth is shown within the broad category of self-respect in Table 2 below. Reba (Choir B director) sees herself as mentoring singers in the choirs she directs. Her ideas align with Renshaw's framework (2009). She discussed self-criticism from the point of view of removing a critical inner voice when talking about her own background:

At the Conservatorium I was a pianist. But I wanted to sing because it was the part of me that had not been trained. So it felt like the freer part of me, the part that didn't have a harsh inner critic. When I formed the group, we kept getting shows and it just took off. I found myself singing on stage and it felt very right.

Reba positioned herself as a learner in this comment. She aligned herself with the 'untrained' and as being resistant to harsh inner criticism. In reality, she has become an accomplished musician and arranger. However she has clear memories of changing her direction as a musician and she brings that understanding to the welcome she offers choir participants.

Her empathy with choir participants is informed by her own experience and comes through in her reflections about people overcoming their fears:

What's interesting me lately is the notion that people have that they can't sing. When they come it's fairly obvious that they can. So it's about other people hearing them. It's a safe place, a choir, in the sense

that you've got a lot of other voices around you. I can have people in my choir for five years and they'll still say they can't sing. And they sing really well.

Reba discusses several concepts in this statement: a choir as a place of safety; people's own 'learned' perceptions about their singing ability; and her judgment of people's ability to sing. The first concept is shown within the broad category of support in Table 2 below. The idea of safety is informed by her own experience (described above) that led her to find singing as a safe place herself. It is her automatic assumption that a choir operates like this for all participants. The fact that her choir members stay with her for years tends to confirm this idea for her. At the same time, she actively works to have an inclusive atmosphere for participants in her choir. Reba is aware that many people have experienced negative comments about their singing as they were growing up. These encompass everything from comments to boys whose voices have not yet broken when they reach high school and advice to girls to 'mouth the words.' As a musician of considerable expertise, she is aware of the psychological damage that is caused by such comments. She is equally aware of the potential that is present in her choir members and works to release that.

Lauren (member of Choir B) talked about confidence-building, another aspect of support. Lauren is herself active in the community arts and a positive learning environment is part of the ethos for the local festival she initiated. She states:

We want to be totally non-judgmental. With community music, the most important thing is that it's non-judgmental. It's important for people learning to have some experience when they're young, that they can hold on their shoulders so they don't have a chip there.

Lauren brings several ideas out in this comment: the non-judgmental community; and the importance of positive experiences for young people. These comments are about specific features of participatory performance. The 'non-judgmental' feature is also discussed by Turino (2008). Additionally, the safety of a large group performance in which the beginner can feel at home within the support of musicians with more experience is also discussed by Turino (2008).

Participatory music making seems to effectively provide possibilities for a rich interaction of professional and learner that benefits all involved. The social aspect of music making is integrally part of the interaction of a performing ensemble. However it is a focus in community music making. The two broad categories of self respect and support are shown in Table 2 below.

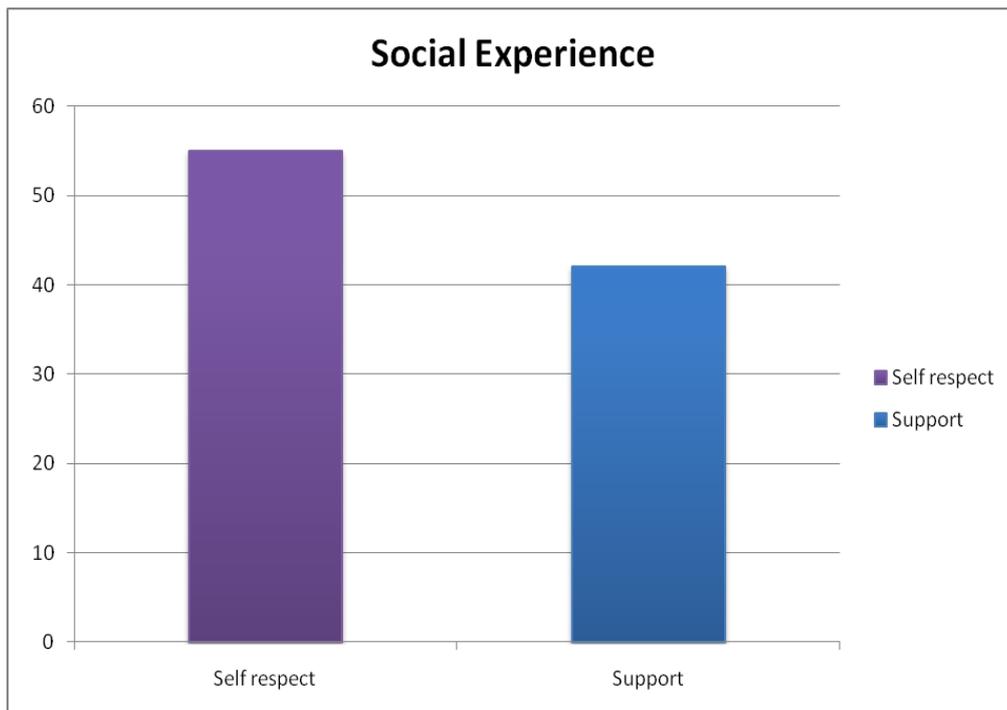


Table 2: Social Experience

The theme of nurture was strong. Research has confirmed the successful use of communal music making after trauma (Zubovic 2003). In a similar way, this study found that communal singing experiences have benefits in general wellbeing and support. Both choir directors commented on the way the entity of the choir may vary as the lives of the participants change, with the members being with each other as they go through their life experiences - dealing with everything from sickness to the celebration of getting a book published. 'Meryn' (Director of Choir A) spoke of the progression over 13 years that she has seen:

The choir's gone from young women without families to one where many of those women now have several children. The choir performed at the National Folk Festival. A lot of the choristers brought their husbands and families. The performance gives them a social outlet and the families can be part of it.

Meryn introduces a different idea here: the way in which the choir is part of the experience of the families and not just the women themselves. This comment also verifies key characteristics of community networks: they are flexible and adaptive; and they engage in practices built on trust (Moll et al. 1992). Significantly, singing participants discussed the 'reality' of the community music through the authenticity of the people who lead activities, their passionate involvement in music and the practical nature of the learning.

COMMUNITY MUSIC IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS

Themes emerging from the final question were concerned with fulfilment, shown in Table 3 below. A number of participants spoke about the choir giving them hope. They saw the choir as lifting their day-to-day experience onto another level. Meryn (director of Choir A) spoke about the responsibility of her role:

You try to give them all the skills that you want to give, always working towards a performance goal. You start with nothing. You just build this performance that is completely intangible but so incredibly solid. It's emotional as well. There is the general outpouring of spirit and assistance and positiveness. These are very tangible things that happen. When people pull together a performance you just can't buy this. It's something which is magical and so incredibly valuable. I suppose it's replacing the other aspects of community that existed in the past.

Other choir members, too, talked of wanting to give the audience the best that they could in performance. This aligns with ideas of responsibility. Meryn's comment mentioned goals, the development of skills and the magical aspect of performance. It is quite possible that the choir participants may not use the same language or mean the same things even if the same words were used. Meryn's comment is from the perspective of the person leading the group to 'pull together' the performance.

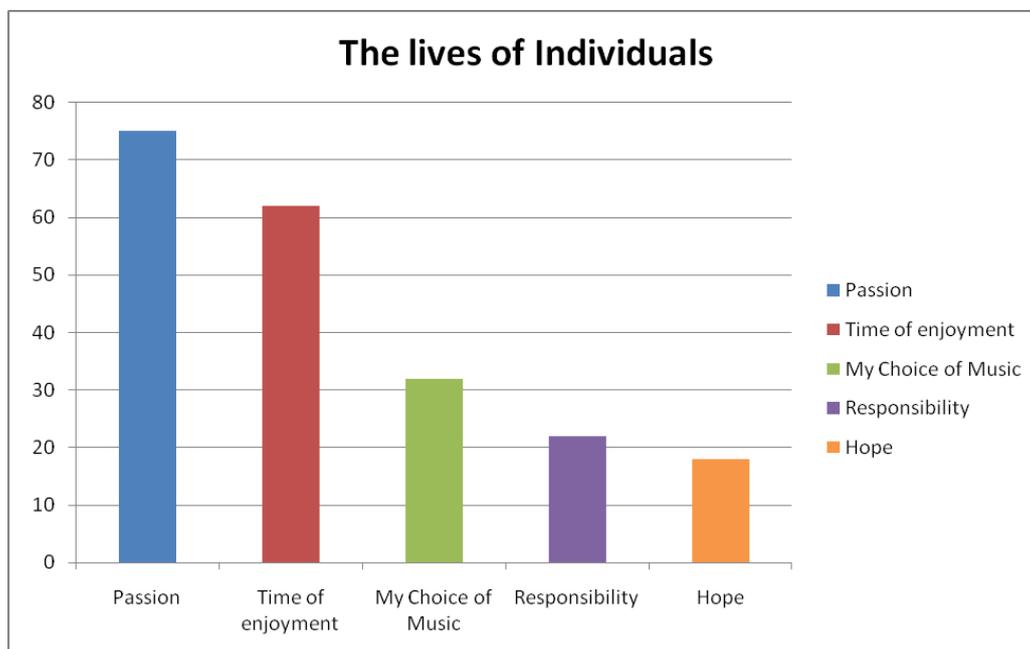


Table 3: Community music in the lives of individuals

In making this comment, Meryn also touches on the shift in focus in a community choir when a performance deadline brings a change from participatory to presentational performance. This aligns with Turino's view that the two kinds of performance are not mutually exclusive and that these different fields of artistic practice can operate at different times in communal music-making.

CONCLUSION

Meryn's comment about building a performance is a process that takes place over time. This process also places Lindsay's comment about responding to challenge (p.11) in a new light. Lindsay spoke about weighing up whether the challenge was worth it. It is possible to consider that the 'weighing up' involves balancing the social bonding and the vocal challenge to be met for performance. She did not elaborate on this comment. She did confirm that she felt it was worth it.

Participants spoke about valuing the way in which their choices of music were reflected in programming what the choirs performed at community events. They felt that their voices were heard in the decision-making processes of the choirs. A high proportion of the participants described the rehearsals as 'times of enjoyment' when they joined together in music-making, found a new energy and left the working cares of the week behind. Passion comes through in all of the discussions of the participants as an important motivation for participants in community music making. For those who are organising community events and groups, this emerges in comments about the satisfaction of bringing together musical talent in a district and hearing individual singers develop into an accomplished ensemble.

Throughout both the performance experiences by the two choirs in the research, participants never lost sight of the gathering that happens in rehearsals as a social event as well as a learning event. They were living the notion that singing is 'one of the glues of cohesive culture' (Goodkin 2005, p. 29). This research confirmed other research (Heath & McLaughlin 1993; Cahill 1998; Campbell 1998; Green 2001; Bartholomew 2002) about knowledges developed for community advantage. These included supporting young singers in the choirs and passing on skills from one to another. What it provided that was new was the range of knowledges developed for individual advantage. These included learning how to rehearse, to develop vocal technique, to care for the voice and to expand their repertoire.

Alongside this are the aspects that contribute to the individual's sense of self-respect through overcoming fear and building confidence. The mentoring aspect is a valuable component of the community music making experience, aligning with Renshaw's framework (2009). This research also confirms the social bonding that relates to participatory performance in community choir rehearsals. At the same time, it does not negate the fact that in a choir's preparation, there will be a period when the performance shifts to become presentational performance, as was involved in comments from Choir A. In this regard, the choir director's sense of responsibility is foregrounded. Somehow the choir had reached the point where they collectively shifted the emphasis to presentational performance. Overall, the strong motivation for community musicians remains the passion that characterises learning through community music and drives members of community choirs to spend hours of their time in rehearsals that strengthen and develop their music making.

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