

'Leaders,' 'followers' and collective group support in learning 'art music' in an amateur composer-oriented Bach Choir

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how amateur choral singers experience collective group support as a method of learning 'art music' choral work. Findings are derived from a grounded-theory based, socio-musical case study of an amateur 'art music' Bach Choir, in the process of rehearsing and performing the Mass in B Minor by J.S. Bach. Data collection consisted of participant observation, qualitative interviews and a paper-based survey. Findings indicate that in the process of learning a challenging choral work, participants use peer-learning as support and form supportive groups within each voice part, with 'informal leaders' supporting others ('followers') who are performing the work for the first time. On the other hand, performing a challenging work can also seem 'intimidating' for those less experienced singers. Findings also indicate that whereas followers (and the conductor) benefit from this group support, 'leaders' may experience a certain lack of musical challenge.

Introduction and theoretical perspectives

The aim of this paper is to address how members of a composer-oriented Bach choir experience collective peer-group support and peer-learning as a method of informal music learning within the social environment of the amateur choral setting. Particular focus will be placed on the role of 'leaders' within different voice parts who aid fellow singers (or 'followers') in learning their voice parts in a challenging choral work and how the cooperation between 'leaders' and 'followers' aims at providing the best possible performance of a challenging choral work.

Findings presented in this paper are derived from a PhD Study in Music Sociology (Einarsdottir, 2012), which aimed at observing how members of an amateur Bach choir value the composer-orientation, how they experience and associate themselves with the composer, and the benefits of learning and rehearsing a grand choral work (the *Mass in B Minor*).

Formal/informal/non-formal music education?

Musical learning can occur in different stages and situations. *Formal musical learning* can be defined as a learning that is both organised and structured within the context of a music school or a conservatory. The formal learning is curriculum-driven and based on the initiative of the teacher in relation to 'what' and 'how' to learn and a constant, linear skills development of the student (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 1999; Mak *et al.*, 2007). *Informal*

learning, however, consists primarily of self-initiative, self-directed and self-motivated learning, which can be shared by peers, and may also use peer-group learning and support (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 1999; Bjornavold, 2002; Mak *et al.*, 2007).

According to Resnick (1987) the contrasts between formal, in-school learning and informal, out-of-school learning consist of formal schooling as 'a setting in which to learn rules' (p. 15), whereas informally acquired knowledge is not really considered valid or necessary, and learning is based more on peer-support and group learning. Green (2002) defined formal music education as a system consisting of 'educational institutions from primary schools to conservatories, partly involving or entirely dedicated to the teaching and learning of music' (p. 4).

The amateur choral setting does not seem to fit in Green's (2002) category of a formal music education but it may be assumed that it has, in a way, some of its characteristics. In that perspective, choral singing may thus be associated with the third 'stage'; *non-formal learning*, which is not considered as formal learning but is led by a professional, such as a conductor. Non-formal learning is defined as learning that is not primarily designated as formal learning but is more like semi-structured learning that takes place outside the established formal educational system (e.g. based on a tailor-made curriculum which is adapted to the needs of learning groups, under the supervision of a professional) (Colley *et al.*, 2002 – see Mak *et al.*, 2007, p. 15). Thus choral singing as a learning environment has some of the characteristics of a formal setting (student-teacher), based on the structured leadership of the conductor as well as peer-learning and group support. The conductor plays the role of the educator and thus provides structured leadership for choir members in order to engage in the music they are learning, in a structured way. Therefore, the conductor is responsible for the progress of the choir as a whole and, therefore, the musical development and active learning of choral members (Apfelstadt, 1997; Durrant, 2005, 2009; Smith & Salatoff, 2005).

Zadig (2011) investigates the role of so-called informal music leaders within choral voices, i.e. strong singers who lead their voice parts. Through interviews with Swedish choral conductors and multi-track recordings during rehearsals, Zadig demonstrates the existence of informal leaders and how such relationships between voice leaders and followers develop through choral practices in an upper-secondary school choir. Henley's research (2010) on musical learning through participation in an amateur instrumental ensemble addresses how members support each other in the learning process of a new work to be performed. Her findings indicate that group members learn at different rates. Thus, new members follow others who have more experience and as time passes, they themselves become those who help others. The environment thus allows peer-learning to happen, according to Henley.

Being a part of an ensemble enables the learning process to become more collective. Davidson *et al.* (1997) claim that an appropriate practice environment is necessary in order to develop musical performance skills and maintain interest in the learning process. According to Hargreaves (2002) practising music is, in most cases, a social activity which can easily be linked to choral singing. Ensemble music making, like choral singing, can also provide a certain level of well-being (Chorus America, 2003; Durrant, 2005; Smith & Salatoff, 2005; Cliff *et al.*, 2010) and can have a positive effect on vocal health (Smith & Salatoff, 2005; Zadig, 2011).

Musical development is also shaped by educational contexts and institutions. North and Hargreaves (2008) attempt to define the distinction between formal and informal learning processes, referring to Vygotsky's rejection of Piaget's emphasis of the child as a 'miniature adult' (1966 – see North & Hargreaves, 2008, p. 315) thus claiming that learning is primarily based on social interaction and child-centred approaches in education. Pitts (2005) argues that students who participate in non-institutional musical activities show a greater confidence in their musical abilities than students who only participate in curricular-related activities. However, Folkestad (2006, cited in Henley, 2010) argues that research regarding formal and informal learning situations is too much influenced by the 'myth' of formal musical learning in a formal setting, without acknowledging informal learning as a learning style itself.

Amateur choral setting within the four dimensions of music learning

Wise *et al.* (1992) define choral music performance as a communal phenomenon where choir members seek influence from the group and the conductor in order to succeed. Hargreaves (2003b) categorise informal pathways in music education as the 'third, self-directed environment' which is both informal and elective – thus choral singing might be located in this 'third environment'. By referring to Folkestad (2006), Green (2005) and Hargreaves (2003b), North and Hargreaves (2008) present four main dimensions of music education:

The first dimension is the *contexts of learning*, demonstrating the differences between musical practices and informal learning (Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005) at home, formal learning at school, and extra musical activities that can be categorised in the 'third environment', such as participating in choral activities, music groups, bands and other musical ensembles (mainly on amateur levels).

The second dimension refers to *autonomy and ownership* – whether music education is directed through music teachers or self-directed through 'informal' musical learning (Folkestad, 2006) such as choral singing, for example. Choral singing is thus likely to be both informal (by using peer-group support and partly self-directed learning – see Boekaerts & Minnaert, 1999; Bjornavold, 2002; Mak *et al.*, 2007) and non-formal (supervised and structured by the choral conductor; Colley *et al.*, 2002, cited in Mak *et al.*, 2007, p. 15).

The third dimension is the *learning style* itself – the nature and quality of the learning process. Lucy Green (2005) emphasised four approaches of the learning style: First, the use of recordings instead of 'traditional music scores' for learning purposes. Second, the use of group learning rather than individual learning and thus using peer-learning through imitation, observation and discussion (in relation to musical learning in choirs especially). Learning music within the context of an amateur choir occurs partly through group learning, under the supervision of the conductor. This aspect connects with Moore *et al.* (2003) who discussed the critical importance of the social context of learning in a choral setting, especially for sustaining motivation and for the development of musical skills. The third aspect contrasts traditional top-down, rather than bottom-up, fashions of music education as a planned progression from simple to complex skills and achievement, and the fourth

involves integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing activities (Green, 2005).

The fourth dimension of musical learning refers to the *learning content* itself, the 'what' of music learning, whether the focus is on different styles and genres. North and Hargreaves (2008, p. 351) claim that the main challenge that school music teachers face is somehow to be able to capitalise on the high levels of motivation and commitment that informal music learning can provide more motivated students within the school environment, since the musical identities of music teachers and pupils are interdependent, and this can be linked and referred to in the conductor-choral singer setup as well. However, many secondary school music teachers are a product of the western classical tradition, according to the analysis of Hargreaves (2003a) and may therefore be inexperienced in other music genres (see York's (2001) survey of 750 heads of secondary school music).

In summary, this introduction sets the stage for the theoretical basis of this paper by locating the learning environment of an amateur choir and the support of peer-learning within the amateur choral setting. The next section will discuss the methodological approach of the research, focusing on the research design and methods of data collection.

Methods

Research design

In the design process of this research, it came to my attention that there were quite a number of composer-oriented Bach choirs in England. Historical writings on the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach indicate that he was not particularly well known in his lifetime and his grand choral works (e.g. *St Matthew Passion*, *St John Passion*, *The Christmas Oratorio*, *Mass in B Minor*) were almost forgotten for 80 years, until Mendelssohn revived the *St Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829 (Stauffer, 1997, p. 206).

In the latter part of the 19th century, Bach choirs were established in order to perform the grand Masses and Oratorios, where their content suited both the development of the 19th century choral movement, and the religious emphasis on the respectability of choral singing as a constructive, religious recreation (see Russell, 1987). Today, there are approximately 41 Bach choirs in the UK.¹ Previous writings concerning Bach mainly consist of historical accounts of his life and work (see for example Parry, 1909; Butt, 1997; Parrott, 2000; Wolff, 2002). Therefore, I chose to observe this 'Bach choir tradition' and specifically the value of the composer-orientation in the amateur choral setting.

I also wanted to study a choir that was rehearsing and working on challenging repertoire by J.S. Bach. I chose the *Mass in B Minor* mainly due to its historical context. Bach composed the Mass over a long period of time and completed it only one year before his death. The Mass consists of many different styles and is in fact a kind of a 'grand finale'. Not only did Bach self-borrow the Catholic mass form but he used this work as a kind of a 'portfolio' of all the types of composition he could do and had done in his lifetime (see Wolff, 2002, p. 438–442).

Participants

The case in this study was the Croydon Bach Choir in London, with Tim Horton as musical director. In order to choose a case, special criteria were created. The choir had to (a) be an amateur Bach choir where prospective members did not have to attend formal auditions, (b) have a minimum of 50 members and (c) be in the rehearsal phase of the *Mass in B Minor*. Sixty-five per cent of participants were women; the average age of members was 62 years (60 years for female participants, 64 years for male participants) and 67% had undergraduate degrees or more. The average age of the choir was thus relatively high. The study of Bruhn (2002) indicates that after 60, hearing and flexibility of the voice start to decline. It must be taken into account that even though the average age of the choir was relatively high, the choir as a whole demonstrated good skills in singing and the sound of the choir was of good quality, in my opinion. According to Bell (2008) choral conductors are facing the inevitable fact that recruiting new members (especially young people) is becoming increasingly difficult in general and according to my findings (Einarsdottir, 2012) the participants reflected similar concerns.

Research approach

The methodological approach of this research consisted of a grounded theory-based, single case study of the Croydon Bach Choir in London (60 members) performing J.S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor* (Einarsdottir, 2012). The Grounded theory approach consists of systematic collection and analysis of qualitative data in order to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves. Thus the analysis of the data generates the concepts constructed. Instead of defining and writing a massive literature review, the researcher starts by going out in the field to collect data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, I chose grounded theory as an approach for this research since doing a socio-musical study on a composer-oriented choir was a relatively new field. Thus the aims of the research were kept quite open in the beginning, allowing the themes of the research to emerge from the data.

However, even though it is a part of a grounded theory study to start analysing the data quite early in the process (Charmaz, 2006), due to my position as a part of the study, I decided to distance myself from the data and 'keep it in the drawer' for at least half a year before starting the analysis process. The fact that I became a part of the group, a member of the choir, also affected my decision to put the data away for a period of time.

The research took place from 13 January to 27 March 2010. In order to collect data, I used the following methods.

Participant observation/self-observation

I joined the Croydon Bach choir as a choral member in the spring term 2010, rehearsing and performing Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, gathering participant observation material via field notes and reflections on the experience. The rehearsal process was 10 weeks – the first week's rehearsal was cancelled due to severe snow but I joined the choir in the 3rd week of rehearsal.

My status as a researcher was to observe from the perspective of the amateur choral singer since I have relatively little formal music education and no professional qualifications in singing. Several research projects on choirs have however been conducted with the researcher in the role of the conductor, such as the research by Anshel and Kipper (1988), Bailey and Davidson (2005), and more recently, Tara French at Glasgow Caledonian University (French & MacDonald, 2011) and Anne Haugland Balsnes (2011). This status thus gave me the opportunity to 'blend in' by being part of the choral group and served as a clear advantage in the data collection. Thus the field notes consisted of my own experience singing with the choir, i.e. the choir rehearsals, conductor, repertoire and the spirit in the choir among members. A special framework was used for writing the field notes that were written after rehearsals based on notes taken during the rehearsal and some reflections on the memory afterwards. Main themes of the field notes framework were atmosphere in the rehearsal, interaction between choir members; repertoire; the performance of the conductor; interaction between conductor and choir members and my experience in general of the rehearsal (such as my interaction with choir members, performance in sight-reading and keep on track etc.).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews

Some of the choral members and the conductor were interviewed (14 interviews, 10 by voluntary participation, four by request). Interviews with choir members were anonymous and every interviewee was given a pseudonym. However, the choral committee and the conductor agreed that I could use the name of the choir and the name of the conductor in any publication that might follow. Interviews with choral members mainly covered their experience in singing with the choir, how they began their participation and how it affects their daily life and identity, the music that is sung in the choir and their vision of the composer and the tradition along with some background information. The interviews were recorded with an audio-recording application included in the iPhone 3GS smartphone. The general length of the interviews was from 25 minutes to 1 hour. The question frame was semi-structured and consisted of various types of questions; general questions regarding each interviewee's background (education, profession, music education), choral experience, music inspiration and effects of music in everyday life, musical skills and confidence, experiences of musical directors and then specific questions regarding J.S. Bach, the *Mass in B Minor* and the Bach-orientation of the choir. The interview data were transcribed manually with Express Scribe software² analysed with coding analysis through NVivo software.³ Peer-group learning was one of the themes that was derived from the analysis (which is the topic of this paper).

Paper-based survey

A survey was used in order to gather demographic information and answer basic questions in the research – responses were collected during coffee break at a rehearsal. The response rate was 85% (n = 60, 51 responses). Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous where participants responded to the survey during the tea break and gave the results back to the researcher at the end of the coffee break. The quantitative data were

analysed and displayed with descriptive statistics and crosstabs with the SPSS quantitative data analysis program.⁴

Research findings

In-group experience of the Mass in B Minor

Participants of this research consider the *Mass in B Minor* by J.S. Bach to be one of the most difficult choral works an amateur choir can undertake. The Croydon Bach choir was celebrating its golden jubilee in 2010 and this work was chosen to celebrate that year.

According to the survey results, a total of 63% of choir members had sung the *Mass in B Minor* before this term. From that group, 37% had sung the work with the Croydon Bach Choir, 40% had sung it with another choir and 23% had sung it with CBC and also another choir. Thus, 37% of members were singing the *Mass in B Minor* for the first time. For someone who is learning it from scratch, however, in order to be able to keep up in a rehearsal period (especially if it is only 10 weeks rehearsing 16 choral parts), both the choir and the individuals within the choir must have attained a certain stage of vocal and sight-reading skills. Thus the group consisted of a mixture of experienced choral singers (who had sung the *Mass in B Minor* previously) and those who were learning it for the first time.

I am an amateur choral singer myself – my experience with large-scale choral works is not extensive; I have performed Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, sections from Mozart's *Requiem* and Vivaldi's *Gloria* along with other repertoire consisting mainly of Icelandic choral music (both religious and secular) and hymns. Since there are not many opportunities to sing grand choral works for people who live outside the capital of Reykjavík, I was one of the members singing the *Mass in B Minor* for the first time.

The experience of the rehearsal process is a complicated phenomenon – while discussing the *Mass in B Minor*, the interviewees frequently referred to the complexity of the work, required vocal/technical skills, good sight-reading and ability to learn and have good pitch as well. It was evident that most participants liked the repertoire – some of the choir members had joined the choir specifically to perform the *Mass in B Minor*. Research suggests that liking the repertoire is helpful in the learning process and in creating certain in-group favouritism (see also Lonsdale & North, 2009). However, it became evident that rehearsing a choral work of this magnitude in 10 weeks would be a challenge.

Followers, informal leaders and group support

During the learning process, due to the complexity of the *Mass in B Minor*, some groups within different voice parts formed a supportive unit in order to help each other in the learning process. As within so many groups, a kind of automatic 'hierarchical' division emerges in which the strongest singers are the leaders and the other singers, who do not have the same level of skills, act as followers, as Louise (a soprano)⁵ describes:

I think I'm not a follower. There are some people and when they sing they just wait for the person sitting next to them and then get the confidence to come in when I make sure I know something so well that I could sing quite happy. I could do a solo, not that

I have got the voice for it so I think that my skills have more to do with timing and accuracy and learning something well rather than having a good voice, I do not think I got a good voice but I think that I'm accurate. (Louise)

What Louise is describing is that she is not afraid to take the initiative and does not necessarily want to rely on others to make the right entry or to hit the right notes and she takes time to prepare before every rehearsal. Even though it is possible to find a pattern of leader-follower relations within the group, the division is not always black and white. As within every type of group work, different individuals have different strengths and skills, and individuals contribute their talents to the group using the social force and dynamics to create something great (see for example Belbin, 2010). Take Emily (an alto) and Peter (a bass) as examples: Emily, who learned to play the piano when she was young, describes her sight-reading skills as moderate and she has, with other two altos, formed 'a small group within the group':

Q: How would you describe your skills as a choral singer?

I'm not sure really. I can read music – I would think I am kind of moderate really – I'm moderate and enthusiastic. I'm not marvellous but . . . we are three sitting side by side and we are doing quite well at the moment. (Emily)

I'm good in hitting notes, I'm rubbish at counting, I feed off the other singers in the bass and some of them are very good at counting and some of them who are good at counting do not have that nice voice so I sort of project their counting outwards . . . I think that I've got better because I'm in the choir. I was always capable to make a reasonable sound but I think I got better projecting it . . . (Peter)

David (a tenor) and Emily both describe how they seek their support from the other members within their part: Peter claims he has good pitch, but he relies on the assistance of his peer singers when it comes to keeping time. The group, consisting of individuals with different strengths and skills, forms a unit and helps each other out. As for Emily's small group, according to my experience as a choral singer, I have seen this micro-formation of groups within each part (especially among the female parts) in every choir I have sung with. The singer finds his/her place within his/her part, sits next to the same two people and chooses these people according to how they sound together; the person next to you is usually accurate (or even better than you are) and your voices sound well together. These two quotes above are an example of this kind of cooperation. According to my experience, singers with relatively little experience also tend to try to sit next to a person who has more skills and is confident while singing – whether it is sitting beside that person or even in front of him/her. The conductor encouraged people, especially those who were learning the *Mass in B Minor* for the first time, to place themselves next to a person who knew the work and in the rehearsals, I noticed that people were switching seats and thus clustering around those individuals who had previous experience in performing the Mass. The group seems to support individual contributions in order to make the result of the group work

better (see also Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009) when it comes to the quality of the sound, pitch and accuracy.

It was evident in some of the narratives, especially when interviewees were asked whether they wanted to become professional singers or not, that some of them claimed they sing better in a group. Louise, for example, does not consider her voice good enough for solos and likes to sing when no one is listening but her remarks on the value of group singing highlight another feature of collective singing and its value:

I honestly think that I sing better with the choir – when I'm alone I feel like I am struggling more but yes I sing on my own . . . I think it would be fantastic to do [a solo career]. If you got a good voice to be a soloist is wonderful – I do not think – it's very competitive – there are very few people who get on, particularly these days. You have to have the whole package – if you look like Catherine Jenkins, you go ahead. (Louise)

Louise is demonstrating that she uses the power of group singing (the social, collective, aesthetic experience) to enhance or 'increase the quality of my own singing' (Louise) – using the collective power to sing aloud without hesitation. This indicates that singing together might be better for the individual voice in many cases, whereas the individual is also enhanced by the collectivism and finds that he/she does better in a group (see Putnam *et al.*, 2009; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009).

Thus the group dynamics seem to have a positive influence on new members, who were at times struggling with getting through the work itself. These new members, especially those who were singing the *Mass in B Minor* for the first time, were spread throughout the group, sitting next to people who had sung the work before in order to benefit from the group support (Rehearsal 5).

In the beginning of the rehearsal period, due to my lack of practice in sight-reading and my pitch problems, I placed myself next to a very good soprano (rehearsals 2 and 3) who had sung this work before and knew it well. I was in a new situation – I was seeking support from others to learn the repertoire. Usually I am in the position of learning my part fairly quickly and therefore usually undertaking the role of the 'informal leader' within my voice part and thus supporting my fellow sopranos, but this time it was the opposite. I was experiencing, pretty much for the first time in my life, how it felt to be a singer who benefits from the more experienced singers – to be a 'follower'. In fact, as strange as it might sound, I was quite relieved not to be in my usual role as the singer who knows the repertoire before anyone else within his/her part, as it was a relief to be just one of many strong sopranos, not the only strong soprano. In this way, it meant less pressure on me, I could enjoy it more and I did not have to worry about my voice being too strong or standing out; I could sing out loud as much as I was able, without making a mess of the music.

Although my aim was to be self-sufficient and not to rely on others, I admit that having her support was very helpful, especially when I was going off track and had to get back into the performance fairly quickly with her help. Peer-support of this kind was very helpful to me and demonstrates that teamwork of this kind is efficient; if one fails during a measure or two, there is someone else who stayed on track.

It would be interesting to investigate further whether and/or how this kind of collective learning may support the work of the musical director in the learning process. James (a tenor) commented on the issue of accuracy:

Well, as Tim [the musical director of the Croydon Bach choir] said the other week, he said that we are not here to achieve absolute note perfection – very few amateur choirs ever do, well you aim for that. Nevertheless it needs to be as well rehearsed as it possibly can be. (James)

Like James above, when discussing performances in general, the matter of accuracy and the intellectual challenge ‘in sense of working on something and achieving something’ (Jacob) were frequently mentioned in the interviews. Mary, who is an experienced singer like James, emphasised that the note accuracy was not always an issue if the group is big enough:

... as long as it's pretty much on the note because everybody's voices are different and you might have one person who is perhaps singing a weeny bit under the note but because they are all singing together, it's not going to be noticeable and I think that in rehearsals a conductor of a smallish choir has a pretty good idea where the problems lie in intonation. Yes, it would be ideal if everybody is absolutely in pitch but I do not think it's always a problem. It might be if you were singing a capella but we might only do that perhaps for some folk songs and things like that which we've done maybe in some lighter concerts. (Mary)

Here Mary is referring to the power of collective singing where the group (i.e. the choir) can make up and almost ‘delete’ individual errors or off-pitch singing. According to my personal experience, performing the *Mass in B Minor* is certainly a challenge in terms of vocal/technical skills – making it an ideal work to perform on special occasions.

Are the ‘informal leaders’ being challenged?

Being in the role of the ‘informal leader’ can be a bit frustrating for the more skilled singers who get the feeling that they are not actually improving when they are not being challenged enough and, in the worst case scenario, they get bored. Mary, a soprano, who has sung the *Mass in B Minor* before (and knows it quite well) shared her frustration of having to stop in the middle of a section or measure during rehearsals:

Oh, it just makes me want to carry on singing and – anything that really annoys me at choir practice is that we have to keep stopping [laughter] and obviously that's so other people can learn notes and to get the balance, everything tied together but I find that a bit frustrating [laughter]. (Mary)

In a way, as an experienced singer, I can relate to Mary's notion. In many choirs, singers come and go – experienced singers leave the choir and new members (even less skilled) join in – this difference in skills can be both positive and negative: Positive in the sense that new members get support from more experienced singers while learning new and challenging works and thus benefit from collective learning process.

I have experienced this lack of challenge in some of the choirs I have sung with, which is not a good thing, especially if the main emphasis is on singing challenging repertoire

and not necessarily being a part of a group, or a part of a society. Additionally, this clash of skills can be discouraging for skilled, experienced singers, as James demonstrated:

I just sang the *Mass in B Minor* last summer . . . and it was with what is called the [location] Festival Choir that is to say various singers from different choirs come together and rehearse – and what this means is that you get a lot of singers who probably didn't know it and have never sung it and some who had sung it before and I found that much more difficult because the standard can sometimes suffer slightly and it was a very large number of people and I think you need a smaller number because to get all the complexities needs a lot . . . obviously you need a choir of good ability to do it because it's probably one of the most difficult works in the repertoire. (James)

On the other hand, it must be taken into consideration that those who are more skilled than others are not necessarily right all the time, as Meredith describes. These discussions above address the importance of collective learning: Not only do strong, experienced singers provide support for their fellow members (who may not be as experienced); they may also save the conductor both time and effort in teaching and training relatively new and inexperienced members. Therefore, these singers who have both good skills and experience are valuable to the choir, especially when the conductor and the choral committee decide to go forward with challenging repertoire. This can be a risk, especially if they are not fully aware of both the quality and the musical ability of the choir as a whole.

In summary, the data indicated that participants claimed that the rehearsal process of a challenging work like the *Mass in B Minor* had a positive impact on their vocal skills (certain physical benefits) and the process was a good way of improving sight-reading skills. Becoming familiar with a new work, or revising previous experiences of performing the *Mass in B Minor* had positive influences on the cultural capital of choir members in the learning process itself. This creates a collective experience and impacts an individual's social networks, since many new members joined the choir for this particular occasion (see Einarsdottir, 2012).

Discussion

The results indicate that for individuals who were learning the work from scratch, the collective, peer-support of the rest of the group, especially from experienced choral singers who have previous experience in performing the *Mass in B Minor*, became evident. Thus in a way, this collective force has eliminating effects on off-pitch notes.

According to Green (2005), using group learning rather than individual learning leads to the process of peer-learning through imitation, observation and discussion and that is what I experienced for the first time. In a way, being in the role of the 'ordinary' singer and not the one who learns fairly quickly or knows the repertoire already was a nice change for me personally – I didn't have to be in the role of the 'strong, more experienced soprano' and thus I was able (sort of) to relax and enjoy singing without the pressure of being in the 'leading role'. In my pilot study (conducted prior to this study), one of my interviewees described the pressure she was under in another singing group, where she always learns everything first and feels like it is a sort of obligation to attend rehearsals 'because she had to'.

These findings are partly in line with the primary results from Zadig's study (2011). A similar notion can be found in Henley's study (2010) of an amateur music ensemble, which shows how amateur musicians support each other in the learning process of a new work. In her study, Henley undertook the role of participant observer and joined the ensemble as an instrumentalist. She therefore experienced at first-hand how the group support functioned in order to learn the musical piece together. Zadig's case was a choir in an upper-secondary school in Sweden where he identified informal leaders within each voice part by measuring vocal abilities through individual audio recordings during rehearsals. In my research, I focus on an adult choir with a relatively high average age (62 years) but a future study might build on both studies and investigate through an extensive quantitative and/or longitudinal study when the formation of informal leaders emerges and how it develops. The current study therefore has certain things in common with previous studies; the methodology used is similar to Henley's research and findings support Zadig's study. However, the current study also provides new insights into the aspect of group support within the amateur choral context; i.e. how participants in this study experience different aspects and the relationships between followers and informal leaders and how, in particular, different individuals with different musical skills assist each other in order for the group to provide the best possible results.

The current study also indicates some of the problematic aspects of being either a 'follower' or 'informal leader', derived from the narratives of interviewees. Instead of finding myself in the role of the informal leader, I was suddenly taking the role of the follower, which gave me a new perspective on the vocal interactions within individual voice parts.

Thus, different choral singers have different skills, strengths and weaknesses – as is evident in the narratives, some have good pitch, others are good at counting and they can thus help each other and use the collective force of learning and support. Strong, experienced singers sometimes automatically take on a leading role within their voice part ('leaders') and take initiative in singing, while other less experienced singers follow the leaders and learn from them ('followers') (see also Zadig, 2011).

The informal leaders, however, may experience a certain lack of challenge – they either have sung the repertoire before (and therefore know their part pretty well) or have good sight-reading skills. Therefore, rehearsals can be a bit non-challenging for those individuals. One of the interviewees in this study (who had performed the *Mass in B Minor* a couple of times before) claimed that the only thing she found irritating was when they had to stop after a few bars – she just wanted to carry on singing, although she could very well understand that it was not possible for those who were learning the repertoire for the first time. Therefore, music directors must take into account that if the repertoire is not challenging enough, these skilled, experienced individuals could become somewhat 'bored'.

However, performing repertoire that is very difficult can also be discouraging for singers with weaker sight-reading and/or vocal skills and distractions such as chatting, disturbance and low levels of discipline can be a problem during a rehearsal. Richards and Durrant (2003) discuss the tendency among conductors to recruit skilled singers instead of putting effort into training less skilled singers. Taking this perspective, conductors should not underestimate the process of peer-learning and the use of group support in order to train less skilled singers to become more skilled in time (see Green, 2005). Group learning

could thus be beneficial, not only for choir members but also for conductors and the choral movement in general.

Lastly, there was a certain feeling of collective pride and achievement that was evident as things were finally coming together and the hard work of pre-rehearsal preparation and attending intense and focused rehearsals was finally paying off. This echoes Arasi's study (2006) on adult choral singers joining a high school choral programme, where findings suggested that participants felt a sense of pride and achievement, and an increased ability to criticise and evaluate their own performances, as well as gaining increased self-confidence.

The focal point of this research demonstrates the usefulness of doing a socio-musical study on the amateur choral setting as an active learning environment and how the learning process is facilitated. As previously mentioned, the amateur choral setting has some of the characteristics of a formal learning environment but is rather characterised as a non-formal learning where collective learning is the leading factor, under the supervision of a professional (e.g. the conductor) (Colley *et al.*, 2002 – see Mak *et al.*, 2007, p. 15). Findings in this research could become useful for conductors and choral committees on how to manage a group of singers with different skills and therefore ensure that the 'leaders' are being challenged, without intimidating the less skilled ones and thus utilise the experience of the leaders in order to train the less experienced ones (and thus maintaining recruitment of new members). Furthermore, findings could be tested further on more performances of the same work (perhaps in different countries) in order to see whether the results will be similar or not.

Acknowledgements

Findings are derived from my PhD thesis 'J.S. Bach in Everyday Life': I thank my supervisor, Professor Tia DeNora, for excellent supervision and support. I would also like to thank the Postgraduate Admission Office at University of Exeter, and participants of this research; and the musical director, board and members of the Croydon Bach Choir, for their support, interest and participation.

Notes

- 1 Choirs with a webpage, found on the internet.
- 2 <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html>
- 3 http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx.
- 4 <http://www-01.ibm.com/software/analytics/spss/products/statistics/>.
- 5 All interviewees are represented with a pseudonym.

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