

# Knowing the audience: Music Performance Anxiety and other performance experiences of a primary school choir

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## Abstract

Research has shown that an audience can make a great difference to a musical performance but limited research has explored this with primary school-aged children. Using an action research study, participants from a primary school choir, students in fifth and sixth class formed into a choir through a compulsory singing programme, were surveyed to discover their experiences of performing for an audience.

The study was completed during a busy period in the school calendar when participants competed in an eisteddfod and performed at the annual school Open Day concert. The events occurred three days apart and featured a performance of two pieces by the choir, the same repertoire being performed for both audiences. The eisteddfod audience included an adjudicator, eight competing choirs and their conductors, with family and friends from each choir also in attendance. The audience for the second performance, Open Day, was made up mostly of family, friends and other school students. This audience could be considered a known audience. Given the two different audiences, the opportunity to discover how the children felt was discovered through a survey prior to and after the events. Surprisingly, participants were more concerned about performing for a known audience, with 25% acknowledging this as difficult with only 9% indicating Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) about performing for an unknown audience. Further exploration suggested the audience expectations of repertoire and performance technique further influenced the choristers experience of MPA. Following this experience, data was collected prior to the annual Speech Night presentation, again for a known audience with repertoire expectations. Implications for conductors include understanding the sign and symptoms of MPA in students in their care, repertoire selection, preparing students for performances and assisting young singers to present to an audience rather than worry about the expectations of the audience.

**Keywords:** school choir, Music Performance Anxiety, audience, repertoire

Singing is an important component of education programmes from the Preparatory and Kindergarten levels through to the end of primary school. Barrett (2009) described the child's musical engagement as "singer, song-maker, and music-maker" (p. 116). As a child develops, singing can become a feature of much of the music learning students undertake in formal school settings "as the singing voice has traditionally been an accessible instrument for musical learning" (Hughes, 2008 p. 131). It is the accessibility of the voice that allows it to be a positive introduction to music.

Through singing we can shape who we are personally, culturally and nationally (Durrant, 2005a; Welch, Himonides, Howard, & Brereton, 2004), musically, intellectually, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually (Durrant, 2005a; Elliott, 1993; Welch, 1994). Singing can be considered a form of personal awareness and it has the added benefits of deep listening and well-being (Rao, 2005). Further research has investigated the benefits of singing in a group such as emotional balance, a feeling of freedom, being able to step away from problems of everyday life, positive emotional health, relaxation and enhanced

mood (Davidson & Bailey, 2005; Davis, Unwin & Kenny, 2002). Given all the benefits of singing and membership of a choir, why then do some people experience Music Performance Anxiety (MPA)?

Miles (2016) found MPA was highlighted and enhanced by repertoire, "I think that the choir already struggles a bit with performance anxiety and having that sort of pop people tend to get embarrassed and it doesn't help during the performance if the performers are embarrassed." (Interview: Participant 9, 29 May 2012). MPA in a group singing ensemble setting can affect individual members of the ensemble and may have a collective effect on the group (Miles, 2016). The form of performance anxiety specific to musicians, including children and adolescents in group singing ensembles, can be defined as a recurring anxious apprehension relating to a musical performance. The effect of MPA may not define an overall outcome of a performance or the musical accomplishments of individual performers, but conductors should be aware of the possible effects (Kenny, 2010; Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2013). There may be occasions where, in the event that MPA occurs, it could result in a lowered performance quality (Ryan & Andrews, 2009).

Kenny and Osborne (2006), describe young children as natural performers, having a love for performance and unaware of the quality of their performance. With the development of MPA, possibly during primary school, but observed in a high school setting (Participant 9 above), this study was undertaken in a primary school as this is an area with limited research. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of MPA in a primary school choir during preparations for two performances, a competition and a school Open Day concert. Aspects of interest included (i) the number of children experience MPA in the week prior to the events, (ii) if pressure was applied to the competition by either the conductor or the school, (iii) if MPA was experienced differently according to either the type of event or the audiences.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 53 Year 5 and 6 children, varying in age from ten to twelve, from a school in Sydney's Northern Beaches. There were 29 boys and 24 girls. The choir is a compulsory activity, with two 30 minute rehearsals scheduled each week during the school term. The choir was in the process of preparing to participate in a competition, in the primary school choir section of a popular eisteddfod, and the annual school Open Day Concert. Both events were held in the same week of May, the eisteddfod on Thursday and Open Day on Sunday. The same repertoire, two-part arrangements of *Fall Leaves* by Donald Skirvin and *Broadway Musical Magic* arranged by Mac Huff, was performed at both events.

### Procedure

The study was undertaken as an action research project, a strategy frequently used in education, as it allows a teacher to carry out a disciplined inquiry that both informs and possibly changes their practice (Ferrance, 2000), in this case providing an opportunity for the conductor to undertake the role of researcher. As it was an action research project carried out within a specific school, ethics clearance was not required, but permission was granted by the Headmaster, with support from the Board of Directors, prior to the commencement of the research. A survey was developed to be completed in the week prior to the events (Part 1) and a follow-up response (Part 2) in the week after. To match the data, participants were asked to include their name on the top of Part 1 and Part 2. Once the surveys were matched, participant names were removed and participants were assured of their anonymity.

### Survey

The survey was designed to allow primary school aged participants to answer the questions

in a reasonably short time frame. Part 1 was divided into three sections, a) thinking about the eisteddfod, b) thinking about Open Day, c) thinking about both performances. Section A and B asked participants to consider feelings, confidence, expectations, pressure and anxiety using a 5-point Likert scale using the words strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. Section C gave participants an opportunity to list words that made them feel nervous and words that encouraged them or made them feel less nervous.

Part 2 was also divided into three sections, d) thinking about the eisteddfod, e) thinking about Open Day, and f) thinking about both performances. Section D and E again used a 5-point Likert scale. Section F allowed participants to describe their experiences in more detail with the direction *write some words (or sentences) to describe your experience at the eisteddfod and Open Day (you could include the audience, other performances, the music you performed).*

## Results

For the survey analysis, findings were grouped into the five themes, *interest, preparedness, confidence, anxiety, and school expectation*. A final question in the survey provided participants with an opportunity to respond by listing their feelings in words. Participants described their understanding

of the role of the conductor, and other classroom teachers involved, along with how they felt about the performance events.

To gain an initial idea of the participant’s interest in performing in both events, participants were asked to rate their feelings using the following statements:

- I am excited to participate in the eisteddfod
- I like the music we are performing
- I am excited to perform at Open Day

The results indicated 46% of girls were excited to perform in the eisteddfod and, though slightly less, 37% of boys. The interest in performing differed more with those not excited to perform, a small percentage of girls (4%) but a much larger group of boys (16%). Clearly the tradition of an Open Day concert at the school created a much higher level of excitement, and considerably less anxiety. Table 1, displays the results measuring both excitement and feeling anxious.

With a total of 53% of girls and 55% of boys in agreement that Open Day was an exciting performance opportunity. Small numbers in both groups displayed some anxiety, but the tradition of Open Day could be considered a great opportunity for students with so few feeling anxiety. With 75% of girls and 63% of boys disagreeing with the statement *I feel anxious about performing at Open*

**Table 1: Performing at Open Day.**

I am excited to perform at Open Day						
	SA	A	N	D	SD	
Girls	25	28	28	13	4	Girls
Boys	30	25	23	17	6	Boys
I am anxious about performing at Open Day						
	SA	A	N	D	SD	
Girls	4	4	17	29	46	Girls
Boys	4	9	25	21	42	Boys
<i>All figure shown in % Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)</i>						

Day, the annual concert could be considered a confidence boosting success.

As a conductor, and from experience with other choirs and conductors through previous research, an anecdotal observation is a sense of pressure from expectations placed by the school and teachers. This may be experienced by members of the choir and the conductor and could be attributed to some anxiety. Fortunately, in this survey, this was not seen as a problem with 71% of girls and 66% of boys in agreement with the statement *I am comfortable with the expectations of the school and teachers*. Further to this, the students were *comfortable performing for an audience of parents and people I know*, with 67% of girls and 68% boys agreeing with this statement.

Analysis of the survey undertaken before the events, shows the participants were prepared, excited and reasonably confident about the forthcoming performances. Despite the positive results, there were some hints about stress, nervousness or anxiety created by the rehearsal experience. Comments made included:

- Remember do your best, come on, you can do it “better” (Participant 1F)
- A part in a song we had to practice again made me feel scared (Participant 7M)
- There are 13 other schools (Participant 12M)
- Horrible, bad, slide (Participant 25M)
- Off key, the competition is big (Participant 46F)
- It’s not a bad thing by I sort of feel that if we lose the eisteddfod the teachers might be disappointed with us (Participant 51M)

By reporting comments such as these, the language can be considered somewhat negative, and although probably said with the best intentions of inducing focus in rehearsals, this language could appear to have caused concern to participants in their preparation. Perhaps the most challenging for conductors and teachers is this comment, “the teachers might be disappointed” (Participant 51M). This is an important aspect for the conductor and other teachers working with a choir. Further research is needed into the effects of language.

In contrast, the survey completed after the performances indicated some nervousness on the day, especially for the eisteddfod. Nervousness was rated on a scale of 4 out of 5 by 14% of girls and 15% of boys. Further to this 14% of girls and 11% of boys felt pressured by the competition. Although it may be considered a small percentage, and remembering participants are primary school aged children, this should be addressed.

An interesting point, given participants reported some confidence about performing at the Open Day concert in the survey undertaken in the week before, on the day there was some notable anxiety. In response to the statement *I felt some anxiety before I performed on Open Day*, 19% of girls and 21% of boys agreed with this statement. Given their confidence (girls: 77%, boys: 72%) about performing for an audience of parents and people known to them, it is surprising to consider that many of them were anxious. Comments indicating some aspect of anxiety are shown in the Table 2.

Comments such as these, indicating a level of anxiety in relatively young participants, suggests conductors need to be aware and find ways to help choir members to feel comfortable and less stressed about a performance. As a number of

**Table 2: Performing for an audience.**

Participant	Comment
1F	I don't like singing in front of people I know because I feel pressured
7M	I felt a bit nervous at trying to remember the mistakes I had done before
11M	I felt nervous
20M	Scared terrified nervous wanted to hide
22M	A bit anxious
31F	A little nerve racking
38M	I was freaked out
42F	At the eisteddfod, I thought I wasn't going to be nervous but then I got really nervous about my solo
45F	Slightly scary NB: F for Female participants, M for Male participants

these comments suggest, the students' perceived audience expectation may increase MPA. This is an area for the conductor to further understand as several factors may play a part such as choice of repertoire, positive rehearsal experiences and preparedness for the performance.

Research has explored meditation (Farnsworth-Grodd, 2012; Lin, Zemon, & Midlarsky, 2008) and other forms of relaxation (Lorenz, 2002) an aspect familiar to participants in this study. The school practises meditation and all children participate in a 'pause' at the beginning and end of each lesson. This is a moment for all to collectively remain still with eyes closed, hands together while staying a Sanskrit phrase. The purpose of the pause is to bring about a sort of happiness and freshness. In Sanskrit literature, there is a system of beginning work and finishing it. Work is started with the word *atha*, which means that the person who starts the work comes into the present moment by encompassing the past and future. At the end of the task the word *iti* is used, allowing the subject to be closed after completion. Perhaps this has an effect in keeping anxiety levels low; however, as a conductor, there still seems to be a significant number of ensemble members who have some fears about performing, especially given this may have repercussions as children reach higher levels of schooling.

## Discussion

Given this was a small-scale study, using an action research model in one school, there was evidence of MPA. In a school setting, a conductor can be a key person in assisting members of a choir to overcome their anxiety and enjoy performances. Practice is important for the development of self-efficacy or task efficacy; however, practice "may not play as significant a role in the reduction of musical performance anxiety" (Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2013, p. 9), especially if the language used during practice can enhance anxiety. Ryan and Andrews (2009) found a strong link between the role of conductor and performance anxiety. It is imperative that conductors are aware of their

role in the preparation of performers to reduce the possibility and effect of performance anxiety. A conductor must ensure that a task is not daunting or negative and that students involved are able to feel they can fulfil the task of performing with the ensemble (Durrant, 2005b).

Conductors may display a sense of self-efficacy (Elliot, 2005) and feel good about their skills and ability to lead a group singing ensemble (Kelly, 2003; Madsen & Kelly, 2002). It is the conductors' capacity to create a positive non-threatening environment in a 'safe' atmosphere that can be seen as strength in interpersonal skills (Durrant, 2005a). A conductor's strong belief in their own skills, along with their self-assured approach to directing an ensemble, supports this idea where the interpersonal skills shapes both theirs and ensemble members' identity within the group. The conductors may believe their own commitment to the ensemble creates student motivation and alleviates anxiety.

To minimise stress a conductor can provide an appropriate emotional environment for creativity (Odena & Welch, 2007) whereby the social, personal and cultural development (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003) of the student is the conductor's primary role. Should this happen, performance excellence will be the likely result. Through musical performances, "feelings are likely to be set in motion by achievement of emotionally significant goals" (Durrant, 2005b, p. 84). By this, conductors are challenged to ensure their choice of repertoire is made for the best possible outcome and students are well-rehearsed, with attention paid to performance skills, thus reducing performance anxiety.

## Further research

Understanding how MPA is experienced by students in group setting such as a school choir is an area open to further exploration. For the conductor or school music teacher, an awareness of symptoms of MPA is important and skills for assisting students to alleviate their symptoms is

necessary. As this is an area that is not regularly included in pre-service teacher education, support material in the form of a toolkit and/ or professional learning programme is currently being developed.

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