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Reaping the Harvest of Joy: Practitioner Enquiry into Intercultural Group Singing

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ABSTRACT: Singers from community choirs in the UK and Norway participated in research to evaluate their experiences of singing in a collaborative choral event in the UK in June 2023. They shared personal stories of their participation and interpreted the significance of their experiences through the app-based data collection method Sensemaker®. We found strong evidence of fast social bonding through a shared emotional experience, which was amplified by the aesthetic qualities of the singing, the material qualities of the venue and the ethical qualities of leadership to model and express the values and attitudes underpinning the reported positive effects. As an intercultural activity, we found that both bonding and bridging social capital were produced through the activity, highlighting the potential of group singing as a potent form of civic imagination and for developing intercultural empathy. The study also highlights the value of practitioner enquiry as a research methodology for developing an understanding of the complex ways in which participation in cultural activities can lead to positive outcomes for participants.

KEYWORDS: Group singing, intercultural empathy, social bonding, community music, practitioner enquiry

INTRODUCTION

Come and Sing was a choral event promoted as part of University of York's Festival of Ideas on June 10, 2023. Two community choirs from the UK and Norway were invited to participate, and the free public event consisted of choir performances interspersed with research insights into group singing given by practitioner-researchers from UK and Norwegian Higher Education (HE) institutions. The participating singers (c.100) met for the first time immediately before the event and spent social time together for a few hours after the event. For this study, the singers were invited to participate in a survey immediately following the event using the Sensemaker® app (Cynefin Company, n.d.) to share their experiences, and 52 of the singers (c. 50%) responded. Twenty-four were from the UK choir, and 28 from the Norwegian choir. Of the 50 who shared gender information, 32 self-identified as female and 18 as male. Seventy-seven per cent (n=40) of the respondents were aged between 55 and 74, with 12% (n=6) under 55 and 12% (n=6) over 75.

The respective choirs shared some other characteristics—both emphasised the importance of community participation alongside aesthetic concerns about 'sounding good' in public performance, and both groups had been fairly stable over a period of 10+ years. They were also culturally different—not least through nationality and language—with these cultural differences mediated by different leadership styles. The UK singers came from a number of smaller choirs led by vocal group Mouthful and so did not necessarily sing with each other regularly, while the Norwegian choir had sung together as a group for many years. The cultural ethos of the UK singers was about singing as a means of developing social cohesiveness through making a good group sound together, while the emphasis within the Norwegian community of singers was on presenting 'enthusiasm' as an attitude for being in the world, specifically within their local neighbourhood, as an expression of solidarity and joy of life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Group singing has been the focus of considerable research over the last twenty years, with evidence pointing to its capacity to promote fast social bonding (Pearce et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2016) and produce moments of 'communitas' or 'collective joy' (Camlin et al., 2020; Camlin & Reis, 2022; Turner, 2012). Group singing also produces positive health and wellbeing outcomes for participants, especially for those experiencing dementia (Lee et al., 2022), Parkinson's Disease (Machado Sotomayor et al., 2021), lung health rehabilitation (Kim et al., 2023), mental health recovery (Williams et al., 2018) and / or postnatal depression (Bind et al., 2022; Fancourt & Perkins, 2018).

Although less well-researched, group singing also has the capacity to foster positive health and wellbeing outcomes for those without any medical diagnosis, as it is viewed as a resource for developing and maintaining positive health and wellbeing as part of a 'healthy publics' / 'health musicking' social agenda (A. Balsnes, 2014; A. H. Balsnes, 2017; Camlin et al., 2020; Densley & Andrews, 2021; Stige, 2013). The requirement to 'tune in' or entrain to one another to produce a good group sound highlights the interpersonal intimacy that is a foundation of good group singing practice (Camlin et al., 2020, pp. 11–12). Many individual mechanisms—neurohormonal (Tarr et al., 2014), psychological, biological, social, and behavioural (Fancourt et al., 2021)—may be implicated in the production of a positive group singing experience, but it may also be a more holistic experience of vitality exchange (Stern, 2010) whereby participants 'feel felt' by their fellows, which leads to the common experience of 'magic moments' in group singing (Camlin, 2023, pp. 66–68) which in turn drives its potency as a human collaborative activity.

Group singing might therefore be considered a 'performance' of human relationship following the idealistic traditions of Small (1998), who suggested that music making 'establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies' (p. 314), which furthermore 'model[s] the relationships of our world, not as they are but as we would wish them to be' (p. 50). In the case of group singing, these relationships are complex, but understandable when approached as a holistic experience. How these relationships produce value is similarly complex, both in terms of the individual benefits they produce, and also their wider benefit to society. As a means of materialising particular (post-)humanistic values—love, reciprocity, democratic equality (Camlin, 2023, p. 156)—which are considered to be 'diametrically opposed to a capitalist ethos' (Turino, 2016, p. 298), group singing might be seen to represent a form of 'civic imagination' (Baiocchi et al., 2015)—a social 'interstice' (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 14) in the fabric of everyday life where participants can experience alternative ways of being in relationship with each other (Camlin, 2023, pp. 144–145).

Group singing potentially mediates the formation and development of both social and biographical identities. Social identities are how individuals 'define themselves in relation to others, either as part of a group or in contrast to others' (Government Office for Science, 2013, p. 6), whereas biographical identities are 'more "standalone" identities which individuals might use to describe themselves to another or how they perceive themselves. These might include national identity, as well as ethnicity and religion' (p. 10). Because of the affordances for social bonding through group singing, we expected to find evidence in this study of the development or emergence of social identities as people develop kinship relationships with their fellow singers, what Putnam (2001) refers to as 'bonding' social capital (p. 22). By contrast, we were also interested to see whether feelings of solidarity with others ('bridging' social capital) would also emerge through the activity, and whether there would be any impact on participants' biographical identities. Would the intercultural context of the group singing impact on how the singers experienced themselves through the music making, their 'music-in-identity' (IIM), or how they 'use music within [their] overall self-identities' (MacDonald et al., 2017, p. 15), for example?

As well as these generally positive aspects of group singing, the activity might also be considered to be potentially harmful in that the fast social bonding that often occurs through singing together can lead to the formation of 'rational communities' of musical practice, which may exclude as many as they include (Camlin, 2023, pp. 115–120) and can be experienced as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 4–8) against those unwilling or unable to participate in this idealised form of cultural activity. Hence, an ethic of care that develops recursively over time is an important foundation for the development of accessible and inclusive 'communities of musical practice' or CoMPs (Kenny, 2017) that welcome new-comers and operate along socially just principles of equality and non-judgement (Camlin, forthcoming).

This ethic of care points to the important role of the singing leader in establishing the ethical grounds for the anticipated benefits of the activity to emerge and develop. Care is dependent on how the choir leader discharges the responsibility of their inherent power and manages to radiate care in the role of leadership (Schei, 2023). Care in group singing requires the leader to be aware and conscious of the singers, the intimacy in the 'grain of the voice' (Barthes, 1980) and hence, the vulnerability in being heard and maybe afraid of not being 'good enough' according to cultural norms (Schei, 2019; Schei & Schei, 2017).

Singing leaders often benefit from their involvement in group singing in a similar way to their participants (Forbes & Bartlett, 2020), but they carry responsibilities to the group as well (Camlin, 2021). Hence, as 'close-to-practice' research (BERA, n.d.), we set out to explore this study as a form of practitioner enquiry (Baumfield et al., 2013), seeking to understand our role as influential agents within a practice that produces (assumed) benefits for us as well as our participants. Deepening our understanding of our participants' experiences is an important means of refining our approach to leadership, in order to develop our individual praxis and bring about more consistently positive benefits for all involved, a virtuous cycle of practice and research being 'imbricated' (Nelson, 2013, p. 4) and mutually reinforced.

METHODOLOGY

As practitioner-researchers, we are intimately involved in the situations we are researching, and moreover we exert considerable influence on our respective communities of musical practice (CoMPs) owing to our leadership roles within those communities. Hence, we adopted an approach to help minimise any bias that might otherwise colour our research design, and which would enable participants to share their experience in as naturalistic a way as possible, using their own language and stories (micro-narratives) to express their lived experience in as ecologically valid a way as possible.

Methods

Respondents downloaded the Sensemaker® software app to their digital device or web browser and shared their experiences through the app as the primary means of data collection. The Sensemaker® method has two sequential stages: i) story sharing and ii) story interpretation / self-signification, leading to both narrative and geometric (quantitative) data. In the initial story sharing stage, respondents share a story via the app, which can be in multiple formats, including text, audio, image, video, to enable responses from a wide range of communication methods and creative medias. The user interface for the app was designed in English and Norwegian to facilitate responses in a respondent's first language where possible, and instructions were translated from English to Norwegian by Tiri, who is a native Norwegian speaker. Three 'prompt' questions were used to facilitate narrative responses:

1. What story will you tell your family / friends / work colleagues about the Come and Sing event?
2. The local media have asked you to comment on the Come and Sing event. What story would you share?
3. Imagine you find yourself in conversation with a stranger, and they seem interested in the Come and Sing event. What would you tell them about it?

In the second stage of story interpretation / self-signification, respondents 'interpret' the story they have just shared by placing a digital marker representing their story against a series of geometric frameworks. Triangles are frequently used in this kind of self-signification exercise as they encourage respondents to think about their experience beyond simple binaries into more nuanced and complex relationships. Respondents can choose which (if any) of the frameworks to respond to, and those which they don't see as relevant to their experience, they can simply tag within the app as 'not applicable'.

We used six separate signification frameworks within the app to elicit participants' interpretation of the significance of their experiences, using categories of analysis drawn both from the literature and from previous research studies exploring similar topics (Camlin et al., 2020; Camlin & Reis, 2022). The categories of analysis within each signification framework are summarised in Table 1 (Appendix 1). The first five frameworks used a triangular geometric shape to invite participants to interpret their experience against three equally weighted positive dimensions, while the sixth used a dyadic continuum to invite participants to interpret their experience against two such dimensions (See Appendix 1).

The two data sources—narrative accounts and self-signification data—are designed to be interpreted alongside each other, either validating

or questioning the findings from either source to some degree.

Data Analysis

The sequence of data analysis in this project consisted of the following steps:

1. Analysis of narrative data, including:
    a) Translation of Norwegian narrative data into English;
    b) Inductive analysis of narrative data carried out independently by the two researchers;
    c) Comparison of the various identified themes within the narrative data, and agreement over final themes;
2. Deductive analysis of geometric (self-signification) data, in other words, referring to the pre-determined categories within each framework in relation to respondents' collective digital mark-making;
3. Comparison of narrative and geometric data.

The project received ethical approval from the Royal College of Music Ethics Committee on April 3, 2023 (ref 230315). Participants were recruited by email immediately following the event and responded anonymously via the Sensemaker® app.

FINDINGS

Analysis of Narrative Data

Independently, we immersed ourselves in the (n=52) individual participant narratives through multiple readings of all data. Subsequently, we followed a process of thematic analysis (Williamon et al., 2021, pp. 236–243) to code all the data, initially breaking the participant narratives down into sentences or phrases and giving each fragment a 'code', and then organising the codes into themes. Dave undertook the analysis using NVivo software, while Tiri undertook the analysis manually. We each produced a short-list of overarching themes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Initial Themes

Researcher A Initial Themes	Researcher B Initial Themes
• Context • Emotional feeling • Intercultural • Positive experience • Social bonding	• Singing Community • The venue • Feelings • Joy • The other choir • Musical learning experience

Following discussion, we aggregated our responses into a single set of five overarching themes, summarised as:

1. Social bonding
2. Feelings
3. Singing
4. Context
5. Interculturality

In the following section, we discuss each of these themes as they relate to the participants' narrative accounts. As responses were anonymous, each narrative was given a unique identifier (P-1 to P-52), which we use here.

Overarching themes

Social Bonding

Many of the participants' accounts emphasised the affordances for social connection and bonding, bringing disparate groups of strangers together quickly into a cohesive community of like-minded souls:

> 'The choirs arrived as two separate groups of people - different countries, different cultures and different language[s]. Within an hour each choir had so enjoyed listening to the other and had also had such a wonderful experience in singing together that we were all one as friends - even before we had been introduced to each other.' (P-35)

This sense of connection was often intensely emotional:

> 'I found myself looking directly at and meeting the eyes of members of the other choir in a manner that touched me. Indeed, I many times had to stop singing for a few seconds as I was about to weep.' (P-36)

Participants experienced this deep sense of connection as being grounded in the musical nature

of the experience itself, where 'we made the music… [and] reaped the harvest of joy' (P-13). In other words, not just a social phenomenon, but the music making itself became the foundation for a sense of 'communitas' or 'collective joy':

> 'There is something wondrous about more than a hundred people coming together in one space and so completely focusing their attention on one another that they can create something of harmonic beauty that none of us could achieve on our own. There is such joy and exhilaration in acts of pure joint endeavour like this.' (P-7)

Quite a few singers use the word 'joy' to express that the experience was meaningful and positive, in addition to words like excitement, curiosity, empathy, respect, appreciation, bonding, and relaxed contentment. 'Being part of the whole day's inspiration, I observed that we were moved to joy through song-sharing' (P-13).

> '... when we sang together the joy and mutual appreciation felt so incredibly special. It felt like one of those moments that you never want to end, so thankfully it didn't! Not for the rest of the day.' (P-45)

> 'I feel like I won't know what to talk to them about, but this experience was a pure joy because we had a way of communicating that didn't rely on being good at small talk. It didn't matter who we were or what we did for a living, it was just the music that mattered, and creating that collaboratively.' (P-4)

Characteristic of the dissolution of identity common to these kinds of 'magic moments' (Pavlicevic, 2013, p. 197), participants described the phenomenon as transcending individual experience, pointing towards the sense of 'self-other merging' associated with endorphin release (Tarr et al., 2014):

> 'It was intense and a moment of here-and-now experience. The phenomenon was the feeling of oneness, of unity. We were united across borders, age, musicality, social status and professional positions. It was the best moment that day. Time and place disappeared, and instead this very feeling of oneness was in the foreground.' (P-8)

For many, this deep sense of social connection and communitas through musical participation was the 'most moving', and 'the strength of the shared joy and comfort found in the common values of song brought us all together in harmony as one' (P-24).

Participants shared rich descriptions of what a singing community can be, and what this joint event triggered. 'This event reminded me just how joyous singing in groups, and especially large groups, can be. ... There is such joy and exhilaration in acts of pure joint endeavour like this' (P-7). 'The whole atmosphere was friendly, invigorating, stimulating and indeed life affirming' (P-11). 'It's like being lifted up together with good smiles on all sides', writes one singer (P-29). '... when we all sang together it was so very moving and utterly uplifting' (P-15). '[E]xtraordinarily uplifting', wrote another singer (P-35), and the word 'uplifting' is used by a number of singers. 'I feel thrilled and privileged to have taken part in this' (P-7).

Words connected to happiness are eagerly used: a singer summarises their experience with the title 'A feeling of oneness', describing it as a 'unifying experience to sing with the choir from Bergen … I really felt we all were so similar sharing our music' (P-19). 'Bonding with new Bergen friends was unforgettable and we will treasure our sharing' (P-13), writes another. 'It was clear that the song was embedded into our individual and collective souls and histories and exacerbated the sense of bonding and mutual joy' (P-20), writes a third, while another suggests that 'the enjoyment and camaraderie created by singing together with open hearts helped us to cross the boundary from stranger to friend within an afternoon' (P-5). Singers from both groups expressed a desire for future collaboration, with one saying that the experience 'left me hoping to sing with them again before too long, and perhaps repeat the experiment with other cultures' (P-5), while another suggested that 'both choirs would very much like to join together again, which would [be] fantastic […] hope this can be done' (P-42).

Feelings

As well as the experience of joy described above, participant responses further emphasised the emotional dimension of their experience, with singers expressing their reactions and basic emotions with words like tears, laughter and hope: 'I felt relaxed immediately' (P-10) said one, while another felt 'I was about to weep' (P-36). 'Every bit of me felt relaxed, aware and happy' (P-39) writes a third, while another describes the experience as to 'feel safe among supportive friends' (P-5).

Rich descriptions of anxiety, nervousness and how the experience challenged participants' self-confidence were also expressed. The singers from both choirs describe their entrance into the chapel, some full of anticipation, others a bit nervous. Singers are audible and visible to each other and to the audience. One singer writes: 'When you sing you are revealing your vulnerable sides. That can be challenging' (P-28). A singer from the

English choir writes: 'We had the space to ourselves for a while to rehearse which I was pleased about as I was a bit nervous of meeting the Norwegian singers' (P-41). The participant describes the other choir as they enter the chapel, how they were dressed and how they behaved: 'I felt more nervous then and hoped we sounded ok; not off key or anything' (P-41). Nervousness was at the forefront before we all got to know each other. The attention in this situation reveals some of the relational complexities of group singing, especially prior to actually singing together.

Bearing in mind that the groups had not sung together before, it was a challenge to be trustingly confident in the situation, because no one—singers and leaders alike—knew what the singing event would turn out to be. 'To many, there will be an inherent risk in such a situation, the risk of shame, of being heard as someone who 'cannot sing', who doesn't make [a] beautiful sound.' (P-50). The Norwegian singers were eager to perform the few songs they had prepared during the preceding months. They had rehearsed in depth technical challenges in one of the songs in particular, the most challenging song they had ever sung. How would that go? But the conductors also introduced new songs, songs they had not sung before: 'Tiri had a completely new song for us to have a go at. I felt a bit anxious about that. I was worried I'd not be able to get it and make a bad sound' (P-41).

Singing

The materiality of singing itself was highlighted as an important contributory factor in the overall positive experience, particularly its aesthetic qualities and the complex ways in which sounds were collectively manipulated to produce pleasing effects: 'to hear so many voices in harmony producing such complex sounds [was a] fantastic celebration of the power of the human voice' (P-39). One of the UK singers was 'totally blown away by the magic of the voices of the Bergen choir, and when we sang together the joy and mutual appreciation felt so incredibly special' (P-45). Another commented that the quality of the singing reflected the complex relationships within the 'other' choir, which had clearly built up over time:

> 'Their voices blended so well, perhaps because most of them had sung together for 20 years, so that they had merged into a singing family. Their love for each other and the sounds they made together was apparent.' (P-5)

A number of participants recognised the singing as a form of emotional communication rather than just musical entertainment, describing 'intense moments of musical sharing' (P-31) where group singing 'is not dependent on speaking the [same] language and is in this way a universal way of bringing people together' (P-46).

Furthermore, the singers' accounts point to a profoundly embodied experience, rather than just a vocal exercise. The singers express bodily awareness: '... every bit of me felt relaxed, aware and happy' (P-39). Another acknowledges that while '[t]he connections we make through singing are emotional and spiritual, […] when I feel the hairs stand up on the back of my neck as our sound swells to fill the space, I know something physical and visceral is happening as well' (P-7).

The sense of embodied engagement is also felt interpersonally rather than just individually, with one singer describing energy, not only in themselves, but being able to 'feel the energy of us all' (P-25), while another recognised 'the bodily pleasure of producing beautiful sounds with others who share the delight in the very same moment for the very same reasons' (P-50).

Context

The two choirs met for the first time in the chapel where the concert was to be performed two hours later. It was a beautiful warm and sunny day in June, and the Norwegian singers had walked the streets of York city centre to find the chapel. When they entered the venue, they heard the English choir rehearsing. With silent steps they entered this inviting space. The chapel was a welcoming space, as if it was inviting us all to join in: 'The chapel at York St John is a beautiful space, very modern in design but the atmosphere is calm and gentle and welcoming' (P-41). There were gentle smiles, nodding and eye contact. Soon, in the break, we shook hands, and could feel the expectant and slightly tense atmosphere since we were all unsure of who the others were and how this would evolve.

The chapel seemed to be the perfect space for the singers to make good sounds and musical relations:

> 'I was struck by how inclusive this place of worship was. Everyone is welcome and invited and the chapel has a very warm and friendly energy which really suited the energy of the choir and the songs we sang.' (P-45)

There were so many choir singers in a relatively small venue, but the singers elegantly and purposefully found their own space and integrity. 'Even the final act in the chapel, the shifting of the pews was achieved harmoniously, unity out of chaos' (P-39). 'With so many voices joining together the songs sounded great and the resonance

in the chapel enhanced our sound as well. It was spine tinglingly good' (P-41).

During the event, the singing performances were interspersed with short presentations by members of the academic team about the anatomy and physiology of the human voice. This content provided an extra dimension to this singing event: 'The presentations to the audience were interesting, hearing about the approach to the event and understanding more about how our bodies work...' (P-40). One singer suggested that 'the greatest experience was probably the review of the physiology of singing, which was told in an engaging and educational way' (P-22). The singers were attentive and openminded: 'We sang our hearts out in the chapel and listened to an incredibly interesting talk on how singing works' (P-45).

Interculturality

Respondents also pointed to the experience as a way of bridging cultural differences, with a sense of mutual admiration colouring the event. One singer noted that 'each choir's performance during the event was met with mutual empathy, respect, profound appreciation and emotional connection. There was a real sense of warmth and joy, everyone was smiling' (P-20). Social awareness became apparent, with one singer speaking of the joy it was to meet the other choir and 'feel the joy together and fill the air with our voices, share new tunes and get to know each other' (P-48).

Another singer talks about the other choir as '... strangers who would turn out to be a soulmate' (P-49). As noted earlier, group singing as a communication medium not only bypasses linguistic barriers, but establishes new ways of developing intercultural empathy:

> 'As I listened to them performing, I thought that they were just like us really. They speak a different language and have some different customs but essentially, they are all just people who love to make wonderful music together and enjoy the camaraderie of their group.' (P-41)

Other singers echoed these sentiments, reflecting that 'it was wonderful to spend time with, listen to and create with people from a different culture and experience how music crosses barriers of all kinds to open up connections' (P-1). Another suggested that '[w]hen many sing as one we submerge our differences and rediscover the simple humanity we share in common' (P-7). This thought was echoed by others:

> 'The idea that singing together with other people is not only about singing, but also being a part of a community was a new thought, and kind of an eye opener. Especially when singing with people you don't know from before, creating a 'union' aiming for the same goal.' (P-51)

Analysis of Geometric Data

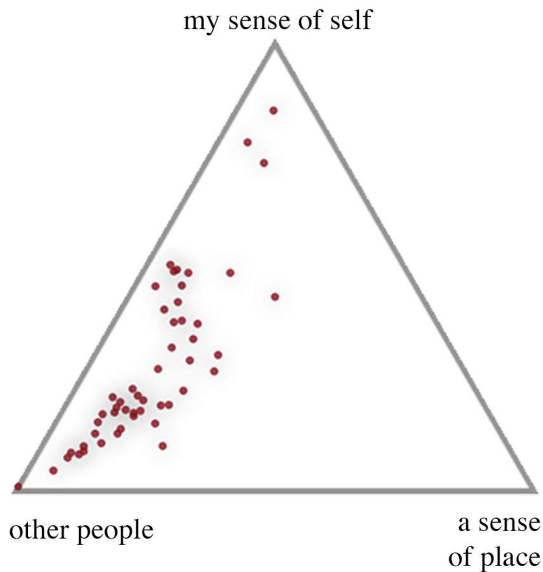
The signification frameworks within Sensemaker® were analysed visually to identify any more obvious clusters of signification marks in participants' responses. Those frameworks with more randomly distributed responses would have been discounted from further analysis on the basis that they indicated no patterns of signification, but in this instance, there were some clear patterns in each of the frameworks.

Five of the signification frameworks were triadic, in that they required participants to interpret the significance of their experience against three equally weighted positive dimensions (see Table 1). In terms of interpreting participants' mark-making, responses were interpreted in two ways: first, by considering the mean responses against each dimension within a given framework, and second by considering the number and % of responses emphasising a given dimension. For example, a completely evenly weighted marking in the centre of the triangle would return a numerical value of 0.33 in relation to each dimension. Hence, a mark resulting in a numerical value of greater than 0.33 against any dimension was considered to be positively emphasising that dimension of experience. Mean responses always sum to 100% whereas the second approach results in numerical data where more than one dimension is simultaneously engaged, and so is not restricted to a sum of 100%.

Framework A: Connection (n=51)

The experience / story I shared is about making or deepening a connection to…

Figure 1: Signification Framework A: Connection



Participants' responses are summarised as follows:

Table 3: Signification Framework A: Connection; distribution of responses

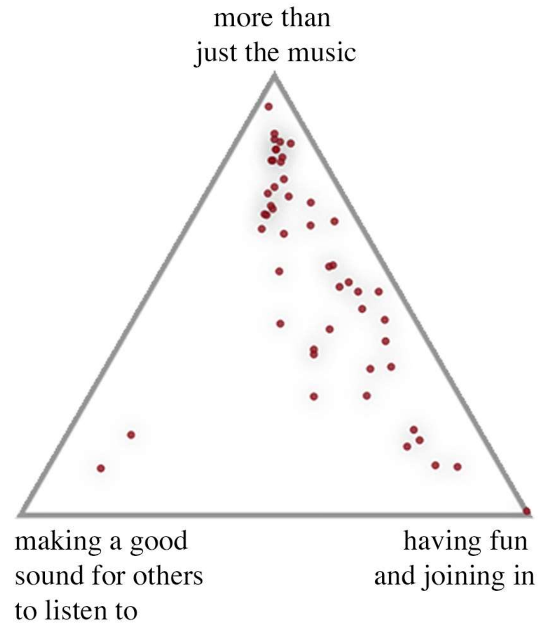
Dimension	Mean	No. of responses greater than 0.33	% of responses greater than 0.33
My sense of self	27%	17	33%
Other people	61%	47	92%
A sense of place	12%	0	0%

Participant experience is clearly centred on the experience of social bonding, as might be expected from a group singing activity.

Framework B: Musical (n=50)

The experience / story I shared is about…

Figure 2: Signification Framework B: Musical



Participants' responses are summarised as follows:

Table 4: Signification Framework B: Musical; distribution of responses

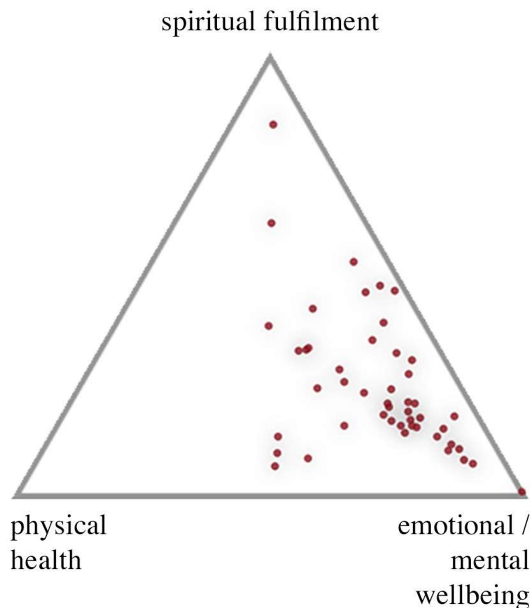
Dimension	Mean	No. of responses greater than 0.33	% of responses greater than 0.33
More than just the music	54%	39	78%
Making a good sound for others to listen to	15%	2	4%
Having fun and joining in	31%	21	42%

These figures run slightly counter to the narrative data where making a 'good sound' assumes some importance for many of the singers. Our interpretation of these responses is that by focusing on the paramusical benefits of the activity and the importance of people's participation, these aesthetic concerns appear to be minimised.

Framework C: Health and Wellbeing (n=48)

The experience / story I shared is about…

Figure 3: Signification Framework C: Health and Wellbeing



Participants' responses are summarised as follows:

Table 5: Signification Framework C: Health and Wellbeing; distribution of responses

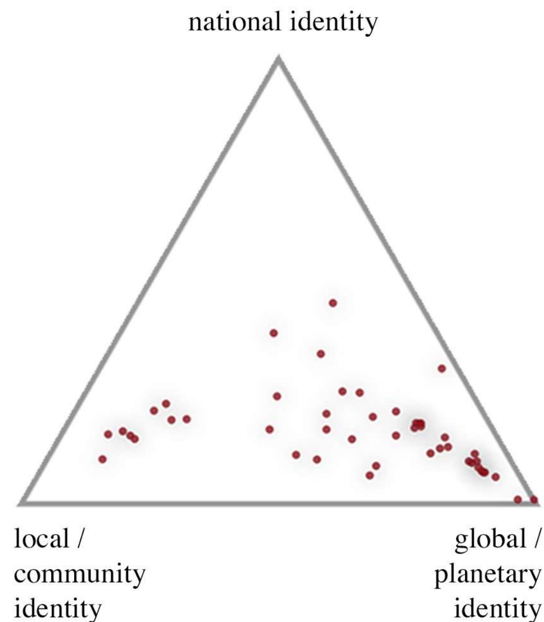
Dimension	Mean	No. of responses greater than 0.33	% of responses greater than 0.33
Spiritual Fulfilment	24%	11	23%
Physical Health	17%	4	8%
Emotional / Mental Wellbeing	59%	45	94%

While there may well have been benefits to physical health through participation in the activity, participants attach more significance to the benefits to their collective mental wellbeing, and to a lesser extent to the spiritual dimension of the experience. Mean responses were similar between singers from the UK and Norwegian choirs.

Framework D: Identity (n=47)

The experience / story I shared is about establishing and / or celebrating…

Figure 4: Signification Framework D: Identity



Participants' responses are summarised as follows:

Table 6: Signification Framework D: Identity; distribution of responses

Dimension	Mean	No. of responses greater than 0.33	% of responses greater than 0.33
National Identity	15%	3	6%
Local / Community Identity	28%	13	28%
Global / Planetary Identity	57%	37	79%

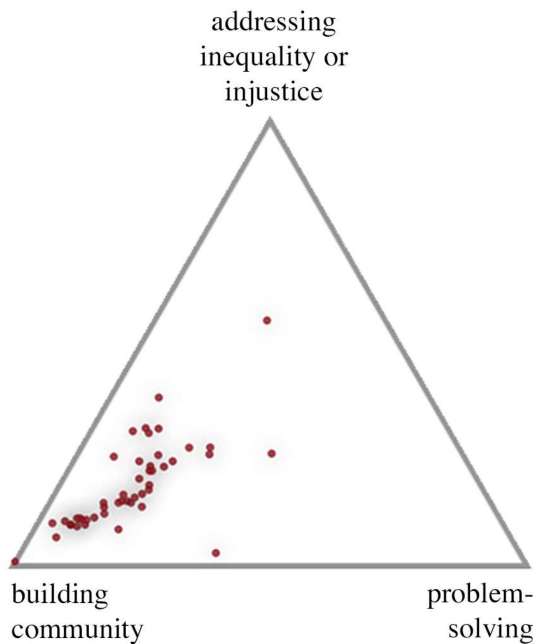
If local / community identity represents more 'bonding' social capital, and 'global / planetary identity' is more 'bridging', there is clearly a balance being struck between the two. Mean responses were similar for both UK and Norwegian singers—while the experience is clearly about strengthening social bonds of identity through local activity, there is also a sense of reaching out beyond

those bonds to include the extra-national 'strangers' involved in the communal act of singing together.

Framework E: Civic Imagination (n=47)

The experience / story I shared is about…

Figure 5: Signification Framework E: Civic Imagination



Participants' responses are summarised as follows:

Table 7: Signification Framework E: Civic Imagination; distribution of responses

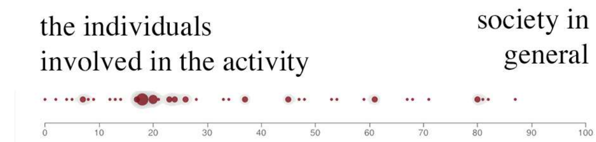
Dimension	Mean	No. of responses greater than 0.33	% of responses greater than 0.33
Addressing Inequality or Injustice	17%	2	4%
Building Community Solidarity	69%	46	98%
Problem-Solving	14%	2	4%

The emphasis within the participant signification data is clearly on the dimension of building community solidarity, rather than the more activist dimensions of civic imagination.

Framework F: Social Impact (n=47)

The impact of this story was on…

Figure 6: Signification Framework F: Social Impact (n=47)



The sixth signifier used a dyadic framework to understand the locus of social impact along a continuum between the individual and society in general. The mean response was 34%, suggesting that respondents found the impact of the activity to be principally experienced at an individual / relational level, rather than anything more structurally transformational (Bartleet, 2023).

Comparing the Narrative and Geometric Data

For the most part, the narrative and geometric data point toward similar conclusions about group singing, namely that it produces social bonding effects that extend beyond the familiar group of singers to include the strangers who have only just been met, through positively experienced shared moments of collective joy or 'communitas'. These positive feelings extend towards the audience too, with both choirs and audience becoming temporarily united through a shared experience of social bonding.

There were also some differences and complexities highlighted by the different kinds of data. For example, despite the importance of a sense of place in participant narratives, when asked to reflect on the significance of this sense of place in relation to a sense of connection with other participants through the geometric mark-making, it is the sense of connection to others that is emphasised. In other words, the sense of interpersonal connection is of most significance to participants, even though the venue and other material factors clearly affected their experience. One interpretation of this discrepancy is to suggest that the venue and other material factors function as a material resource to amplify or enhance this sense of social connection, which is what appears to have primary significance for participants.

Furthermore, although some participants talked about feelings of anxiety about 'sounding ok' (P-41), these feelings were apparently

subsumed by a more general sense of relaxing into the experience and its positive benefits, which were to do with feeling socially connected, experiencing positive mental wellbeing and to a lesser extent, a sense of spiritual fulfilment.

DISCUSSION

In this context of an intercultural encounter, group singing clearly mediates fast social bonding, with positive feelings of communitas and a shared sense of collective joy coming across strongly in participant accounts. Emphasising the opportunities for interpersonal connection across cultural differences, group singing represents a mutual exchange of 'vitality' (Camlin, 2023, pp. 44–49, 66–68; Stern, 2010), a powerful way of encountering 'strangers' that transcends linguistic and other cultural barriers. In terms of social capital, the study suggests that this kind of intercultural group singing activity strengthens existing bonds between groups of singers and also serves to develop forms of 'bridging' social capital that reaches across cultural differences to the 'other' singers, as well as to the audience. The extent to which this effect occurs is no doubt mediated by the degree to which an ethic of care informs how the separate groups are led, and also by how the conditions for intercultural encounter are established. Taken as a whole, the event builds community solidarity as a potent form of civic imagination, where new relationships are established among relative strangers, leading to positive reinforcement of emerging collective social identities and feelings of kinship and intercultural empathy.

As Byrne suggests, 'the space, the platform, and the software "makes" the art, the music, or whatever' (Byrne, 2012). In this instance, the generous acoustic of a sacred space provided a reverberance and an atmosphere that amplified the choral harmonies in aesthetically pleasing ways, further enhancing the sense of connection felt by the singers, as described by Daugherty:

> 'Indeed, choral singing, at its best, is about celebrating relationships, relationships between the singer and the rest of the choir, relationships between the choir and its singing venue, the choir and its audience, relationships among complex, beautiful sounds, relationships among audience members. Such relationships inevitably create meanings and patterns.' (Daugherty, 2013, p. 85)

These two choirs are used to singing outdoors—on mountains or in narrow streets. Being privileged with a chapel with a magnificent acoustic lifted the experience, and we assume the acoustic and the atmosphere in the chapel also contributed to participants' rich and expressive accounts. As Daugherty suggests, 'the idea of space as it relates to choral singing is at heart a way of exploring, understanding, and celebrating those patterns of relationships that we idealize or desire to cherish' (Daugherty, 2013, p. 85). It is within this community that the two choirs meet, as in a successful arranged marriage, with the venue as the perfect environment for such a union.

The process of collaboration is also worth noting, as it contributed to the overall experience of the singers on the day. As conductors / musical directors, we had planned for this event for months, but separately. We had decided the program but had never rehearsed it together. We wanted the two choirs to blossom and share some of their favourite repertoire. The joy of music making, sharing and experiencing the atmosphere by singing together were the main goals for us, implying that there was no competition or 'hidden agenda' about producing the best sound or having the most challenging repertoire. It was all about bringing our groups together in a spirit of unity and letting the music flow freely between us. No-one seemed to worry about the fact that we were going to perform songs together very soon that we hadn't practiced together. This trusting conviction created a good atmosphere for all. It was as if the singers mirrored the atmosphere and saturated the singing community with a deep sense of trust.

As conductors / musical directors, we did not know each other terribly well and had not worked with each other in a professional context before, which for us was also very exciting. We had to rely on our own judgement of each other's capabilities and trust each other's choice of repertoire for the joint event. However, the singers trusted us, which we could both read from their relaxed dispositions, and how they trustingly smiled and conveyed their enthusiasm. They knew us well, respectively, from years of togetherness during rehearsals, week after week performing the rituals and routines of our musical communities within well-known venues. They knew our style, our ways of being and—by the nature of their ongoing participation—shared our visions for what creates healthy singing communities and safe spaces to sing together. We are both aware that it is a privileged position to be the choir leader, but also one of considerable responsibility. Therefore, it was a relief to read what some of the singers expressed about the event: 'The atmosphere was electrical and amazing' (P-38), said one, while another described the

experience as being ‘surrounded by a feeling of collaboration’ (P-40).

What this points to is a central finding of this study, that much of the positive experience of singers in an intercultural exchange is influenced by the ethical attitudes toward such collaboration adopted by the leaders. In other words, our intentions and values as leaders clearly shape how participants experience the phenomenon of group singing, and as leaders, we therefore have a primary responsibility for shaping, modelling and expressing those intentions and values. A serious and professional attitude, while at the same time being relaxed and aware, present and attentive to the situation of the here-and-now, is of greatest importance to set the table for a welcoming choral experience.

There were some clear limitations of the study, in particular the fact that this was a one-off event, with no follow-up activities to monitor how any of these reported effects may have evolved over time. Future studies would benefit from a more longitudinal approach to better understand how such effects may evolve. Furthermore, while a 50% response rate to a survey might be considered representative of the target population, it does not tell us about any reasons for participants not responding. For example, some participants may have had less than positive experiences, but may not have felt comfortable sharing them.

In summary, despite some obvious methodological differences, this study concurs with similar previous studies about the fast social bonding effects of group singing (Pearce et al., 2015), and that these effects can extend to ‘strangers’ in an intercultural context when the situation is approached with an ethical spirit of care, mutuality, trust and collaboration. We highlight the important role of the venue as a mediator of these effects, in this instance a generous acoustic increasing the aesthetic experience leading to an amplification of the experience of communitas or ‘collective joy’. We note the important mediating role of the singing leader in expressing and modelling the attitudes and values that are hoped to be materialised through the activity. Overall, the study illustrates how the subjective perspective of the practitioner-researcher can help illuminate much of the richness and complexity of participant experience, especially when undertaken with an awareness of how we are imbricated within the situation we are seeking to understand through research. The study serves as an important reminder to each of us as researchers that our attitudes and values—and the ways in which they are held, modelled and expressed—play a significant role in mediating participant experience. An important implication for practice more generally is that these kinds of ethically-grounded value-based cultures of music making evolve over time, and are reflective of the quality of relationships that underpin them. Hence, more longitudinal studies of these kinds of cultures are required in order to develop a deeper understanding of such evolutionary processes.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Dave Camlin is an award-winning musician from Cumbria UK whose practice spans performance, composition, teaching, Community Music (CM) and research. He lectures in music education at Royal College of Music and Trinity-Laban Conservatoire in London, and formerly Sage Gateshead in NE UK. His research interests include: CM, especially group singing; music, health and wellbeing; musician education. He has pioneered the use of Sensemaker® 'distributed ethnography' as a research method for understanding artistic and cultural experiences. His recent book *Music Making and Civic Imagination* explores the potential of musicing as both a complex adaptive system (CAS) and a global resource for sustainability.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1: Summary of Geometric Signification Frameworks

No.	Framework title	X axis	Y axis	Z axis
1	Connection	Me	My People	My Place
2	Musical	Aesthetic	Paramusical	Participatory
3	Health and Wellbeing	Spiritual	Physical	Emotional / Mental
4	Identity	National	Local	Global
5	Civic Imagination	Inequality	Community Solidarity	Problem-solving
6	Social Impact	Individuals Involved	Society in General	N/A