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How Participants Envision Community Music in Welsh Men's Choirs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe choristers' perceptions of Welsh men's choir participation. Four choirs were observed in concert and rehearsal settings across Wales. Focus group interviews were conducted with between 4 and 10 members in each of the 4 choral settings for a total of 24 total interview respondents. The interviewees had a spread of years of male choir participation, from 4 months to 47 years, and a spread of ages, with members ranging in age from 32 to 89. The interview questions were designed to be flexible, yet focused. An interview guide was organized with a set of predetermined, open-ended semi-structured prompts, dealing with the topics: enjoyment, organizational structure, recruitment, language, music, challenges, and future directions. Results highlighted the musical and social benefits as well as nationalistic benefits that participants perceived. The singers also noted certain challenges that their groups needed to work through, such as recruitment, economic issues, health of the members, and a decrease of social time available. Conclusions address the results in terms of general community music issues, including the potential impact of community issues on the future of music making in the United States.

How Participants Envision Community Music in Welsh Men's Choirs

The United States is well known, worldwide for its school music programs that produce skilled musicians. Once students graduate, though, many opt to discontinue active participation in music. National assessments have documented this trend with low numbers of adults reporting engagement in music making (Jellison, 2000). Researchers have pondered why participation in school music may not translate to lifelong learning in music. The question is not an easy one, though. While Myers (2008) cited that there are actually large number of ensembles that are available to adults, and Leglar and Smith (2010) noted that community music is indeed prospering in highly populated areas, other issues may be at play in people's participation choices. For instance, young adults may need to balance job and family requirements with their own leisure time options (Rohwer & Rohwer, 2009). Retired adults may have the time to participate, but may have other issues such as health or finances to consider (Rohwer, 2010a). All of these issues as well as others may complicate a person's music participation decision.

Even in sites with stable community music environments, adult community groups may still be experiencing common challenges such as recruitment, retention, and aging. In order to address these possible issues in the most informed way so that lifelong music making can flourish, research is needed that can describe how groups work that are highly active and successful; what choices have these groups made and what are the members' perceptions about music participation?

In terms of community music, Wales is known world-wide for its men's choirs that rehearse in every small town, sometimes with even the smallest towns having multiple choirs. The following study will describe an investigation of community music in men's choirs in Wales in order to highlight community music making processes in an environment that has had a long and successful tradition of community music making. In this way, community musicians can

become better informed of music making in what might be considered a model community music setting.

Background

Wales is famous for its cultural festivals and community singing groups. Jones (1992) noted that the competitive festivals, called eisteddfods, are a part of the contemporary Welsh identity that has served to replace the industry-based mining identity. Trosset (1988) added that the eisteddfod is integrally linked to Welsh culture through the transmission of the Welsh language. Even with the strength and prevalence of the eisteddfods, however, Jones (1992) documented that the number of Welsh speakers has decreased over the years. Lindsey (1993) noted that even in the more Welsh-based area of North Wales, there are settings where English is far more acceptable than Welsh. Trosset (1986) stated that part of the challenge with Welsh is its diversity and complexity, making it a difficult language to master.

The issue of language usage in Wales has been integrally linked to changes in the structure of education throughout the 1900s. Historically, England and Wales have had challenges separating a national curriculum into the components that would be Welsh-based, with language instruction being one of the battlefronts (Daugherty & Elfed-Owens, 2003). The Education Reform act of 1988 added Welsh instruction to the schools in Wales and as of 1999 the Welsh Assembly Government had a voice in curricular discussions. But, as Sutherland (2000) stated, “it is unclear whether the enforced learning of the Welsh language at school will have lasting effects on the percentage of the adult population using that language” (p. 207).

Following suit with the national curricular discussions in the schools, Welsh music educators began discussions about a national music curriculum; basic issues such as the value of passive versus active music making and the importance of classical versus pop versus folk music have been debated, as well as curricular ownership hotbeds such as local or national control (Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994). In Welsh elementary music education circles projects aimed at improving music education have been designed (Russell-Bowie, 1993) and discussions have ensued concerning the curricular or extracurricular status of music and concerns with training of generalist teachers to teach music (Stevens, 1979). Garrett (2010) described a popular music education project in the community of South Wales that targeted disenfranchised youth, noting that “Wales has a traditionally strong association with music and song, but young people have largely rejected the traditional forms in favour of more universally accepted, and marketed, genres such as rap and techno” (p. 372).

Authors have linked language and music to the cultural heritage of Wales, both in traditional music and in pop music (Llewellyn, 2000; Wallis & Malm, 1983), with social media having a profound influence on the dissemination of Welsh music to other countries (Wallis & Malm, 1983). In America, there have been reenactments of Welsh eisteddfods and Gymanfa (non-competitive hymn singing) in an effort to enliven Welsh traditions on American soil (Drayson, 2003; Pohly, 1989; Schultz, 1984).

Little research attention has been given, however, to the traditional Welsh men's choirs that are prevalent in nearly every town in Wales. While many of these choirs perform at the eisteddfods and Gymanfa and so they are naturally imbedded in these contextual discussions of Wales, musicians in community settings could benefit from knowledge about the nature of music making in Wales in order to understand the context of Wales' support for the cultural heritage of singing. In contrast to the dearth of studies on Welsh men's choirs, many studies have been conducted in the U.S. about the workings of community music ensembles and the perceptions of the members (Black, 1999; Coffin, 2005; Coffman, 1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2008, 2009; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Dabback, 2006; Faivre-Ransom, 2001; Heintzleman, 1988; Kruse, 2008; Patterson, 1985; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, in press; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009).

In these adult music ensembles, participants have documented the importance of music making in their lives (Coffin, 2005; Coffman & Adamek, 1999; Faivre-Ransom, 2001), citing social (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Dabback, 2006; Kruse, 2008; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010b, in press; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) and musical (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Heintzleman, 1988; Kruse, 2008; Patterson, 1985; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010b, in press; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) benefits from participation in music. Research has also cited challenges with adult participation in ensembles, including such issues as health (Rohwer, 2005, 2008, in press; Rohwer & Coffman, 2006), finances (McCullough, 1981), attendance and recruitment (Rohwer, 2010b). It would be useful to determine if music ensemble members in another country have similar perceptions about benefits and challenges associated with music participation as have been documented in the U.S. The purpose of the current study was to describe choristers' perceptions of Welsh men's choir participation.

Methodology

For the current study, four choirs were observed in concert and rehearsal settings across Wales: one choir in the southwest, one in the southeast, one in the northwest, and one in the northeastern part of Wales. The choirs ranged in participant numbers from 18 to 50 members. All of the choirs had active performance schedules, with consistently large, paid audiences in attendance, and each of the groups had made recordings that they sold, with one of the groups recording under an internationally known label. Three of the choirs had male directors and a female accompanist, while one had a female director and a male accompanist. The groups rehearsed twice a week for 1-1/2 to 2 hours at schools, men's clubs, or churches. All four choirs sat in a semi-circular seating arrangement for rehearsals. The singers tended to sit while singing for the majority of the rehearsals, but would stand when the music director wanted their undivided attention.

Focus group interviews were conducted with members of the four groups as a way to document the group members' overall reactions and combined perspectives on a set of core community music issues. Given the social nature of a choral ensemble, focus groups were chosen as an authentic data gathering procedure (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Interviews were conducted with between 4 and 10 members in each of the four choral settings for a total of 24 total interview respondents. The four locations of the choirs allowed for multiple focus groups to be conducted

on the same topics in different settings, thereby highlighting a cross section of views. The interviewees were linked by their common experiences in participating in a men's choir. The interviewees had diversity due to their spread of years of male choir participation, from 4 months to 47 years, and a spread of ages, with members ranging in age from 32 to 89.

The interview questions were designed to be flexible, yet focused. An interview guide was organized with a set of predetermined, open-ended semi-structured prompts, dealing with the topics: enjoyment, organizational structure, recruitment, language, music, challenges, and future directions. Recordings of the interviews were analyzed for consistent topics that emerged. The content areas were described, with respondent trends and quotes being used to highlight each area (Creswell, 1998). The trends noted in the study were not documented with frequencies or percentages in order to avoid the impression of generalizability (Fern, 2001). Each content area was determined by the primary author and analyzed for consistency by the second author.

Results

Choir participants in the current study consistently noted both musical and social benefits from their participation in their ensemble.

You join the choir and all of a sudden you have 60 or 70 best friends. It's like being in an exclusive club, and the buzz you get off of being on stage when you've got that four part harmony. It's an unbelievable feeling...it's the singing that combines us.

Being typically Welsh, you play rugby, you have a drink; you have a drink, you want to sing. You get too old to play rugby, but you're not too old to have a drink or sing. I love the fellowship we have here and since we have our own bar here in our facility, we have everything we need. My only regret is that I didn't join years ago.

When I had my new hip put in, the choir was my reason to get out of bed: get back to the choir; get back to the choir. It's the whole package why people join and stay. The collegiality of this extended family, the singing....and let's face it: people who sing are usually happy, aren't they? And even if you have had a rough day, you sing for a while and you have forgotten it all.

Some participants noted challenges with the social component.

Any social time we have is in the choir rehearsals or sometimes after a concert; we used to do a lot more when we were younger. Socially the choir used to be very strong, but not so much now; one reason is that we draw from a wider area. That being said, I think if you ask any choir member who has lost a partner, then you realize the value of the choir; it's such a difference being a member of the choir—the support we all have from the choir.

We don't have the time to meet outside of choir...we are doing so many concerts now that we don't have time like we used to.

People used to join because of industry: the slate mines and coal mines...that was the core and the community spirit of the choirs. What can you do to get away from the dirty environment where you were working...something totally different....well, let's sing....the eisteddfods came out of that...the poetry and singing competitions, but now that link to industry is gone, so the bond of people isn't there from the start. We have to really work at those bonds to make the group a family. It's harder than it used to be when I joined (coughs) years ago.

The most common reason for joining a group was having a connection through a choir member, either friend or family.

Most people join because they know someone. It's a bit daunting to come along on a first night without knowing anyone. I sat and listened for the first month and finally started singing.

I joined because I have friends and family that joined. It was like a club.

I was brought up with music. I've always sung from a young age...always loved the sound of male voice choirs all me life but never really envisioned bein' part of one but um this gentleman spent quite a long time persuading me. I'm at the stage now, I think, where I was able to commit because it is a commitment...but it's been thoroughly worthwhile. I absolutely love it.

All of the choirs noted a decline in the younger generation's participation in men's choirs.

Recruitment challenges are different than they were 40 years ago. More young people go away to college whereas a lot of us stayed in town and did apprenticeships in local industries. We stayed and joined a choir.

I think the reason that there aren't as many men in the choirs is death and aging. The average age of the choirs around here is what? 100? No really, probably 60 or so. There is a gap with the young people. We need more because we are really aging as a group. We have problems enrolling young members. Pop groups are cool to the youth, but something traditional like singing in a male choir, no. It's not what it used to be. The youngsters have more distractions. The son joining with the father is not often the case anymore.

It is very difficult to attract the young people. Work commitments affect attendance. Even the youngest members make a great effort to attend the concerts, though. It is a big commitment to join a choir and the youngsters with work and families and such just don't have the time.

Choir members consistently documented the Welsh language as one reason for their continuation.

The male voice choirs have survived on the language and the feeling and the passion for heritage. Because the chapels were Welsh and that's where the music came from, I would suggest that the language has a strong influence on the choirs.

Some of the best choral pieces are in Welsh. The audience always wants to hear the Welsh songs....they have heard it in chapel and school and choirs sing in Welsh at Rugby matches.

Even though I am not a Welsh speaker it feels quite natural to sing it. It's something from within. There's something very emotional about the Welsh language...I think...something unique.

Traditional Welsh hymns are what calls to the audience. I prefer these too. They are more exciting. But, if we only sing in Welsh, then the audience doesn't understand the text, so we try to balance the pieces.

Rehearsal procedures for the groups tended to center around rote learning techniques.

Since music instruction in the schools was for assembly....for hymns in the morning, our choir members sometimes never learned to read music. The accompanist plays the parts for us on new pieces.

I suppose there's got to be an advantage to be able to read music, but it's not an essential thing to be in a male voice choir.

Ninety percent of our choir doesn't read music. I've been here 45 years and I still don't read music. None of us would classify ourselves as musicians in that sense.

Participants noted that the musical directors (MDs) of the ensembles tended to have primary control over the instructional choices, including repertoire.

The conductor chooses the music (interjection by other participant) BUT, having said that, if the majority of the choir are not comfortable with it we will moan and groan and maybe he will change his mind. There is a lot of music that we rotate. We only sing a few new pieces each year.

The MDs often differ on sound. For a while we had one that wanted us to sing really soft...tried to change us. We like the ones who try to change us gradually.

Sometimes the pieces are chosen due to the size of the choir. We used to have 120 people and now we don't so that changes what we sing. And, most choirs these days sing "pop" songs...some overdue it.

The participants stated that the concerts that the groups present are an integral part of the choir's persona.

Churches and organizations contact us about a year in advance to schedule concerts. We limit it to about 30 concerts a year. The money goes to charities, the music, the director, the accompanist, and any other costs. Last year we made 20,000 pounds for charity.

We tour a lot and do a lot of competitions and concerts and now with our national recording contract, we do a lot. Our first album went gold in 3 days, then platinum.

We agree to do a concert and agree on a fee of 2000 pounds or so and that pays for our expenses out of that and then we keep the rest. It is surprising the expenses you have now a days. It looks good on paper, but with petrol going up as well...but of course, we are all amateurs; we do it 'cause we love singing and we don't bother with that so much.

Across the various ensembles there was a accepted feeling of competition.

One choir has been a big hit. The majority of their songs were English popular music. I doubt they would sing some of the big pieces. They stressed out to choir, too, doing the recordings for their CDS, and they did a 21 day tour of the UK. How do you get 21 days off of work?

There's a Welsh thing, you see: it should have been us; it should have been us that got the record contract. We were at the right place at the right time, yes, but.... I can understand some of the envy...

We do the eisteddfods sometimes. We enjoy the competitions. Pluckey weekends. But we don't always agree with the results....

When asked about what they knew about community music in the U.S., the participants consistently noted certain genres, the public school programs, and style characteristics:

Gospel sings from the heart...love that!, and barbershop choirs sing such tight harmonies...when we are in competitions with them we get scared.

Music is so structured in the US...it is very professional sounding, even with the youngsters. You are really known for your school music, right, but it gets lost after that, doesn't it?

The US choirs all sing a lot softer....softer....we tend to attack our music a lot more. And they are very technical.

Participants noted recent changes to the men's choir movement.

Only Men Aloud have brought a new face to men's choirs. Many of the Boys Aloud members are from our town, but they won't join our choir because it isn't high profile enough for them.

There have been a lot of television movements related to choirs lately, like Rock Choir. It seems to be the way. On the last choir standing show many of the groups have been Wales-based. The winners were traditional but went more poppy and had movement by the end.

The wives are a different matter now than they were years ago. One of the wives of a prospective member said, "that would be wonderful for my husband to join; we could travel with you"; and I said, "well it doesn't work like that" and she said, "well, he's not joining." So there are social changes that are impacting membership. Some choirs are now changing and taking their wives on tour.

Choral members also noted how recent economic challenges have impacted many other facets of choir participation.

We don't do too many big trips any more so that makes it easier on the young people's schedules.

Traveling has just become too expensive. And the eisteddfods don't have as many choirs from abroad anymore. Everything is just too expensive....

Most of the people at our concerts are on holiday and the economy has affected our audience attendance. And when we schedule trips we have to consider cost for our members....as well as issues of scheduling and health issues with traveling. It's complicated.

With the economic situation, people don't have the money to go to the pubs; it costs an arm and a leg now to go out for a drink – we're losing that social aspect. It's a shame, but singing in the pubs is a rare event now. And, we used to get new members in the pubs – that was how a lot of younger members were drawn into the choirs – hearing people sing and liking the songs and joining in. Now that they don't go to pubs or chapel, they don't hear the songs and then they don't join.

The most common change that the singers wanted to make to their choral experience was the size of the group.

"Bigger!" But there is a good side to being small. We are a family. We support each other and attend each other's family's weddings and funerals and such. I think that is

because we are small, not a competition choir and we're not the best and we know it but that is ok.

It's the same everywhere. We are all worried about numbers of members. People have other things to do now. Back to when choirs were formed: no televisions or radio so everyone went to chapel or church, but that doesn't happen now. There are alternatives. We try and recruit. You can't just sit back and expect people to come to you now. People get older too. I'm one of the younger members and I'm 62.

Even us....one of the largest choirs....we'd like more people. Being in a choir that folds up is very sad.

Conclusions

As in previous research that has documented social (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Dabback, 2006; Kruse, 2008; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010b, in press; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) and musical (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Heintzelman, 1988; Kruse, 2008; Patterson, 1985; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010b, in press; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) benefits from adult music ensemble participation, the participants in the current study also had strong feelings about the beneficial aspects of music making, with social and musical benefits being the most prevalent responses. The addition of the Welsh language as an integral part of the music making added a nationalism component to the list of proposed benefits in this study. Having Welsh songs as part of the program made the performance experience not only about the music and the social environment, but made the performances authentically Welsh for both the performers and their audience. This authenticity and cultural connection may be one of the keys as to why Welsh men's choirs are such an integral, supported part of the community in Wales.

While Wales is known world-wide for their men's choirs, the Welsh choir members' perceptions of music in the U.S. were spread across (1) styles of music (barbershop, gospel), (2) knowledge of the quality music making in the public schools, and (3) the knowledge that the choral groups in the U.S. sing with a different sound. Clearly, the U.S. is not one thing in terms of music and that may be one of the challenges of music making in the community. The U.S. is a mix of national backgrounds without a common musical heritage that is current in today's society. This diversity can make recruitment an even greater challenge for community-based groups.

Perhaps communities could concentrate efforts on starting ensembles that align most clearly with the cultural heritage of the areas in which individual's reside. If adults want to begin participation in music, having that experience relate to their upbringing and be relevant to their current life experience may make the recruitment process more straight forward. So, it may be that mariachi groups could be advocated as a lifelong learning opportunity in some specific communities and bluegrass groups in others, for instance, instead of assuming that one type of group will work in all communities. Audiences with similar cultural backgrounds may be able to

resonate with this cultural link as well. This is not to say that diversity isn't valued in our current society. But, for ensembles to start and grow, they may need support from the community, and any links that can be utilized to help this process should be considered.

In terms of organizational structure, the Welsh choirs have similar procedures to other choirs across the world, with choirs often sitting in a traditional choral set-up and learning parts or the whole of songs by ear, and having a director in charge and doing concerts and feeling a bit of friendly competition toward like-ensembles around the area. Even with the ubiquity and continued success of the men's choirs in Wales, the participants in the current study still noted organizational challenges that have been documented in previous U.S. research (Rohwer, 2005, 2008, 2010b, in press; Rohwer & Coffman, 2006); issues such as challenges with recruitment, attendance and scheduling, health, travel, and the economy are issues that may be endemic to community music participation. There may not be "solutions" to these issues, so much as "concerted efforts" at alleviating the challenges. It may be useful to have the members and the music director communicate about the best, most contextually appropriate ways to work through these challenging issues (that are within the dedication and financial means of the participants).

Social challenges were also mentioned by the participants in the current study, with such issues as many performances, spread of singers to a wider geographic area, and finances being perceived as impacting the amount of social time that the singers would like to have. If finances are beginning to be an issue in Wales ensembles, as has also been documented in U.S. community ensembles (McCullough, 1981), then a variety of alleviating efforts should be considered by groups, such as finding donors to finance social events, and carpooling to performance venues and bars afterward. The social component is such an integral part of the community music experience that it would be a pity if social time between group members was impacted negatively.

While current Welsh men's choirs are carrying forward the choral tradition even though the initiating contact of working in the mines together is gone, these groups continue to ponder ways to grow beyond history to encourage choral participation. It may be important, then, for all community groups to envision novel ways to attract and retain new participants and specifically younger participants. While recruiting new members through friend and family ties may still be a useful networking tool, it may not be enough to maintain high enrollment in ensembles. It may be that the media is going to need to be an ever-present part of marketing for community programs in Wales and possibly beyond. Business models of advertising may need to be added to the word of mouth recruitment model of the past. Understanding the target audience for concerts and promoting the group to the constituents is a basic marketing strategy. This marketing can be done using the traditional media of tv, radio, and newspaper press releases, and/or by moving forward in technology; having an internet site for the group, blogging, and using social media resources such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ may all promote the group in a more up-to-date fashion than word of mouth.

Even in the traditional modes of marketing like television public relations, current television shows are putting a new spin on marketing. As the Welsh men's choir members noted, shows,

like Last Choir Standing, may be novel ways to get the word out about the value of the choral experience. Especially with young adults moving away to college and starting families, television as a PR function may have a widespread ability to recruit across age and demographic lines. Finding novel ways to approach media for the benefit of promoting community music groups seems like an important, yet virtually untapped resource.

While Wales has found great success in maintaining the strength and integrity of their men's choirs, even in changing times, the message seems clear that all good community efforts need attention and significant work to maintain currency and usefulness. Just as the U.S. is pondering ways to increase enrollment and deal with scheduling conflicts of the members, and how to integrate social time into the mix, so are Welsh choirs. Directors who keep a constant pulse on their members' interests and concerns may be doing one of the most important things for the health and well-being of their group. Also, considering new ways to use technology and media to recruit and retain young singers and new audience members, may also be an important consideration in the years to come. Reflection and vision for each group, then, may be key to continuance and success. Research in community music may help these efforts by adding perceptual information from different styles of ensembles so that pertinent questions can remain at the forefront of discussions about music in lifelong learning.

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