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Adult Motivations in Community Orchestra Participation: A Pilot Case Study of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra (New Jersey)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations of adults in choosing to participate in community orchestras. This paper identifies many of those motivations and examines the reasons and implications of why the adults in the study chose to continue to play in community orchestras. The investigation was conducted in 2007 via a case study of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, a community orchestra located in Northern New Jersey. The adults selected for interview were members of the orchestra. The responses were uniform: love of playing one's instrument, desire for musical challenge, inspiration for practice and commitment to the organization. There was virtually no difference in response from professional vs. non-professional musicians. The data is valuable in understanding the needs of middle-aged adult learners, informal learning practices and establishing goals for music educators in training students for community music involvement after high school.

Introduction

Community orchestra participation is a viable and active form of adult informal education. In the state of New Jersey, where this study was conducted, there are sixty-five ensembles listed with the Association of New Jersey Orchestras (www.anjero.org), only a handful of which are fully professional or youth orchestras. The existence of so many ensembles begs the question of what the motivations are of adults to participate in a community orchestra.

Adult education is an area of music education research that has been generally overlooked by researchers, yet has the potential to provide much insight into understanding music learning (Mark, 1996). MENC: The National Association for Music Education (hereafter referred to as MENC) has called for an acknowledgment by music educators that they are training the adults of tomorrow, so insight into why adults pursue music as an avocation is critical in developing school curricula that looks beyond high school (Yarbrough, 2000).

In addition, those in music education need to pay attention to the training of those teaching adult learners as music education students may eventually become community orchestra directors. Particular training is required in order to understand that segment of the learning population.

Community music-making is more than a group of people passing their leisure time dabbling with an instrument. It is a pro-active, important component of lifelong learning in music. An educational institution, community orchestras provide concert attendance opportunities for the public and technical and musical development opportunities for the players. In addition, community orchestras are a vehicle for continuing education for professional musicians. As orchestra members, they can continue to hone their ensemble skills, maintain their performance level and gain, in a practical format, new ideas for the ensembles that they direct.

Background in the Literature

Profile of the Adult Learner in Music

Kim and Creighton (1999) collected data on adult education reporting that “[p]articipation in adult education has grown steadily over the past three decades, increasing to 46 percent in 1999” (p. 1). It is unlikely that the growth has not waned in the years since their study. There are a plethora of musical activities pursued by adults such as Elderhostels, community music ensembles, adult piano classes, ethnic music groups and church choirs (Coffman, 2002a; Veblen & Olsson, 2002). While much of adult education in Kim and Creighton’s general survey was of the required type, (work-related, professional development), or continuing-education oriented (ESL, GED, apprenticeship), the percentage participating in personal interest courses (of which community orchestras would be considered a type) was 21 percent, a healthy number. Considering that professional musicians participate in community orchestras, note should be taken of the statistics for work-related courses as well. In a study of adult learners, Kim, et al. reported that “the most frequently reported reasons for participation in work-related courses were maintaining or improving skills or knowledge (95 percent).” Having the opportunity to maintain one’s knowledge of orchestral excerpts learned in college or to learn major solos can be a motivating factor in a professional’s choice to join a community orchestra.

Stebbins (1992) categorized adult participation into the “P-A-P” system (Professionals, Amateurs, Public). This system applies to the community orchestra where the professional and the amateur are found side-by-side, both components serving the third component, the public. Looking at the orchestra as both a community in itself as well as a part of the community at large was addressed in articles by Palisca (1976), Silverman (2005), Olson (2005) and Coffman (2002a).

Palisca commented, “the impersonality of the phonograph and radio has created a need for personal identification with live makers of music” while Silverman highlighted the act of coming together from different backgrounds for the purpose of making music together. Olson confirmed this in a report of his study of 2003 (in Olson 2005), identifying social interaction in the name of music-making as an important element of community orchestra membership. He reminded us of the sense of ownership and identity by members of the group, a theme that resonates through the case study presented in this paper. Coffman listed peer acceptance, group achievement and creativity with a group as positive outcomes of community music making.

The notion that a community orchestra identifies with the local community is made clear by viewing the websites of various orchestras and by reading an ensemble’s history and role in the local area. Many groups include the canon of classical repertoire, as well as commissioning new works, providing audiences with listening (and learning) occasions at their doorstep.

The Participation of Professionals and Non-Professionals

Community orchestras consist of professional musicians as well, bringing rise to the question of whether there is a conflict between professional and amateur. Dabback (2005) acknowledged a

difference between participants as follows: “Some of them view musical activity as a form of work (professionals, apprentices), and others approach their activities as serious leisure (amateurs).” The amateurs who join these orchestras take their time there very seriously, enabling them to combine efforts with the professionals on the roster. Boyd et al. (1996) commented that amateurs are as devoted as professionals, but don’t make a living by playing music.

For professionals, beyond maintaining skills as mentioned earlier, participation provides a form of leisure. Boyd, et al. suggested a form of leisure that has “been defined as compensatory, where the individual chooses an activity to satisfy those needs unmet during work...”

The amateur has had an important role in music history both in commissioning works and as skilled performers. Palisca (1996) states, “there is no reason why a musical amateur cannot also claim the attention of a community audience, even one that pays to hear him.”

All of this considered, coupled with the long and rich history of the community orchestra structure as a mix of non-professional and professional, there does not appear to be a profound conflict between the two musician types.

The Particular Characteristics of the Adult Music Participant

Bowles (1991) points out that little is known of the “musical characteristics” of adult amateurs. The motivations of adults’ pursuit of leisure activities have been studied by Stebbins (1992). He established nine areas of rewards for participation which are then grouped in two classes: personal rewards and social rewards.

Personal rewards are “1) self-actualization, 2) self-expression, 3) self-conception, 4) self-gratification, 5) self-enrichment, 6) re-creation or re-generation and 7) monetary returns.” The social rewards class is briefer, identified as “1) social attraction and 2) group accomplishment” (p. 94 – 95).

Jeong Hwa Park, in her 1995 dissertation investigating the social organization of amateurs in community orchestras, identified these participants by category: “1) The Adult Novices, 2) The Retired Professional Musicians, 3) Professional Dropouts, 4) Music as a Second Career, 5) Music Teachers, 6) Amateurs Who Play As Well, If Not Better Than, the Professionals” (p. 154 – 158).

Much of the research on lifelong learning in music focuses its attention on adults of post-retirement age or those with physical or mental limitations. While it is encouraging that much of the research has considered the role of adult music learning as an aide or adjunct to music therapy and geriatric studies, there appears to be a research gap concerning those adults who are of pre-retirement age and are physically and mentally healthy, which describes the majority of the musicians in community orchestras. Patricia Ann Chiodo, in her 1997 dissertation points out that “[t]he adult music participant has been largely ignored by researchers but it is exactly such a person that is the exemplar of the lifelong commitment to music that music educators

seek to produce.” While Chiodo may be speaking broadly about all adult music participants, this writer would argue that this statement is particularly applicable to the “middle-aged” adult learner.

While socialization is often listed as a priority in community music participation (Aspin, 2000; Cavitt, 2005; Coffman, 2002b; Jutras, 2006), there is research that suggests that performance and active music making are of a higher priority (Chiodo, 1997; Darrough, 1992). Jacquelyn Boswell’s (1992) discussion focused on the type of learner characterizing the adult participant. These people were seeking musical experiences rather than filling social or physical needs. Tom Bradshaw, in his *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (1998), provided encouraging numbers in regards to adult participation and especially in terms of those performing music.

A Subject for Future Research

Adult education, or lifelong learning, has received comparatively less attention as a subject for music education research. Much of the literature regarding this area is itself a call for more research in the field, arguing that music learning does not end with high school graduation and therefore school music programs need to begin to change the focus and direction taken in their curricula.

MENC has taken the lead in stimulating research on lifelong learning in music. In an editorial in the “Adult & Community Music Education SRIG News,” Cheley Bowles (1999) summed up how important this educational area is to several different facets of music with a convincing and impassioned call for more and better attention to be paid to adult learning in music:

...we must proactively consider our responsibility of designing quality music learning experiences for adults starting with 18 and then throughout the adult life stages to correspond to continuing mental, physical, and aesthetic development. In addition, we must recognize that the current adult generation is crucial to the music education cycle, in that it teaches its own children values and skills, populates our audiences and community organizations, and determines and votes on arts legislation.

MENC also folded its focus on adult education into its forward-looking “Vision 2020” statements. Writing on the relationship between schools and other areas of music education, Cornelia Yarbrough (2000) called for music educators to begin thinking in broader terms about how music education fits into the larger community music picture. She offered a warning to music educators not to ignore adult learners or music participants since their recreational engagement in music is an aspect of music education as much as is a high school orchestra.

Michael Mark (1996) agreed that adult learning has been ignored and coupled that with informal learning. He went on to suggest that informal learning, including the “musical life of the community,” offers opportunities for research. It is particularly special for the researcher, he pointed out, that the subjects would be individuals who participate in music in a willing,

joyful way. Kevin Olson (2005) and Sheri Jaffurs (2006) discussed community music making in a broad scope, pointing out the school's role in developing informal learning and community music.

A Brief History of Community Orchestras

Early Colonial American orchestras resembled those operating at the same time in England known as “provincial orchestras.” These ensembles performed in towns outside the cities and were made of both professional and non-professional players. In their study of early orchestra history, Spitzer and Zaslav (2004) inform us of early American orchestra activity,

The Southwark Theatre, however, opened in the 1760s, and by the [*sic.*] 1769 it had assembled the core of a professional orchestra [with] amateurs who performed in the theater for their own amusement and perhaps also as a sort of public service (p. 301).

Spitzer and Zaslav also reported on the Santa Cecilia Society (founded 1762) of Charleston, South Carolina who “sponsored concerts by a mixed orchestra of gentleman performers and professionals” (p. 301).

These small ensembles of ten to twenty players functioned in towns in a manner similar to the town band, but with less prominence (Crawford, 2001). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, orchestras were assembled for specific purposes as was seen with the so-called “Social Orchestra” (Knight, 1993, Crawford, 2001), or were short-lived, which was the case of the Winchester (MA) Orchestral Society which only operated from 1909 – 1917.

It generally appears that the formation of professional orchestras in the big cities eclipses the town orchestras in terms of attention paid to them in research.

A Profile of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra^[1]

At over seventy years old, The Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra is one of the oldest community orchestras in the country.^[2] It performs in Teaneck, New Jersey, which is approximately seven miles from New York City; this is a suburban area rich with culture and artists. It should be noted that I have been a member of the orchestra since 2002.

The orchestra was founded in 1936 as the Teaneck Symphony Society by a group of musicians who came together to create an orchestra that would perform outside of New York. The name of the orchestra was changed to the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra in 1968, adopting the name of the county in which it resides.

Today, as the resident arts ensemble of Teaneck, it enjoys a level of support from that community in terms of free rehearsal space in a local school and waived custodial fees. A cooperative arrangement, the orchestra has in the past invited students to sit in during rehearsals to benefit from the learning opportunity.

There are about seventy regular members of the orchestra. Through its history, that roster has represented a mix of professional and non-professional players and working and retired people. In its early years, the Bergen Philharmonic played to large audiences (800 – 1,000) and featured marquis soloists such as Van Cliburn, Roberta Peters and Artur Balsam. Until 2006 the orchestra, via a single donor, sponsored a Young Artists Competition. It is not surprising to learn that, as is the case for many arts groups, audience attendance began to dwindle over time. The orchestra faced continual financial difficulties including the loss of the competition sponsor. The marquis soloists were not forthcoming.

In the Spring of 2006, the Board of Directors announced to the orchestra that they would be out of funds after the November 2006 concert and would cease operations at that time. The orchestra members were very upset by this news and wanted to find a way for the orchestra to continue, but the Board was set with its plans to conclude business. At first it was unwilling to allow the orchestra to find a way to move forward and blocked efforts to form a new board (which would include adopting the name, and gaining access to financial statements and donor information). Eventually, however, a new board was convened and plans were underway to repair the financial picture of the orchestra. The November concert was, in the end, a concert of both conclusion and re-birth. The new board and conductor appeared optimistic, although cautiously so, about the orchestra's future. Among the changes were a less expensive performance space, a change in the ticket structure to attract more families and college students and a move to an all-volunteer orchestra (except the conductor).

The group was forced to address the questions of commitment and identity—a common occurrence in an organization. Stephen Boyle (2003) in his case study of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra states,

In an organization's life cycle, any number of major events can trigger circumstances that force the organization to question its identity or *raison d'être*. Such events include its initial founding, the loss of a sustaining element, the achievement of goals, very rapid growth or decline, and change in corporate status (p. 12).

In regaining its footing, the Bergen Philharmonic's rehearsals were better attended than before and a new energy surrounded the group. The motivations of these adults to stay with this orchestra despite what may have been a rough road ahead are essential to the difficult task facing its administrators.

Methodology

Participation Selection

The participants in this qualitative study were selected from the members of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. The sample was a purposive one; the participants were selected based on their time and experience with the orchestra. There were seven people interviewed: three

professional musicians and four non-professionals. Of that group, five are working while two are retired. This project was proposed to the president of the orchestra board who enthusiastically approved it. As all the participants are adults, no parental consent was necessary and each adult was given and subsequently signed a consent form.

Data Collection

This was a pilot study, restricted in time and scope. There were three components in the research: interviews of orchestra members, rehearsal observation as a participatory observer and establishment of the historical background of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra.

All of the interviews and e-mailed responses took place between February 4, 2007 and February 11, 2007. Interviews with orchestra members took place either over the telephone or by face-to-face interview, depending on the preference of the subject. There appeared to be little difference in ease of interviewing between the face-to-face interview and the phone interview. Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. The face-to-face interviews were taped in addition to note-taking on the part of the interviewer. In two cases, both telephone and face-to-face interview became impossible, so the questions were e-mailed. The interview protocol was intended to be semi-structured, allowing for new questions to be added at the interview as well as elaboration on the part of the subject. While the e-mailed responses were less spontaneous than the live or telephone format, the subjects were instructed to elaborate at will and they took advantage of the opportunity. The interview schedule was designed in three sections of open-ended questions (sixteen questions in total): demographic, past and current musical experience and questions specific to the motivation for membership in the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. Questions included query into why they joined, what they enjoy most and what they enjoy least about orchestra membership.

Participatory observation was conducted. As a flutist in the ensemble, I purposely observed one rehearsal during the data collection period. The observation was subjective and was done with the intention of capturing the interactions of the group at large.

For historical background of community orchestras and the Bergen Philharmonic in particular, research in print material such as journals and newspapers was conducted as well as an interview with the president of the board employing an interview schedule of seven questions.

Delimitations and Qualifications

Adult music education is a broad topic; this paper concerns itself only with community orchestras. Research on community bands is limited, but research on community orchestras is very thin and more contributions need to be made here.

This case study was limited to members of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. The interview portion was limited to seven members, both professional and amateur. This was not a quantitative study; the interviews provided narrative and “real-life” information. This writer

had been a member of the orchestra for approximately six years; therefore some of the background information on the orchestra comes from personal observations.

Research attention was focused on adults aged 18 – 65, the age group represented by many of those involved in community orchestras.

This was a study limited by time and scope and therefore has likely missed some subtle feelings on the part of other orchestra members. The answers given by the seven subjects were not intended to be fully comprehensive of the orchestra or the final word on adult motivation.

The Bergen Philharmonic operates just outside of New York City in a culturally rich environment. There are, in fact, five such orchestras in Bergen County, so some of the members' comments might be affected by the number of choices they have for community orchestra participation in this area. This may be why the social aspect was so much less important than one might expect, and it is possible that it would take on more of a priority in a geographic area with fewer music participation options.

Major Findings and Discussion

The aim of this study was to discover the motivations of adults in choosing to participate in community orchestras. The three data gathering systems: interviews, participant observation and literature research, were triangulated and demonstrated consistency in the findings in all three areas.

Three Major Themes^[3]

The responses were coded, after which three themes emerged:

1. the desire to remain active musically
2. the learning opportunity presented by participation
3. frustrations in participation

These themes are confirmed in the body of research explored for this project.

The desire to remain active musically

Each subject expressed the need or desire to remain active on their instrument. All had been musically involved during their school days by taking lessons and participating in school ensembles.

Remaining musically active is a common priority for the non-professional. Without the orchestra, there would no incentive to practice or play music. This was mentioned by each of the non-professionals interviewed. One said,

“It makes you play; otherwise you would never pick up the instrument.”

Another commented,

“It compels me not to be lazy in continuing to play [my instrument].”

While one would think that a professional is already active musically, either as a teacher, performer or both, the professionals here had a variety of reasons for participation.

Personal fulfillment was one, as expressed by one member who teaches school music who commented, “It’s breaking away from reality after a while. It’s a musical outlet.”

Considering the limited opportunities in professional orchestras, these professionals noted that without the community orchestra, it is unlikely that they would have the chance to play the orchestral repertoire at all. One of the professionals interviewed emphasized that,

“It expands my knowledge and ability to play repertoire. It’s an opportunity to play major repertoire.”

This sentiment is found in the research as well. Jeong Hwa Park (1995), in investigating amateurs as they function socially in community orchestras pointed out that “the number one reason why people join amateur music groups is because of the opportunity to make music” (p. 144).

An aspect of continued musical involvement concerned the opportunity to work under the conductor who is currently at the post. He has an international reputation and the orchestra members interviewed, both professional and non-professional, found him inspiring and enjoyable to work under.

The learning opportunity presented by participation

For everyone interviewed, involvement in a community orchestra was a learning experience. All of the subjects cited the conductor’s knowledge and conducting style as a major aspect of this. The opportunity to learn new repertoire and be challenged by it was universal to all questioned. For the professional musician, additional points were the opportunity to learn new orchestral repertoire and to work on ensemble blending.

Learning is a broad concept; for one subject, playing in the orchestra provided the chance to improve technique on a newly learned instrument saying, “I decided to switch to violin...my aspiration is to play violin as well as I did flute.” For another, it was conducting lessons to bring back to the middle school band. He said, “I get free conducting lessons every time I go.”

Frustrations

While the interviews were, on the whole, of a positive nature in regards to time spent in a community orchestra, one interview question asked what was least enjoyable. The issue of frustrations was more predictable for the non-professionals than the professional musicians. Comments were similar to information found in the research, most notably: self-preparedness, lack of ability or time to practice. The frustrations for the professional musician were far more individual in nature. One commented on the lack of a musically satisfying experience playing with this level of performer. Another made mention of egos getting in the way, while a third commented about poor rehearsal attendance. It was clear that the professional musicians did not agree on the frustrating aspects, and that those less than appealing aspects were not primary enough to deter anyone from participation.

An over-arching theme

All those interviewed expressed a strong positive feeling about playing in this orchestra and in community orchestras in general. Of the seven interviewed, four performed with another community orchestra besides the Bergen Philharmonic. They approached rehearsals with professionalism and seriousness of purpose, as was observed during rehearsal. This would appear not to be isolated to the Bergen Philharmonic. In reporting on the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony for *The Wall Street Journal*, Laurence Scherer Barrymore (2002, December 4) writes,

“Amateur orchestra” usually conjures up images of George Booth’s New Yorker cartoons: a motley band of duffers out of tune and out of time—“OK, Hattie, Beethoven’s Fifth and floor it!” But if there is any truth to this cliché it scarcely applies to groups like [this one] (p. D10).

Observations made at the rehearsal were that any socializing is left to break time and did not spill over into rehearsal time. In fact, despite what one might think, socializing was not a high priority for those interviewed. They did not look at their time in the community orchestra as particularly social. There were comments like, “the people are nice” and “I enjoy their company at rehearsal,” but no sense that creating a social life through their orchestra participation was a motivating factor. While all listed the conductor as part of the overall positive experience, each said he/she would continue with the orchestra even if he left. They participate because they love being a part of the music making.

The passion and love for this orchestra was made evident by the enthusiasm on the part of the members for continuing despite the hurdles ahead for the organization. Only a very few left the organization after the reformation of the board.

Conclusions

This study was conducted in 2007. Since then, the orchestra, while continuing to face financial and personnel challenges, has continued to produce a season of concerts. The season had consisted of four concerts before the re-structuring of the board. It was reduced to three

concerts. Remuneration of professional musician participants was renewed in the form of an honorarium, not a full fee that the musicians were receiving before. According to the orchestra president (personal communication, October 28, 2009), “The reason for compensation was just wanting to be able to give back to the musicians. Not because we thought they would not stay without compensation. Those that are with us, are dedicated to the orchestra. So, I guess you would also be correct to say that it is in respect as well. Nothing else. Pure and simple.”^[1] The intention of this study was to begin to get a “feel” for why adults choose to participate in an ensemble. For those involved in this study, their professionalism in preparation suggested that they take their involvement seriously and saw it as more as a continuation of their life’s work, whether vocational or avocational.

It is clear from previous research as well as the answers collected in the interviews that there is the possibility for an active musical life in adulthood and there exists the means for pursuing it. While the number of subjects in the study was limited, the uniformity in their answers suggests that a similar uniformity would exist in a wider study of adult motivations in community music participation. Further study of adults who participate in community music would contribute valuable information not only to those learning how to best serve this population, but to educate teachers as to the informal learning possibilities for their students when they leave the K – 12 learning environment. The recurring themes of an interest in remaining musically active and the opportunity to take advantage of a learning opportunity are ones that can be addressed not only by those instructing in adult education, but in school music as well.

When considering the long history of community orchestras and their numbers in this country, the question of why more young people are not encouraged to join these groups is raised. The community orchestra is fertile ground for informal learning and should be considered by music educators to be a potential aspect of a student’s music education while still in high school. Three of the subjects interviewed joined the orchestra while in high school and all three cited this as an important part of their student musical life. Not all three pursued music professionally, but there is no doubt that their involvement made a lasting impression. What is more significant is that when, as adults, they could have quit, they did not. They had made a lifelong musical connection.

Notes

^[1]All of the information in this section is derived from the personal knowledge of the author, who is a member of the ensemble, an interview with the orchestra’s president and news clippings.

^[2]See <http://www.boerger.org/c-m/index.shtml> for a fairly comprehensive listing of community bands and orchestras in the United States. This writer checked the websites of the listed groups for number of years in existence. It is entirely possible that an orchestra with a

history longer than the Bergen Philharmonic (which is not listed on the website) is not listed here.

[3]All of the subjects interviewed were promised anonymity; therefore no names are attached to quotations.

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Carol Shansky holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in music education degree from Boston University. She is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Music at Molloy College (NY-USA) and a facilitator in Boston University's online Master of Music Education program in addition to maintaining a private flute studio. Her research interests are community music and informal learning, applied lessons and historical research. A flutist, Dr. Shansky has performed in various venues including Weill Recital Hall (Carnegie Hall), the Palais de l'Athenée (Geneva, Switzerland), the Little Theatre at Tanglewood (MA-USA) and WNYC-FM (New York City) in addition to performing in orchestras for shows and concerts.
