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## Church musicians' participation perceptions: Applications to community music

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to describe the participation perceptions of church choir musicians. Twenty-two choral musicians in 3 churches were interviewed. The results align with past research on community music ensembles in terms of musical and social perceptions of the participants, including concepts of recruitment, attendance, and diverse musicianship levels. There was, however, a notable difference with past studies in that worship was an interwoven, integral component of the members' perceptions. Because of this worship component, church music may have a different feel than other community groups, with an emphasis on an external, unifying force making the activity look more like a service endeavor than a leisure activity.

## Church musicians' participation perceptions: Applications to community music

Churches are important community enterprises that have the potential to benefit individuals' quality of life. Spirituality has been cited as a positive aspect related to healthy aging (Brunk, 1996; Gall, et al., 2005; Hembek, 2007; Hylton, 1981; Kahn, 1997; Levkoff, Chee, & Noguchi, 2002; Manheimer, 2000) and Cutler and Danigelis (1993) found that membership in church-affiliated groups was related to life satisfaction. Community music studies have also cited perceptions of improved quality of life issues (Olson, 1997; Rohwer & Coffman, 2006) as well as musical enjoyment (Belz, 1994; Coffman & Adamek, 1999; Faivre-Ransom, 2001; Jutras, 2006; Pike, 2001). Studies specific to both music and spirituality have documented a perceived impact of music participation on spirituality for adult band instrumentalists (Kahn, 1997; Reed, 2008) and adult pianists (Jutras, 2006), however in one study, non-band members were found to have higher spirituality scores than band members (Rohwer & Coffman, 2006).

Church music studies have documented the status of church choirs as informal music-making enterprises that happen in communities (Faivre-Ransom, 2001; Ihm, 1994; Peterson, 2001; Seago, 1993; Tipps, 1992; Titcomb, 2000; Zoschke, 1991) as well as documenting members' perceptions of issues related to participation, such as: (1) the trend for church singers to have high scores on self-perception of singing ability (Peterson, 2001), (2) the procedures used for learning new music, and the perception for singing to be for the purpose of worship more than performance (Titcomb, 2000), (3) the perceived enjoyment of moderate-level, instead of difficult music to prepare for Sunday services (Zoschke, 1991), and (4) the perception that leading congregational singing and singing anthems were primary functions of church choir participation (Ihm, 1994).

In addition, music studies have noted reasons why members join and continue participation in music ensembles. Musical and social goals have been cited in numerous studies (Adderly, Kennedy & Bertz, 2003; Belz, 1994; Coffin, 2005; Coffman, 1996; Cooper, 1996; Darrough, 1990; Hylton 1981, Kennedy 2002; Pike, 2001; Rohwer, 2009; Rohwer & Rohwer, 2009; Seago, 1993). Studies have found pianists to rate social benefits low, and skill and personal benefits as high (Cooper, 1996; Jutras; 2006; Swenson, 2006), while choir members have rated social benefits highest (Kennedy, 2002; Rohwer & Rohwer, 2009) and adult band members cited

musical and social benefits as equally enjoyable aspects of band participation (Coffman, 1996). Hence, these perceptions may have different weights based on ensemble type.

As a specific community enterprise, there is a need to understand how issues related to joining and participating in an ensemble manifest themselves in church choir settings. Research has documented a basic link between community music and church choir, with church music experiences being the most common musical experiences of adult community choir participants prior to high school graduation (Tipps, 1992), and church choir involvement being an influential factor on later community music participation (Faivre-Ransom, 2001). It may be, however, that there are aspects of church music as community music that differ from common community music practice traditions. For instance, practitioner, opinion-based articles (Bell, 2006; Hawn, 2007; Hinson, 1998) have highlighted the idiosyncratic nature of the church choir, where there is limited time to prepare music for services each week, and where worship may be more important than music. And yet, there may be similarities in the needs and challenges of church choirs and other community ensembles, such as the spread of ability levels, as well as the variety of musical backgrounds and interests.

While studies have documented the ubiquitous nature of church choirs as music-making activities in the community, there is a need for an investigation of how church choirs can serve as a model to understand more completely the gestalt concept of community music. There is a need for church choir members to describe their own musical backgrounds, and to provide their perceptions of the issues related to church choir participation in order to obtain a more complete picture of church choir as a community endeavor. The purpose of the study was to describe the participation perceptions of a group of church choir musicians.

## Method

Twenty-two choral musicians in 3 churches participated in one semi-structured interview of approximately 30 minutes in length. The churches were a convenience sampling of 3 different denominations (Congregational Christian, Lutheran, and Methodist) in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in a southwestern state. The respondents were 8 males and 14 females, ranging in age from 28 to 79 ( $M = 58.50$ ,  $SD = 12.76$ ). Their ethnicities were: Caucasian ( $n = 21$ ), and American Indian ( $n = 1$ ), and sang soprano ( $n = 7$ ), alto ( $n = 7$ ), tenor ( $n = 3$ ) and bass ( $n = 5$ ).

The members were asked about their musical backgrounds and their perceptions of church participation as a musical, social, and spiritual activity. The semi-structured interview had 18 open-ended, topic questions and 3 demographic questions. Transcriptions were member checked by the interviewees, and categories were labeled by the first author and cross-checked by an external evaluator for accuracy.

## Results

The demographic profile of the 21 respondents in this study highlighted an older-adult aged group of singers ( $M = 58.50$ ,  $SD = 12.76$ ) who were predominantly female ( $n = 14$ , males:  $n = 8$ ), predominantly Caucasian ( $n = 21$ , American Indian:  $n = 1$ ), who had been members of their churches for from 1 to 37 years ( $M = 10.43$ ,  $SD = 9.70$ ), and who had been members of their church choir for from 1 to 15 years ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 3.92$ ). Twelve of the respondents had been in church choir as a youth, and 10 had not participated, either due to family reasons ( $n = 3$ ) or the nonexistence of a church choir at their family's church ( $n = 7$ ). A majority of the respondents had parents who were actively involved in music ( $n = 14$ , not involved:  $n = 8$ ). Many of the participants had participated in public school music education ( $n = 18$ , no public school music education:  $n = 4$ ), with 8 of those who participated in public school programs also participating at the collegiate level.

For the 18 participants who had participated in public school music education programs, they noted that the main differences between church choir and music education in the schools were: church choir members were more of a bonding community that showed more concern for each other ( $n = 7$ ), church choir had singers with a greater diversity of skill level ( $n = 4$ ), church choir had a looser structure to the learning environment ( $n = 4$ ), and the music was different between church music and school music ( $n = 3$ ). As one participant stated, "This church choir is much more welcoming and outgoing than some other choirs I've joined. Obviously the skill level is not that of an audition-only choir but it's good enough to sound beautiful when we're all working together and we have a lot more fun than the more competitive choirs I've been in."

When asked about their favorite thing about being in church choir, 8 participants mentioned the music first, 7 participants mentioned the worship first, and 6 mentioned the fellowship first. Eighteen of the participants mentioned all three issues of music, worship and fellowship within their elaborated responses. In discussing their reasons for joining church choir, 8 participants responded that church choir was something they had always done, while 6 mentioned fellowship, 4 mentioned service to the church, and 4 mentioned love of singing. However, when respondents discussed their reasons for staying in church choir, 9 mentioned the social benefit, 5 mentioned the music, 4 mentioned the worship, and 4 stated that it was something they had always done and would always do.

In discussing how church choir served a musical purpose for them, the respondents noted that church choir allowed them to maintain their musical skills ( $n = 8$ ), continue to enjoy music even though it wasn't their profession ( $n = 5$ ), engage in a special, different kind of worship ( $n = 3$ ), learn a new and challenging thing ( $n = 3$ ), and 3 participants noted that that church choir was their only way to make music. In discussing how church choir served a worship purpose for them, the respondents noted that church choir made their worship more meaningful to them ( $n = 7$ ). Similarly, 5 additional participants noted that music worship allowed them to focus and reflect on their religion. Other participants ( $n = 5$ ) noted how musical worship was their way to give back to God. Still other participants ( $n = 4$ ) noted how musical worship brought the congregation together. And, one participant noted how musical worship in church choir allowed her, as a newcomer to organized religion, to be educated about religion and the ways of the church in a non-threatening way. As one participant stated, "My worship experience and the

purpose of worship is much more acute when I am a participant in the music experience as opposed to being a member of the congregation, looking on."

In discussing how church choir served a social purpose for them, the respondents noted the deeper bonds they felt with the choir members ( $n = 13$ ), and that for many, church choir was their only social activity outside of work ( $n = 5$ ). Others noted that church choir was how they met people when they first joined the church ( $n = 4$ ). As one participant stated, "Church choir allows us get to know each other and serve each other on a more personal level." Another participant stated, "For two hours each week I'm free. I'm not a wife. I'm not a mom. I'm just an adult who gets to have fun with her group of silly friends. It's a great release and I look forward to it each week."

When asked how the choir members worked toward being a cohesive group, 4 participants cited the relaxed and flexible nature of the people in the group, 4 participants stated that praying together helped cohesion, and 4 participants stated that the social part of the group led toward the members working together in a positive way. Other responses cited the ability to laugh ( $n = 2$ ), the parties ( $n = 2$ ), feeling like a team ( $n = 1$ ), the commitment to the music and the group ( $n = 1$ ), and the director ( $n = 1$ ) as reasons for group cohesion. Three participants weren't sure of how the group worked toward being cohesive. As one participant stated, "I think us working well together is where the love of the Lord comes from for our choir, but for choirs that are not religious in nature, it is being able to bring forth the art of music together to make a great sound." And another participant stated, "Sometimes working together is hard. I have been in churches where there were a lot of cliques and members saw you as competition if you were good. In those cases it takes a while for new members to break in and get to know the others."

Nineteen of the participants felt that the group prayer sessions and the joys and concerns that were shared at each church choir meeting were appropriate ( $n = 19$ ), while others stated that sometimes the sharing became tedious ( $n = 3$ ). As one participant stated, "Sharing is extremely important to me. I believe that it promotes the sense of cohesiveness for members to support one another through encouragement and prayer. I am concerned when this part of the rehearsal is cut short, with a "go in peace." While another participant stated, "I think some outspoken people monopolize the sharing time. I tend to tell a friend or two something, but not announce it to the whole group."

In discussing musicianship levels, 11 participants placed themselves in the fair ability level category, 8 stated they were good singers, 2 stated they were outstanding singers, and 2 stated they were poor singers. When discussing others in the group, the most common response was that there was a wide variety of skill levels in the group ( $n = 16$ ), with some saying that everyone was better than they were ( $n = 5$ ), and one participant saying that everyone was worse than they were. One participant stated, "We all are different levels, but it is important that we all sing together as a group to praise God." And another added, "Honestly, the best moments in a choir are not when everything sounds perfect; they're when everyone is really feeling it and you are too." And, "No matter what your level, everyone belongs. The higher levels of musicianship will lead the others and make it more enjoyable for them." And, "we have been selflessly mentored and have developed enduring friendships with some who lead informally."

The participants noted that the difficulty of the music that they sang in church choir was medium level ( $n = 10$ ), with others stating that the music had varying levels ( $n = 7$ ) and 5 participants stating that the music was easy. When asked about their perceptions of the choir's preparation for singing in church services, 16 participants stated that they felt comfortable with their preparation level, and 6 participants stated that they would like more rehearsal time so as to feel more prepared. As one participant stated, "I think our conductor strikes a good balance in terms of making the choir sound better each time, but he's realistic about the kind of sound he can get from a volunteer choir on one rehearsal a week, too." Another participant stated, "Most of the time, the choir does not have enough preparation time for the skill level of the choir members they have. They have to spend the majority of the time helping the non-reading members learn the music and then run out of time to emphasize musicality." And another stated, "The problem in a volunteer church setting is the many levels of musicality. A few of us in choir would like more of a challenge, but that would frustrate the rest of the group, so we are left to a somewhat boring rehearsal and repertoire, but fun social group where we feel no pressure and are able to serve our church and God."

When asked how recruitment was done for participation in their church choir, 15 participants said that it was an informal process, through word of mouth, and 7 participants said that they perceived the recruitment process to involve more formal processes, such as church bulletin notices or announcements by the church leadership during services. As one participant stated, "Recruitment is not pushed at all and it should be. Not just by the choir director and the music director but also promoted by the pastors and the choir members. If more and better voices were recruited everything could work better." And another stated, "Recruitment is low key and I like that. My feelings about this are that I am glad it is that way as I might not get to be in the choir if you had to try out or take a test." And another stated, "I'm ok with how we recruit in our church, but singing in church choir is a commitment so people need to be excited on their own to be a part of it, or they'll quit coming."

In terms of challenges faced by the church choir, the most commonly cited issue was attendance ( $n = 13$ ), followed by budget ( $n = 4$ ), the variety of skill levels ( $n = 3$ ), getting up for 8 am services ( $n = 1$ ), and petty criticizing of the director ( $n = 1$ ). As one participant stated, "I think we all have achieved a reasonable equilibrium between striving for musical perfection and the more general goal of providing an organization that has appeal to a wide range of participants and one that can also lead and enhance the worship service." When asked if anything was standing in the way of them continuing in church choir, the most common responses were health ( $n = 7$ ) and nothing ( $n = 6$ ), followed by proximity ( $n = 2$ ), family obligations ( $n = 2$ ), available time from their job ( $n = 2$ ), not being able to sit with their family ( $n = 1$ ), any change of church choir leadership ( $n = 1$ ) and musical reasons ( $n = 1$ ). As one participant stated, "There is nothing standing in my way; I'm working on human pride which could cause me difficulty with the music, the music leaders, or the other members. This would then make singing with the church choir to be about me and not the Lord. I am trying to keep singing on a spiritual level and not a human one."

## Conclusions

It should be cautioned that generalizations should not be made from this study, since the sample is small, from a narrow geographical locale, and from only 3 denominations. This background information can serve, however, as a preliminary look at church choir as a community music phenomenon.

In the current study there were similarities and differences in approach between church choir and what we commonly know of other community music organizations. Similar to previous research, the participants in the current study tended to have been in public school music programs and tended to have had parents who had participated in some way with music (Coffman, 2002). Also similar to previous documentation on adult learners, this study found the members to vary greatly in their ability levels (Rohwer, 2008).

Because of the similarity of having diverse skill levels in the groups, both church choir and other community music organizations may have the challenge of meeting the musical needs of each and every musical learner in their organization. While school music ensembles can often break groups down into numerous ensembles each having a more homogenous skill level, community ensembles often lack the instructional personnel and the musician numbers to be able to break the ensembles into multiple skill-appropriate ensemble groupings; hence, the instructors of church choirs and other community ensembles need to be highly effective teachers in order to keep the musicians engaged and learning. Patience and good pacing are, therefore, necessary traits of both church choir and community music ensemble directors.

There may also be organizational factors that are similar across church choir and other types of community music ensembles. Recruitment for the church choirs was conducted in both formal and informal ways in this study. Everything from church bulletin announcements, to pulling someone aside to ask them to join was used to recruit new members. This diversity of tactics can also be seen in many community ensembles, with ensemble members often recruiting friends, and notices being posted in newspapers. One difference between church choir recruitment and other community music ensembles' recruitment is that the population from which to recruit is often a city instead of the more compact body of a church, making the concern of diffuse recruitment a real challenge for community music ensembles. On the other hand, small churches have the issue of a relatively static group of people from which to recruit, and since many of the members in the current study had previous musical experience, that makes the recruiting population even more insular. Recruitment to the general body of church-goers, then, becomes a distinct issue for church choirs, necessitating finesse and careful consideration of the general church member needs and desires.

Attendance was also a challenging issue documented in the current study, due to the busy lives of adults. This issue has also been documented in regard to community music ensemble participation (Rohwer, 2009), and causes the need for a delicate balance between difficulty of the music, musical performance quality, and enjoyment. Obtaining a general conflict calendar for the fall and then the spring from ensemble members can be one way to approach this

troublesome community music topic so that the times of the greatest number of conflicts can be aligned with appropriate musical choices that highlight the strengths of the group on hand.

In regard to their reasons for joining church choir, there were clear musical factors at play in the church choir members' decisions to participate. The desire to maintain musical skills as a hobbyist, even though they had chosen other professions is at the heart of music as a leisure activity. And the majority of the church choir members' beliefs in their skills as being only fair is also in alignment with the hobbyist concept of community engagement that is found in many community organizations across the country.

However, there was a major difference noted in the responses of choir members in this study and many other community music settings and studies. The current study found an equal emphasis on social, musical and spiritual factors. Previous music ensemble research has found that participants cited reasons for ensemble participation as social and musical (Adderly Kenedy & Bertz, 2003; Belz, 1994; Coffin, 2005; Coffman, 1996; Cooper, 1996; Darrough, 1990; Hylton 1981, Kennedy 2002; Pike, 2001; Rohwer, 2009; Rohwer & Rohwer, 2009; Seago, 1993). Because of this balance of three intertwined entities instead of just two, church music may have a different feel than other community groups, with an all-encompassing emphasis on an external, unifying force making the activity look more like a service endeavor than a leisure activity. Since the idea of leisure is often viewed in the U.S. as something that is about bettering the self, this distinction between church and other community activities, may indeed have substantial ramifications.

Many of the comments given by the interviewees in the current study underscore the compassionate stance that many of the church choir members had concerning their participation in choir. Comments such as "I'm working on human pride which could cause me difficulty with the music, the music leaders, or the other members...I am trying to keep singing on a spiritual level and not a human one," and "we all are different levels, but it is important that we all sing together as a group to praise God" allude to the idea that there is an overriding concept that is more important than petty organizational concerns. The few comments from the current study that did not have a compassionate stance to them were from highly skilled musicians who appeared to see church choir as more of a duty to the church than a spiritual or musically enjoyable endeavor; these few members were slightly disgruntled with the lack of skill and competition of the church choir setting. It appears that because these individuals were skilled musicians, the musical perfectionist mindset seemed to override the possible spiritual nature of the task that was documented by the other choir members. As in all community organizations, the balance of skill levels is an ever present concern that needs to be addressed, and with church choirs' balance of not only musical needs issues and social needs issues, but also spiritual needs issues, the challenges faced in church choirs may actually be greater than in other community music organizations.

Clearly, it would be beneficial for church choirs and other music ensembles in the community to work hand-in-hand to work through some of their similar challenges, but also to make music that would benefit themselves and the community at large. The addition of a community orchestra or band to the singing of a major work for choir could help get the word out to many

people about the music programs, while also being musically, socially, and potentially spiritually gratifying to the musicians and the audience members. The many possibilities and benefits are endless.

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