

A study of adults' attitudes, perceptions and reflections on their singing experience in secondary school: some implications for music education

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Despite pockets of excellence, singing in British secondary schools is not only weak but in a state of continuing decline. The unpopularity of singing is well documented but the reasons for that unpopularity are less certain. Through interviewing adults between the ages of 20 and 40 about their school days, the authors located the principal sources of most people's unease with singing, and also the seat of pleasure among those who enjoyed it. Some differences between age groups and the sexes emerged through the study. Unexpectedly, all interviewees were united in the view that singing should be retained as a worthwhile element of the secondary school curriculum.

Introduction – the situation of singing

In 1991, the British Federation of Young Choirs (BFYC) undertook a survey that found that 85 per cent of schools in the UK offered no vocal curriculum at all. Since then reports in education and music journals, literature from choral organisations and OfSTED (the Government school inspection body in England and Wales) have all pointed to an apparent decline in secondary school singing. OfSTED (1995) reported that

singing of a technical and expressive quality which would rarely be tolerated in year 6 is often welcomed in year 7 . . . lacklustre singing is accepted (at key stage 3) and sometimes praised.

Bannan (1996) reports that of all musical activities, singing tends to be the least well taught in schools. He continues:

it is common to hear the conductors of adult choirs lament that they are deprived of fresh personnel (especially tenors) by the insufficiency of school music education.

Durrant (1996) confirms: 'it is apparent that choral activity in many schools is declining or is even a non-existent activity'. For anyone interested in promoting and improving singing this is sorrowful reading. How can this situation have arisen? Suggestions for the apparent decline include:

- lack of vocal studies in teacher training and INSET;
- singing being squeezed out by new curriculum demands on teachers;
- cultural barriers;
- irrelevance of singing to adolescents;
- teachers' lack of confidence and skill;
- a shortage of and possibly inappropriate repertoire;

- the effects of a reduced Christian influence in schools;
- a gradual reduction of specialist teachers.

Further anecdotal evidence gives some insight into the situation. For example, one large and academically successful mixed comprehensive school enjoyed success in curriculum singing that focused largely on vocal composition. However, in the senior of its three choirs, the conductor struggled to find suitable SATB repertoire. Each term was a constant problem for him as he searched for suitable music for the choir that consisted mainly of girls and a handful of male staff. Here was a repertoire problem for a teacher committed to good vocal education.

Another music teacher indicated her frustration in finding suitable class repertoire. All the pupils wanted to sing was the one 'modern' song in the book, 'Rock Around the Clock'! She, however, wanted to find songs, as she put it, with more 'meat' in them. The apparent 'culture clash' might eventually deter pupils from singing at all. Yet another music teacher was observed preparing the school choir for a performance of Rutter's 'Shepherd's Pipe Carol'. The teacher appeared content with the choir consisting of eight people, five of whom were staff, three of whom were students (two white and one Asian) in this school of over 1,000 students, 95 per cent of whom were of Asian ethnicity. At another school, a different kind of situation was encountered which displayed perhaps a cultural misunderstanding. A dynamic youth choir from a local black gospel church was invited to take part in a concert. They declined the invitation, explaining that they did not sing at concerts, as they were not a 'performing' choir. Rather, they sang at church functions as an act of worship and to lead worship, but they did not 'perform' to audiences.

However, in another school, performance was the motivation for four Afro-Caribbean girls, all with outstanding voices. When asked why they were not members of the school choir, the response – 'Are you crazy, man?' – indicated that alternative outlets for their singing and performing needed to be found.

Numerous comparable situations can no doubt be recounted in schools around the country. Yet singing does happen and there are some examples of excellent singing and vocal education in schools. Singing does take place in certain social environments – churches, football matches, karaoke bars, for example. Indeed, there never seems to be a shortage of male or female singers at karaoke bars. One finalist of a karaoke competition reported that he had received an F5 grade on his school music report, something he had never forgotten. Yet he had beaten over 100 contestants to win a competition with his exquisite voice. Had he sung at school? No, the teacher did not know he could sing. Was there a lack of self-confidence, poor motivation or self-esteem or other social cultural reasons why he chose not to sing at school? In considering perceptions of singing in school, the hypothesis is that the concerns are related to understanding the socio-cultural context as well as teaching styles and vocal education.

Organisations such as the Association of British Choral Directors, the Voices Foundation and the BFYC have all been established to promote and maintain a choral heritage, some particularly concerned with the young. Through these organisations choir trainers and singers alike are provided with opportunities to participate in workshops, concerts and seminars in order to share good practice and promote choral singing.

Examination boards continue to provide for singing examinations, with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music recently introducing a choral examination to encourage and promote ensemble singing. Choral competitions continue to operate on a local and national level. One has the commercial backing of the British supermarket company Sainsbury's, which has helped to raise the profile of choral singing nationally through television. There seems to be no lack of choral activity and yet much of this work is reported in articles and journals in descriptive ways with little academic argument supporting its function. In comparison there is much academic debate from those recognising cultural change in our society and calling for a response in education (e.g. DfEE, 1999).

Such cultural change may appear threatening to some teachers. Olsson (1997) suggests that teachers may find that they need to take less of an 'authoritarian teacher role' and more of a 'facilitator's role' and admit that the pupils are more familiar with certain styles of music than the teachers are themselves. 'The task of dealing with habits, prejudices and inhibitions thrown up in this "culture-gap" can appear too high a price to pay for incorporating singing', suggests Bannan (1988), a view shared by Page (1997), a secondary school head of music, who says: 'it is time music teachers realised they cannot be knowledgeable about all musical cultures in the first instance and there may be musics we must initially learn from the pupils'. She calls for teachers to 'swallow our pride'.

This is a view not shared by a 'significant minority' of delegates at the 1996 BFYC conference who, writes Bannan (1996), called for the 'return to proven values: the SATB canon of Handel, Bach and Beethoven, rather than the cheapened product'. But prejudices must be challenged, writes Ross (1998), who focuses on the training college:

If the training of student teachers has done little or nothing to challenge and change their own tastes and practice, then what happens when they become teachers in school?

This is a view shared by Peggie (1998), who also says of teacher training:

it is nothing short of scandalous that music teacher and primary school teacher training does not give every student the vocal wherewithal to sing without embarrassment with and for pupils.

With so many changes in education in recent years as well as changes and developments in the arts in society, it is not surprising that there is much comment relating to the aims of music education. What are we trying to achieve as teachers of music and particularly of singing? What do we consider to be vocal education? Is it an important and worthwhile part of music education?

The consideration and choice of repertoire is a key issue: why teach certain songs? Do teachers have adequate knowledge of children's vocal development? The research of Cooksey & Welch (1997) into the developing stages of the adolescent voice has shown that National Curriculum guidelines are misguided in suggesting a linear approach to vocal development: 'Children's voices simply do not develop according to a straightforward progression of activities associated with repertoire.' As music teachers might well use National Curriculum programmes of study as a basis to develop their aims of singing, Cooksey & Welch (1997) are keen to prevent singing activities being delivered in a progression which is inappropriate:

The Programmes of Study should take into account specific criteria for voice classification of the sequence and development ... and should also contain and recommend solo and choral repertoire which is suitable for the various voice change stages.

Physiological vocal development has not been the only argument used in suggesting suitable vocal repertoire. The *National Songbook* and subsequent national songs have been upheld in the past as crucial tools in teaching singing. Proctor (1965) wrote:

National songs are the very musical fibre of a nation's music and no self-respecting British-born subject should think himself an educated man who cannot sing and play his national songs.

More recently, Amchim (1997) believed that a book of national songs would be useful for communal singing in reflecting the many aspects of American culture. However, having carefully compiled his book of 42 songs, he found that 'many of the students I surveyed acknowledged the importance of patriotic songs, but couldn't sing them'. The notion of 'national songs' is an interesting one and it begs the question, at the dawn of the twenty-first century: what are perceived to be our national songs?

Drummond (1999), who was a head of music for over 30 years, suggests that

the social and educational changes of the past thirty years have had a profound effect on music education. The Christian religion and national pride, which so helped to sustain the subject in the past, have lost their potency. ... As a result classroom music now lacks much of the certainty and sense of purpose that once sustained it.

Thirty years ago 'Rule Britannia' – a 'national' song by a British composer, sung each year at the 'last night of the proms' and designed to stir up national pride – was sung in classrooms around the country. Pupils used to sing Christian hymns in school assemblies as part of the mandatory act of worship. Society's changing culture has now made us question the appropriateness of such repertoire. Several writers cite 'relevance' as being a goal to aim for. Pratt & Stephens (1995) point out that

pupils' motivation and therefore their capacity to learn is enhanced by activities which are challenging, enjoyable and recognised by them as relevant and attainable.

Cooksey & Welch (1997) acknowledge that to identify with a broad range of musical styles, pupils must see and feel the relevance of these musics in their own lives. Durrant (1996) says that young people are more likely to continue singing beyond school years 'if experiences have been positive and aesthetically rewarding'.

Reviewing the literature on singing, a number of writers suggest that significant reasons for the apparent decline of secondary school singing are the divisions which exist between different cultures within our society. Not only do divisions occur between musical genres, but also adolescents culturally identify with particular musical styles (Zilmann & Gan, 1997) that may impinge on their motivation to belong to a musical organisation not perceived as 'cool'.

Research data and analysis

This research study sought to explore the perceptions of school music and in particular school singing from people across the adult age range. Did they remember and regard their

school singing experiences positively or negatively? In order to survey as large a group of people as possible, a series of structured interviews with 'random' members of the public took place in a variety of locations in Berkshire during August 1999. The questions were designed to supply as much data as possible, given the patience and limitations in time with members of the public. The questions ranged from asking what sort of music they currently listened to, to asking them about their school experiences.

The interviews were carried out in a random choice of locations, which included:

- Burger King, where interviewees sat alone to eat;
- at the swings at a local park, where interviewees sat alone while their children played;
- in pubs, where interviewees relaxed having a drink;
- outside Sainsbury's, where interviewees had finished their shopping;
- at a sports and recreation centre, where interviewees were sitting in the coffee bar or 'hanging about';
- at home with service personnel: plumber, electrician and carpenter;
- on the telephone to friends and family and to a carpet sales manager;
- outside a university library while students were relaxing on the grass;
- in the foyer/bar of a theatre, where the audience had arrived very early and were having a drink while waiting for the start of a show;
- various homes and in gardens of neighbours and friends;
- at Office World to manager and staff.

Eighty interviews were conducted overall. Twenty of these had been used as a pilot to shape the final questionnaire, for which a sample of 60 adults was used. A reasonable balance of ages was sought and care was taken to ensure equal numbers of males and females had been interviewed in each of the chosen age categories. Thus, the interviewed sample consisted of:

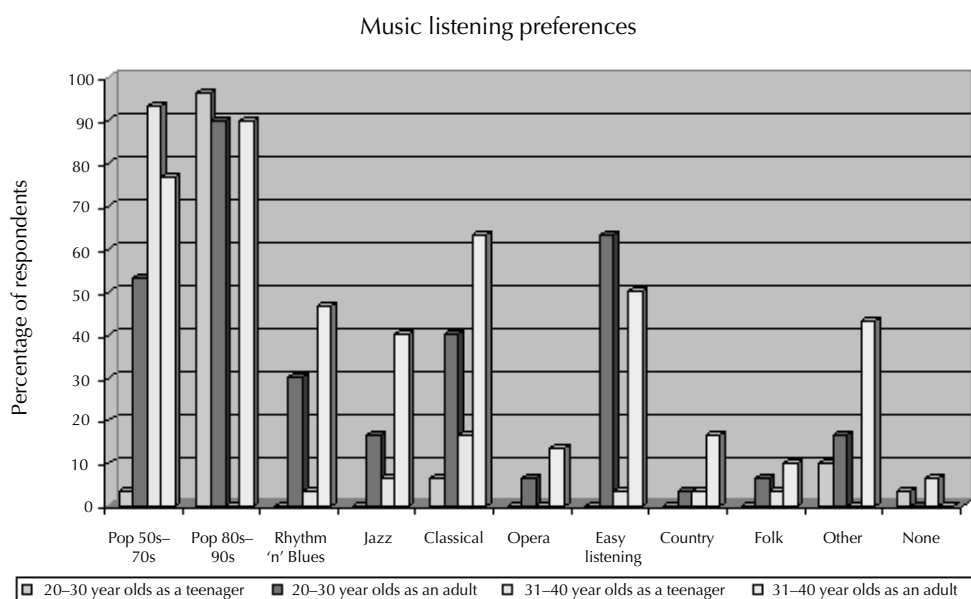
- 15 males aged 20–30 years
- 15 females aged 20–30 years
- 15 males aged 30–40 years
- 15 females aged 30–40 years.

Random locations were chosen in the survey to suit personal circumstances. The decision to sample men and women equally was made because of the intention to see if there were any perceptible differences in attitude between them. Structured interviews were used to obtain information concerning their perceptions of their own singing experiences in school.

Although the interviews were mainly carried out in Berkshire, it soon emerged that interviewees had attended school in places as far apart as Newcastle and Bournemouth. Thus, in August 1999 a survey was conducted using structured interviews on a stratified random sample to support empirical research as to adults' attitudes, perceptions and reflections on their singing experience in secondary school. A selection of the questions and the responses is outlined below:

Questions 1 and 2: Which types of music do you listen to? When you were a teenager, which types of music did you listen to?

These questions were designed to find which styles of music adults listened to and whether their taste in music had changed in any way. The results were as follows:



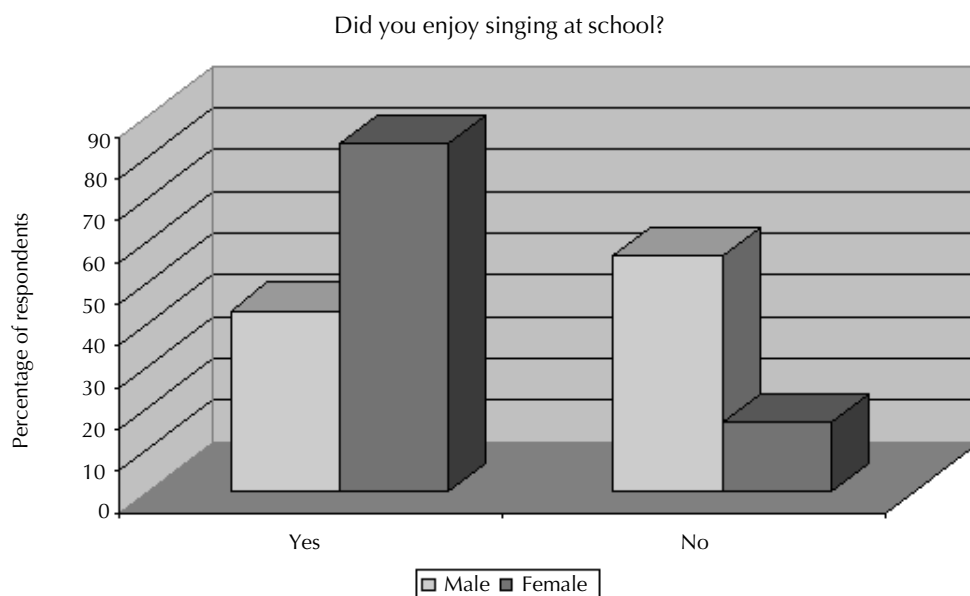
Each interviewee was free to give as many responses as they wished, therefore the graph shows what percentage of interviewees listen to each style. The choice 'other' received the responses: musicals, black radio music, brass bands and contemporary Christian vocal.

The most notable feature is that all respondents listened to pop music as a teenager: 30-40 year olds mainly listened to 50s-70s pop and 20-30 year olds listened mainly to 80s-90s pop. This clearly reflects teenagers' preference for pop of their adolescence period. Adults in both age bands expanded their pop music listening from that of their youth, and whereas the 20-30 year old adults also expanded their listening to include a whole range of styles, the 30-40 year old adults did so to a greater extent. More of them listened to a wider variety of music now that they were older, but pop music remained the dominant music. This supports Small's (1994) view that 'Afro-American tradition is the major music of the West in the 20th century'.

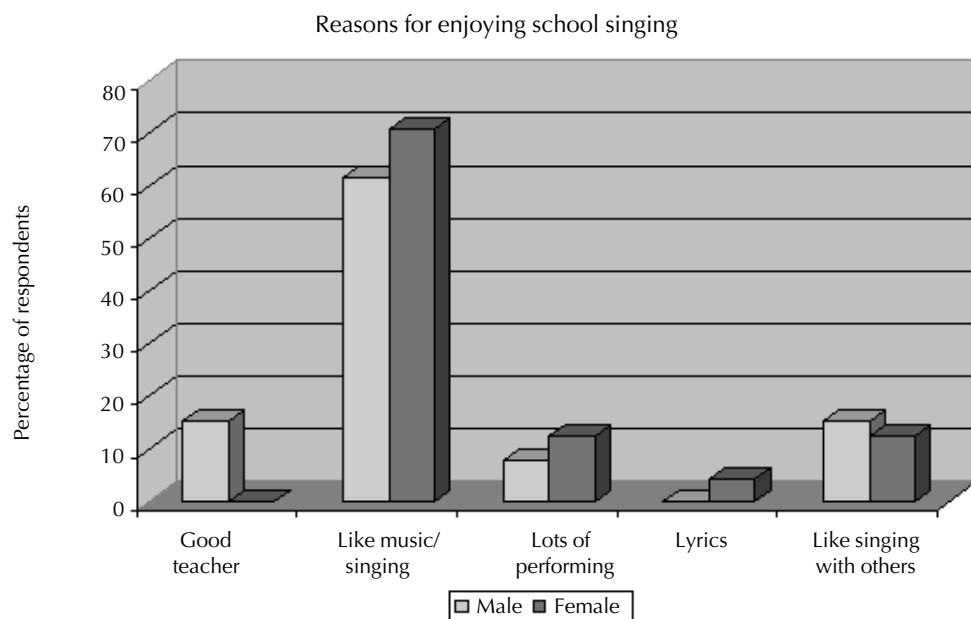
It was interesting to note the way people reacted to particular categories. Interviewing such a large sample of people allowed trends to be clearly seen, one of which was the reaction to 'opera' and 'country'. Reading out the list, the response was 'Yes' or 'No' to each indicated category, though at 'opera' and 'country', the speed with which they said 'No' and the dismissive tone with which they answered were consistent between many respondents.

Question 6: Did you enjoy singing at school? Why?

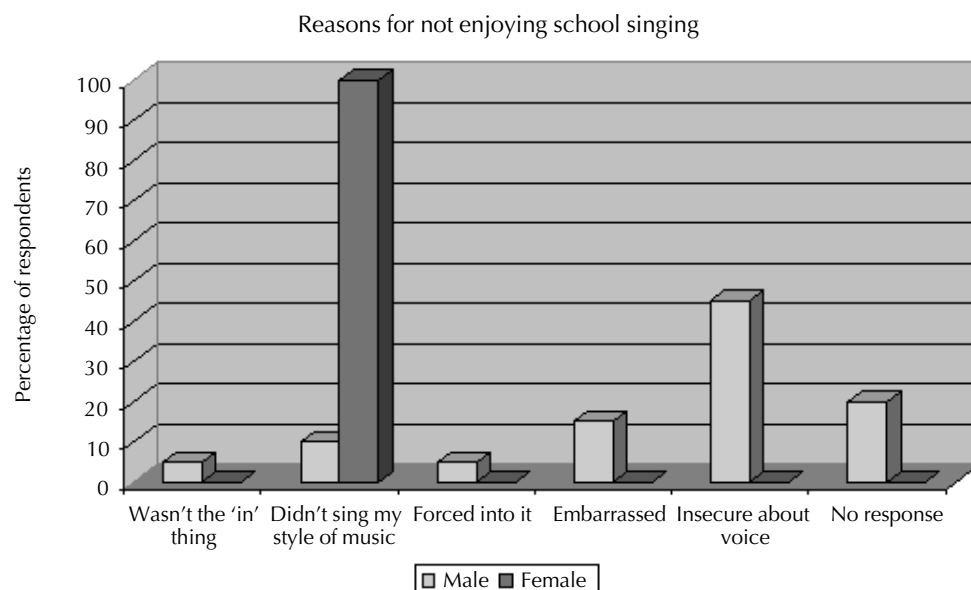
The first part of the question was answered fairly spontaneously. All interviewees answered and were decisive in all cases.



This clearly shows that girls gained more enjoyment from singing than boys. However,



both male and female respondents were often unable to give reasons for their enjoyment, answering simply 'Because I just like singing' or 'Because I just like music'.



Musical style was the only reason for not enjoying school singing cited by female respondents, whereas 9 male respondents cited perceived inadequacies concerning their own voice as reasons for not enjoying singing. Many of these men referred specifically to their 'voice break'. Durrant (1996) states that

there is nothing more disturbing for a young male with a changing voice than to be given unsuitable tasks, such as being asked to 'sing up' in repertoire that may well be inappropriate for his vocal tessitura.

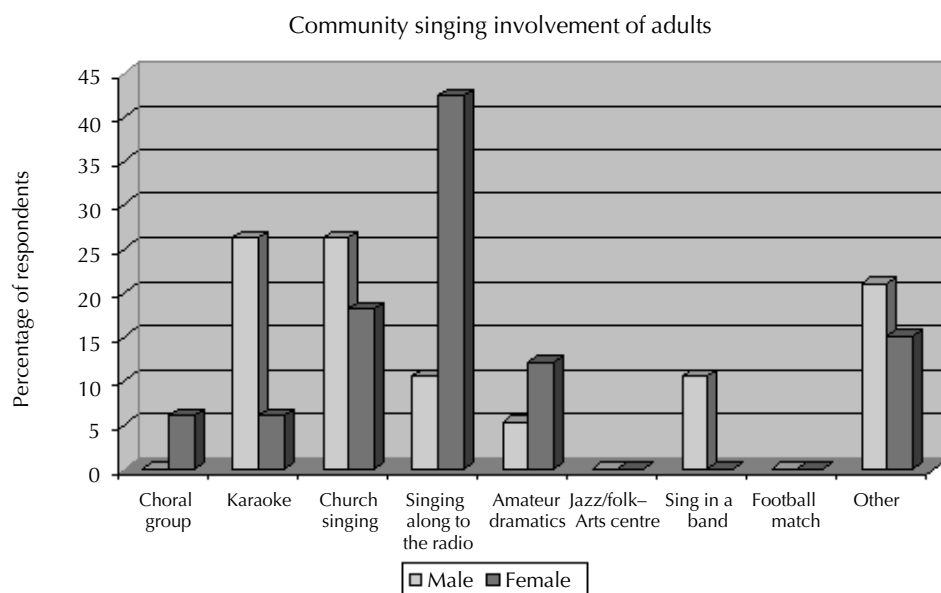
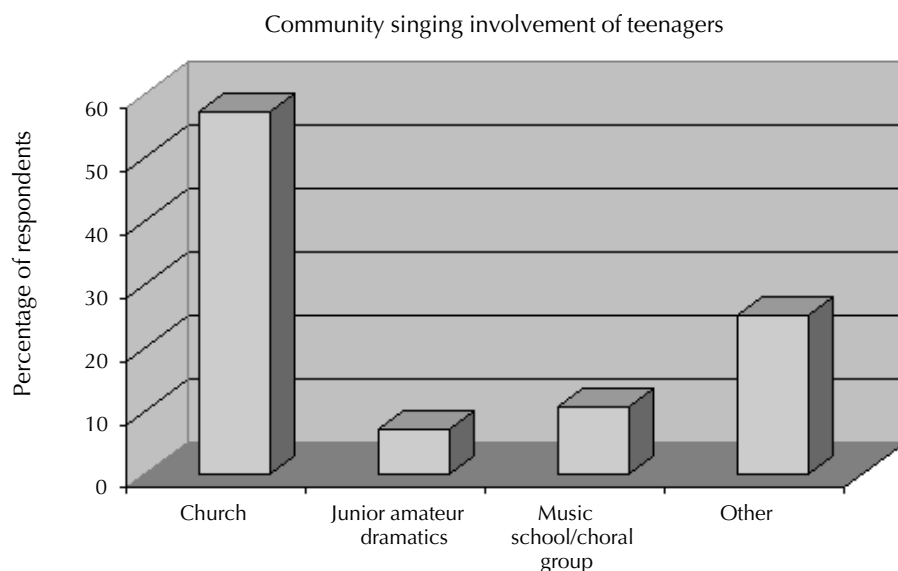
Question 10: Did you sing outside school at all?

All who sang in community groups as teenagers appeared to enjoy the activity (see top table on p. 39). It is interesting that adults aged 20–40 years participated in church singing as the most common. It is also surprising that nearly half (47 per cent) of the respondents sang in groups 'outside' school. Other responses included gang shows, pop band, karaoke, family gospel group and singing at home with a guitar.

Question 14: Do you sing in any way now?

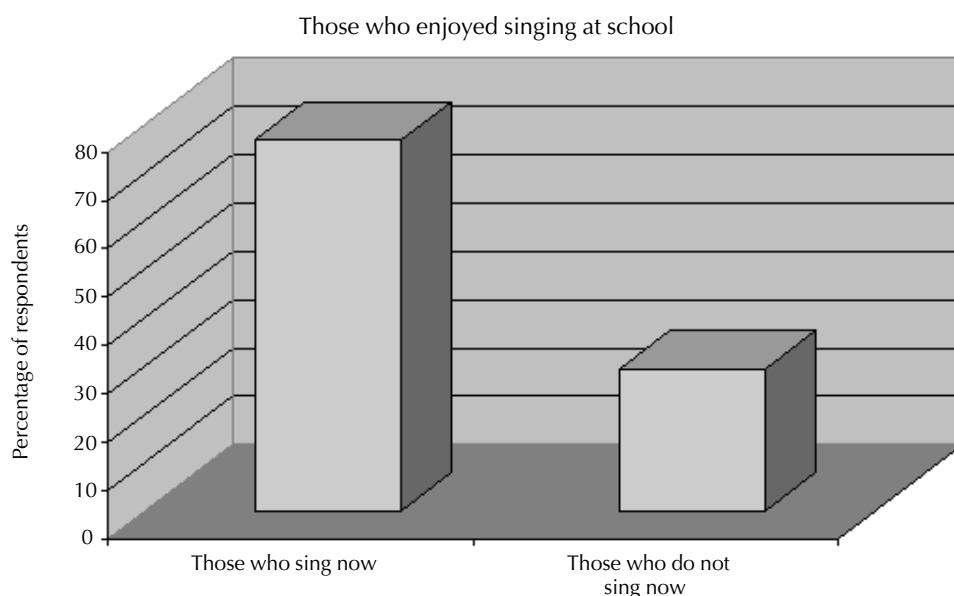
Some adults participated in more than one activity. The largest response was from females who sang along to the radio. Reasons given included that the accompanying band was a psychological boost, it helped them to feel good; also, it helped them to stay in tune. Another positive reason was that there was no performance needed and no audience, they

Adults' reflections on their singing experience in secondary school

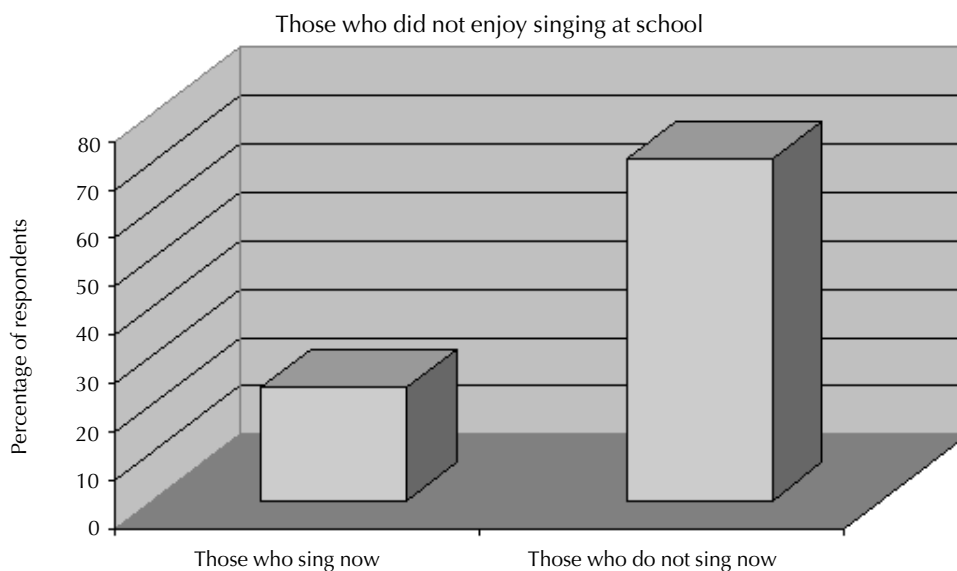


could enjoy the activity alone without feeling embarrassed. Singing in church was enjoyed slightly more by males than by females, who enjoyed amateur dramatics more than males. Males enjoyed karaoke far more than females. Other responses included male voice singing in connection with a brass band, singing to their children, pop groups and singing in connection with work.

Comparisons can now be drawn between the information gleaned from different questions. For example, of those adolescents who enjoyed singing at school, how many

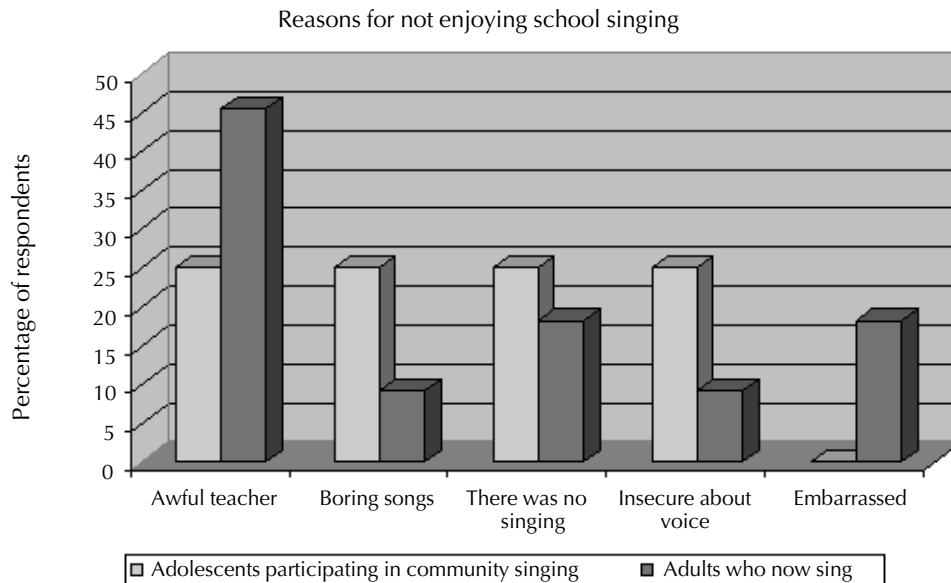


are now involved in community singing? Of the 38 adults who answered 'Yes, they enjoyed school singing', 33 per cent have gone on to participate in some form of community singing. Of those who enjoyed singing in school, 55 per cent now enjoy singing in the community. Of the 22 adolescents who did not enjoy singing, 10 have gone on to participate in singing as adults. Of the 38 adults who enjoyed school singing, 5 now participate in no vocal activities at all, and 12 of the 22 who did not enjoy singing do not participate as adults. There are more adults who sing now despite bad experiences at school than those who had good experiences at school and who now do not sing.



Adults' reflections on their singing experience in secondary school

These figures show a high number of adults involved in the community singing activities who did not enjoy school singing, including the karaoke singer described above. A further investigation into why these adults did not participate in school singing when they clearly now enjoy singing would be enlightening. Comparing opinions from another group might also prove useful, for example, those adolescents who sang outside school, but not in school.

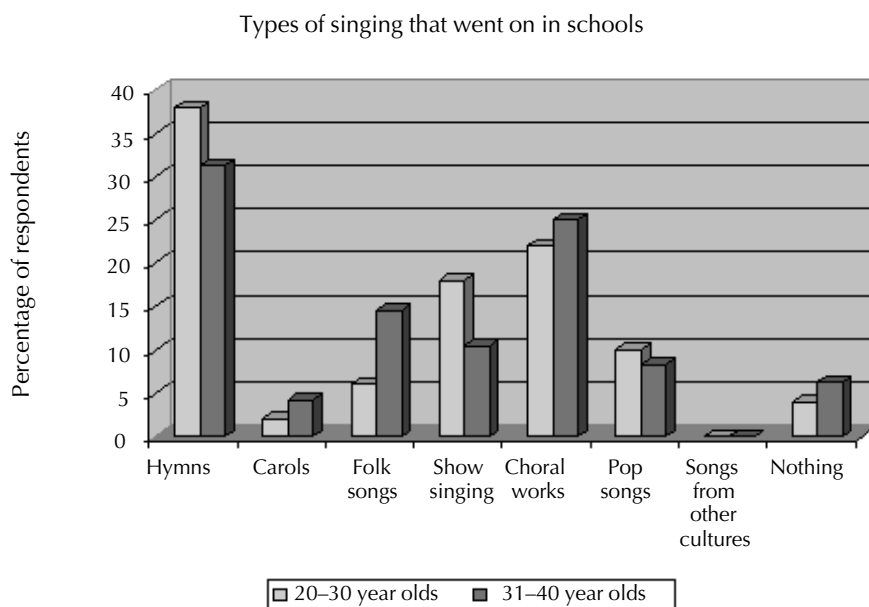


Adult reflections of bad singing experience show the teacher as being the main reason. The adolescent who was insecure about his voice in school and yet participated out of school did so in junior amateur dramatics. He was able to focus on another outlet of performance (i.e. acting) while being unsure of his voice.

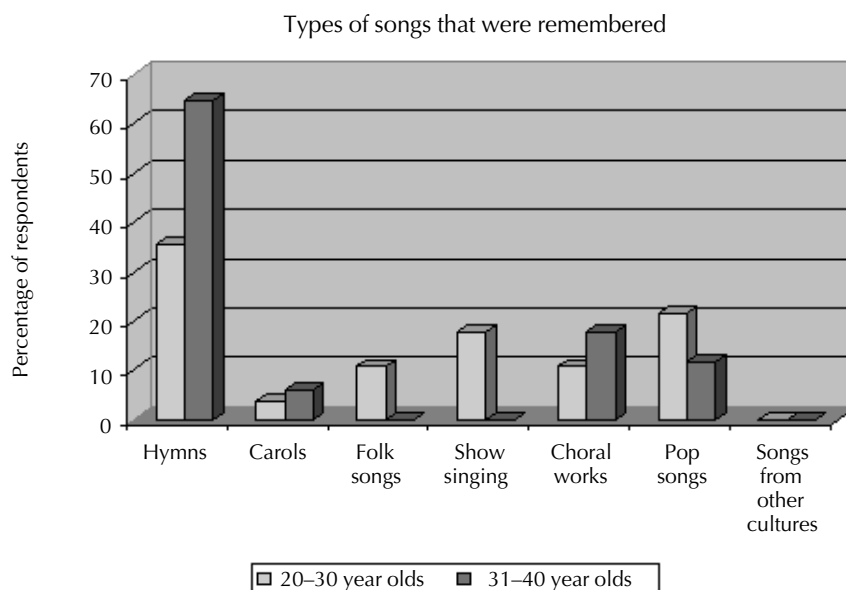
Question 5: Think back to your secondary school. What sort of singing went on in your school?

By analysing what types of singing went on in the schools of 20–30 year olds and 30–40 year olds, any change in the choice of repertoire over 20 years can be seen (see the first table on the next page). This may support a theory that society's music culture has changed and is having an effect in schools.

Comparisons between the two decades about what people remember singing show little change in some areas but a big difference in others, like hymns and show singing. Results also show a decline in folk songs. This cannot be analysed as a fair representation of singing that went on in schools as this question asks only what the respondents remember, not what actually went on. However, as it is people's perceptions and memories that are being analysed it is interesting to see what has left an impression on them since school. Hymns and choral works are the forms of singing most remembered. No respondent mentioned songs from other cultures.

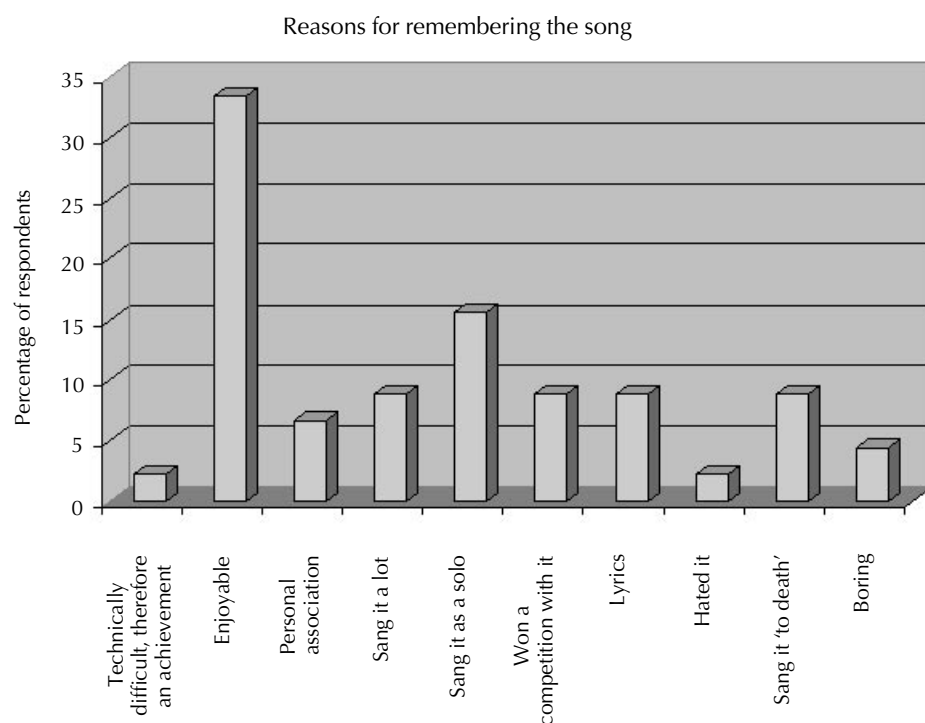


Question 7: Can you name any songs that you sang?



Of those respondents who could remember a school song, most remembered hymns. The 20-30 year olds could remember a slightly wider variety of music. No-one remembered singing any song from another culture.

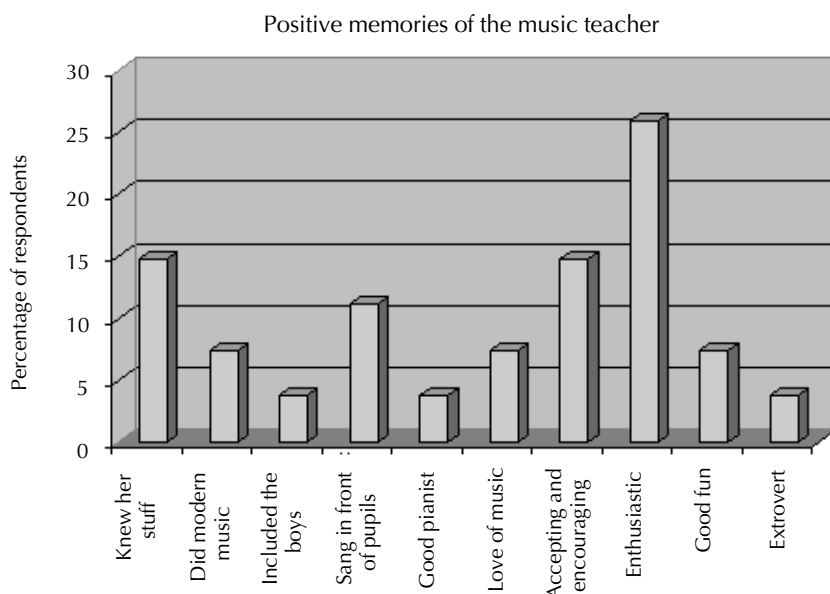
Question 8: Why do you remember that song?



Many differing reasons for why a song had been remembered were chosen by the interviewees. People remembered songs for more positive than negative reasons. Of far greatest significance to respondents was that songs were enjoyable. Questions 6 and 16 also showed enjoyment as being important. It was possible that this was becoming a major trend in the survey. Also significant was that people remembered a song in connection with a solo performance or competition – moments of personal achievement and social unity. Durrant (1996) refers to positive experiences being an influence on pupils' singing beyond school. A further observation comes from comments made by three respondents who remembered hymns because they held personal associations for them. When faced with a list of hymns given to her by a vicar in preparation for her wedding, one respondent chose the only one she knew from the list – a hymn she had sung a lot at school. Weddings and funerals were referred to as occasions when hymns seemed significant. Allen (1997) points out that singing 'is an important expressive outlet and accompanies some of the most significant moments of our lives'.

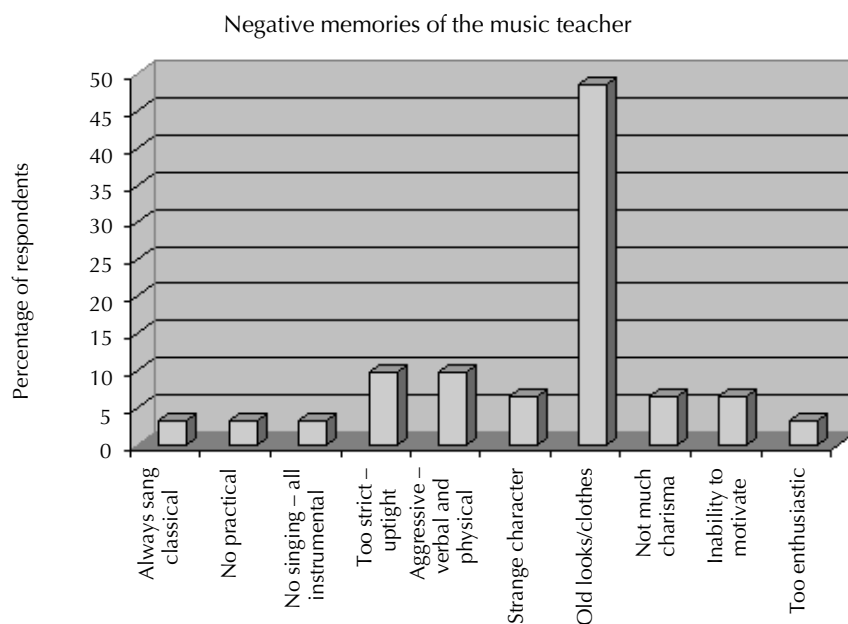
Question 9: What do you remember about the teacher who taught you singing?

Enthusiasm of the teacher was the characteristic remembered by most people, with a range of other personal and professional traits being mentioned. This seems to support Drum-



mond's research where enthusiasm was considered to be the most important teaching characteristic. Enthusiasm, however, can be 'overdone', as one respondent told me who, with his friends, used to laugh at the teacher who was 'trying too hard'!

Other negative memories were numerous and were as follows:



The sheer number of negative personal characteristics indicates that the teacher's appearance may have some significance.

Question 11: What was your voice like then?: Couldn't sing at all (How do you know?) / Sing, but not too well / Sing OK / Sing well (How do you know?).

The judgements people value are important if we are to understand how to motivate and give confidence to pupils. Here is a table showing sources of influence:

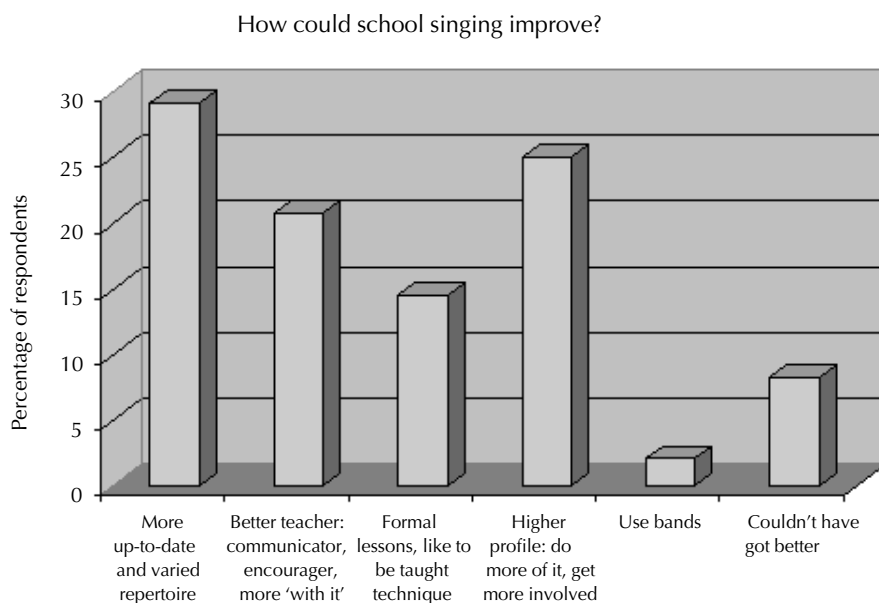
Sources of influence	Adolescent	Adult
My friends' comments	4	7
My music teacher's comments	4	6
My family's comments	5	8
The act of being separated from the others as being 'different' (this can be positive: chosen for a solo; or negative: not allowed to join the choir)	8	3
Public response: level of clapping	1	
Public exams: Pass/Fail	1	3
My own judgement comparing my voice with a vocal model	8	4
Reinforced reactions of strangers to my voice, e.g. 'You've got a lovely voice' (positive), startled looks from strangers	1	4

Only those respondents who said they could not sing at all or that they could sing well were asked this question. Seeking to discover whose judgements they valued, it was clear from the responses that adolescents took more notice of themselves than of others. The act of being separated is an indication to them that they are different, but they seem to need to know themselves. Adults, however, will value judgements from a wider range of sources, particularly the family. They are more likely to believe someone else's judgement about their voice than their own. Adolescents, it seems, need to be sure themselves. This tells us a lot about the confidence that adolescents need in order to sing. If they are not encouraged, confidence goes, as Austin & Howard (1985) suggest: 'negative feedback usually causes the youngster to lose confidence and even avoid singing altogether'.

Question 19: How could singing at your school have been improved?

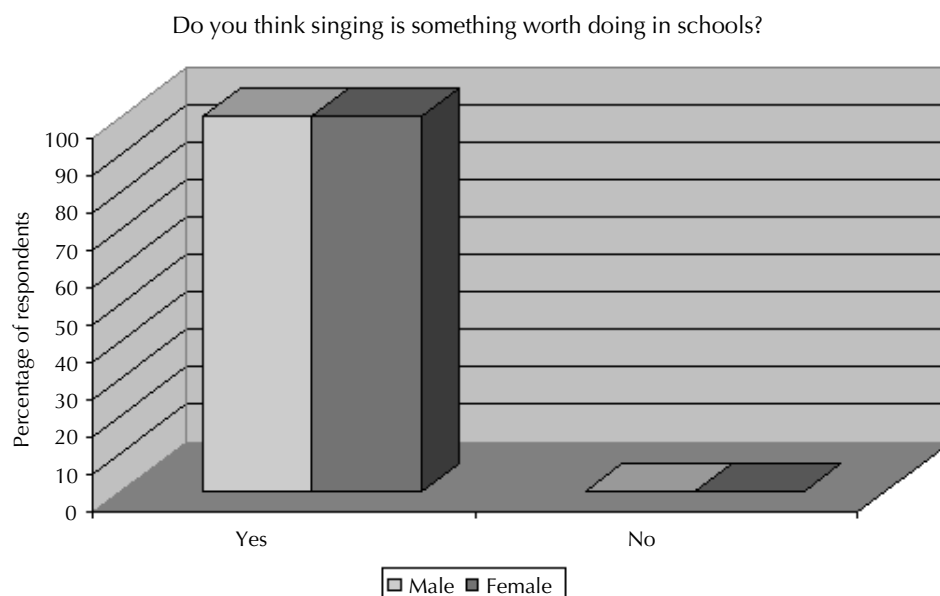
In some ways the answers given to this question could provide the answers for the whole research study. From the views of past pupils, what should be done to improve school singing?

It is clear that people want a more up-to-date and varied repertoire of songs to sing. Also they want to see more up-to-date teachers who are good communicators and motivators. It may be surprising that so many cite teaching vocal technique as desirable.



Perhaps most surprising is adults' call for singing to be given a higher profile, with more singing happening in schools, more pupils taking part and more support from staff and head teachers. There are encouraging signs which lead on to:

Questions 17 and 18: Do you think singing is something worth doing in schools? Why?



100 per cent of respondents said 'Yes' to this question. This is a quite staggering response that shows quite clearly that singing in school is thought of as a worthwhile activity. Not only did all respondents answer 'yes', 31 per cent said 'definitely'.

Implications for music education

The results of this small survey are heartening to the extent that the people randomly sampled regarded singing activity as inherently worthwhile. The reasons cited for wanting singing to remain central to school musical activity included gaining personal confidence and building a sense of corporate identity. Also significant was that people felt they needed vocal training and development rather than just having a singalong. This indeed has implications for qualitative feedback in singing teaching and the consequent promotion of vocal learning.

Singing operates within a variety of cultural contexts that perhaps need to be reflected more effectively in schools. Music is a social process and ideally should embrace both tradition and new experiences. Initiatives including vocal workshops, training programmes and joint concerts with organisations and choirs outside the school's own community will offer pupils a wider range of singing experiences than can perhaps be found in the school alone. Singing is, after all, a communal activity. Teachers should not be defensive about seeking enlightenment with regard to professional development in their own singing and choral conducting. It is vital that we all equip ourselves with the appropriate attitudes and expertise to ensure that singing remains a vibrant and meaningful activity in our schools.

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