How Participants Envision Community Music in Welsh Men’s Choirs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe choristers’ perceptions of Welsh men’s choir participation. Four choirs were observed in concert and rehearsal settings across the United States. Focus group interviews were conducted with between 4 and 10 members in each choral setting for a total of 24 total interview respondents. The interviewees included choristers of years of male choir participation, from 4 months to 47 years, and a spread of ages ranging in age from 32 to 89. The interview questions were designed to be flexible, yet focused. An interview guide was organized with a set of predetermined semi-structured prompts, dealing with the topics: enjoyment, organization, structure, recruitment, language, music, challenges, and future directions. Results highlighted the musical and social benefits as well as nationalistic benefits the singers perceived. The singers also noted certain challenges that their groups needed to address, such as recruitment, economic issues, health of the members, and a social time available. Conclusions address the results in terms of general community issues, including the potential impact of community issues on the future of music in the United States.

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The United States is well known, worldwide for its school music programs that train skilled musicians. Once students graduate, though, many opt to discontinue participation in music. National assessments have documented this trend with 13% of adults reporting engagement in music making (Jellison, 2000). Researchers have pondered why participation in school music may not translate to lifelong music. The question is not an easy one, though. While Myers (2008) cited the actual large number of ensembles that are available to adults, and Leglar and Hackett (2010) noted that community music is indeed prospering in highly populated issues may be at play in people’s participation choices. For instance, young adults need to balance job and family requirements with their own leisure time options (Rohwer, 2009). Retired adults may have the time to participate, but may have issues such as health or finances to consider (Rohwer, 2010a). All of these issues may complicate a person’s music participation decision.
Even in sites with stable community music environments, adult community groups may be experiencing common challenges such as recruitment, retention, and aging. To address these possible issues in the most informed way so that lifelong music flourish, research is needed that can describe how groups work that are highly successful; what choices have these groups made and what are the members to say about music participation?

In terms of community music, Wales is known world-wide for its men’s choirs in every small town, sometimes with even the smallest towns having multiple choirs. Following study will describe an investigation of community music in men’s choirs in order to highlight community music making processes in an environment that is long and successful tradition of community music making. In this way, composer and music educators can become better informed of music making in what might be considered a model community music setting.

**Background**

Wales is famous for its cultural festivals and community singing groups. Jones (1988) noted that the competitive festivals, called eisteddfods, are a part of the contemporary Welsh identity that has served to replace the industry-based mining identity. Jones (1988) added that the eisteddfod is integrally linked to Welsh culture through transmission of the Welsh language. Even with the strength and prevalence of eisteddfods, however, Jones (1992) documented that the number of Welsh speakers decreased over the years. Lindsey (1993) noted that even in the more Welsh of North Wales, there are settings where English is far more acceptable than Welsh. Trosset (1986) stated that part of the challenge with Welsh is its diversity and making it a difficult language to master.

The issue of language usage in Wales has been integrally linked to changes in education throughout the 1900s. Historically, England and Wales have had separating a national curriculum into the components that would be Welsh-specific, including language instruction being one of the battlefronts (Daugherty & Elfed-Owens, 1994). Education Reform act of 1988 added Welsh instruction to the schools in Wales. In 1999 the Welsh Assembly Government had a voice in curricular discussions. Sutherland (2000) stated, "it is unclear whether the enforced learning of the Welsh language at school will have lasting effects on the percentage of the adult population that language" (p. 207).

Following suit with the national curricular discussions in the schools, Welsh musicians began discussions about a national music curriculum; basic issues such as the passive versus active music making and the importance of classical versus popular music have been debated, as well as curricular ownership hotbeds such as loc control (Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994). In Welsh elementary music education projects aimed at improving music education have been designed (Russell-Bo and discussions have ensued concerning the curricular or extracurricular status and concerns with training of generalist teachers to teach music (Stevens, 1999). (2010) described a popular music education project in the community of South Wales targeted disenfranchised youth, noting that "Wales has a traditionally strong tradition with music and song, but young people have largely rejected the traditional forms of music in favor of more universally accepted, and marketed, genres such as rap and techno"
Methodology

For the current study, four choirs were observed in concert and rehearsal settings in Wales: one choir in the southwest, one in the southeast, one in the northwest, and one in the northeastern part of Wales. The choirs ranged in participant numbers from 20 to 80 members. All of the choirs had active performance schedules, with consistent audiences in attendance, and each of the groups had made recordings that took place under an internationally known label. Three of the choirs had male directors and a female accompanist, while one had a female director and an accompanist. The groups rehearsed twice a week for 1-1/2 to 2 hours at schools, clubs, or churches. All four choirs sat in a semi-circular seating arrangement during rehearsals. The singers tended to sit while singing for the majority of the rehearsal time, and they would stand when the music director wanted their undivided attention.

Focus group interviews were conducted with members of the four groups to document the group members’ overall reactions and combined perspectives on core community music issues. Given the social nature of a choral ensemble,
were chosen as an authentic data gathering procedure (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Interviews were conducted with between 4 and 10 members in each of the four settings for a total of 24 total interview respondents. The four locations of the study allowed for multiple focus groups to be conducted on the same topics in different settings thereby highlighting a cross section of views. The interviewees were linked by their common experiences in participating in a men’s choir. The interviewees had a spread of years of male choir participation, from 4 months to 47 years, and a spread of ages, with members ranging in age from 32 to 89.

The interview questions were designed to be flexible, yet focused. An interview organized with a set of predetermined, open-ended semi-structured prompts, the topics: enjoyment, organizational structure, recruitment, language, music and future directions. Recordings of the interviews were analyzed for consistencies to emerge. The content areas were described, with respondent trends and quotes used to highlight each area (Creswell, 1998). The trends noted in the study were documented with frequencies or percentages in order to avoid the impression of generalizability (Fern, 2001). Each content area was determined by the primary investigator and analyzed for consistency by the second author.

Results

Choir participants in the current study consistently noted both musical and social benefits from their participation in their ensemble.

You join the choir and all of a sudden you have 60 or 70 best friends. It’s in an exclusive club, and the buzz you get off of being on stage when you find your part harmony. It’s an unbelievable feeling… it’s the singing that counts.

Being typically Welsh, you play rugby, you have a drink; you have a drink to sing. You get too old to play rugby, but you’re not too old to have a drink. I love the fellowship we have here and since we have our own bar here in which we have everything we need. My only regret is that I didn’t join years ago.

When I had my new hip put in, the choir was my reason to get out of bed to the choir; get back to the choir. It’s the whole package why people join. The collegiality of this extended family, the singing… and let’s face it: people who sing are usually happy, aren’t they? And even if you have had a rough day for a while and you have forgotten it all.

Some participants noted challenges with the social component.

Any social time we have is in the choir rehearsals or sometimes after a concert used to do a lot more when we were younger. Socially the choir used to be strong, but not so much now; one reason is that we draw from a wider area. Being said, I think if you ask any choir member who has lost a partner, they realize the value of the choir; it’s such a difference being a member of the choir who will have forgotten it all.
We don’t have the time to meet outside of choir…we are doing so many competitions now that we don’t have time like we used to.

People used to join because of industry: the slate mines and coal mines…that core and the community spirit of the choirs. What can you do to get away from the dirty environment where you were working…something totally different…to sing….the eisteddfods came out of that…the poetry and singing competition that link to industry is gone, so the bond of people isn’t there from the slate mines and the community spirit of the choirs.  What can you do to get away from the dirty environment where you were working…something totally different…to really work at those bonds to make the group a family.  It’s harder than it was when I joined (coughs) years ago.

The most common reason for joining a group was having a connection through a member, either friend or family.

Most people join because they know someone.  It’s a bit daunting to come to the first night without knowing anyone.  I sat and listened for the first month without knowing anyone.  I sat and listened for the first month before I started singing.

I joined because I have friends and family that joined.  It was like a club.

I was brought up with music.  I’ve always sung from a young age…always loved the sound of male voice choirs all my life but never really envisioned being part of one.  This gentleman spent quite a long time persuading me.  I’m at the stage now where I was able to commit because it is a commitment…but it’s been thoroughly worthwhile.  I absolutely love it.

All of the choirs noted a decline in the younger generation’s participation in male voice choirs.

Recruitment challenges are different than they were 40 years ago.  More people go away to college whereas a lot of us stayed in town and did apply to local industries.  We stayed and joined a choir.

I think the reason that there aren’t as many men in the choirs is death and the average age of the choirs around here is what? 100? No really, probably around 80.  There is a gap with the young people.  We need more because we are an aging group.  We have problems enrolling young members.  Pop groups appealed to the youth, but something traditional like singing in a male choir, no.  It used to be.  The youngsters have more distractions.  The son joining with his father used to be the norm.  Now, it is not often the case anymore.

It is very difficult to attract the young people.  Work commitments affect our lives.  Even the youngest members make a great effort to attend the concerts, t
a big commitment to join a choir and the youngsters with work and family just don’t have the time.

Choir members consistently documented the Welsh language as one reason for continuation.

The male voice choirs have survived on the language and the feeling and for heritage. Because the chapels were Welsh and that’s where the music I would suggest that the language has a strong influence on the choirs.

Some of the best choral pieces are in Welsh. The audience always wants Welsh songs....they have heard it in chapel and school and choirs sing in Rugby matches.

Even though I am not a Welsh speaker it feels quite natural to sing it. It’s from within. There’s something very emotional about the Welsh language. something unique.

Traditional Welsh hymns are what calls to the audience. I prefer these to more exciting. But, if we only sing in Welsh, then the audience doesn’t understand the text, so we try to balance the pieces.

Rehearsal procedures for the groups tended to center around rote learning the parts for us on new pieces.

Since music instruction in the schools was for assembly....for hymns in the our choir members sometimes never learned to read music. The accompaniment is essential thing to be in a male voice choir.

I suppose there’s got to be an advantage to be able to read music, but it’s

Ninety percent of our choir doesn’t read music. I’ve been here 45 years and don’t read music. None of us would classify ourselves as musicians in the text, so we try to balance the pieces.

Participants noted that the musical directors (MDs) of the ensembles tended to primary control over the instructional choices, including repertoire.

The conductor chooses the music (interjection by other participant) BUT, that, if the majority of the choir are not comfortable with it we will moan and maybe he will change his mind. There is a lot of music that we rotate and sing a few new pieces each year.

The MDs often differ on sound. For a while we had one that wanted us to soft...tried to change us. We like the ones who try to change us gradually
Sometimes the pieces are chosen due to the size of the choir. We used to people and now we don’t so that changes what we sing. And, most choirs sing “pop” songs...some overdue it.

The participants stated that the concerts that the groups present are an integral part of the choir’s persona.

Churches and organizations contact us about a year in advance to schedule concerts. We limit it to about 30 concerts a year. The money goes to charities, the director, the accompanist, and any other costs. Last year we made 20,000 GBP for charity.

We tour a lot and do a lot of competitions and concerts and now with our recording contract, we do a lot. Our first album went gold in 3 days, then we agree to do a concert and agree on a fee of 2000 pounds or so and then our expenses out of that and then we keep the rest. It is surprising the expenses you have now a days. It looks good on paper, but with petrol going up and all, of course, we are all amateurs; we do it ‘cause we love singing and we do with that so much.

Across the various ensembles there was an accepted feeling of competition.

One choir has been a big hit. The majority of their songs were English pop music. I doubt they would sing some of the big pieces. They stressed out too, doing the recordings for their CD, and they did a 21 day tour of the country. Do you get 21 days off of work?

There’s a Welsh thing, you see: it should have been us; it should have been us... We were at the right place at the right time, yes, can understand some of the envy...

We do the eisteddfods sometimes. We enjoy the competitions. Pluckys v But we don’t always agree with the results....

When asked about what they knew about community music in the U.S., the participants consistently noted certain genres, the public school programs, and style charact

Gospel sings from the heart...love that!, and barbershop choirs sing such harmonies...when we are in competitions with them we get scared.

Music is so structured in the US...it is very professional sounding, even with youngsters. You are really known for your school music, right, but it gets...
that, doesn’t it?

The US choirs all sing a lot softer....softer....we tend to attack our music a
And they are very technical.

Participants noted recent changes to the men’s choir movement.

Only Men Aloud have brought a new face to men’s choirs. Many of the Bc
members are from our town, but they won’t join our choir because it isn’t
enough for them.

There have been a lot of television movements related to choirs lately, lik Choir. It seems to be the way. On the last choir standing show many of t have been Wales-based. The winners were traditional but went more pop movement by the end.

The wives are a different matter now than they were years ago. One of t a prospective member said, “that would be wonderful for my husband to j could travel with you”; and I said, “well it doesn’t work like that” and she he’s not joining.” So there are social changes that are impacting member choirs are now changing and taking their wives on tour.

Choral members also noted how recent economic challenges have impacted n facets of choir participation.

We don’t do too many big trips any more so that makes it easier on the y people’s schedules.

Traveling has just become too expensive. And the eisteddfods don’t have choirs from abroad anymore. Everything is just too expensive....

Most of the people at our concerts are on holiday and the economy has af audience attendance. And when we schedule trips we have to consider co. members....as well as issues of scheduling and health issues with traveling complicated.

With the economic situation, people don’t have the money to go to the pu an arm and a leg now to go out for a drink – we’re losing that social aspe shame, but singing in the pubs is a rare event now. And, we used to get members in the pubs – that was how a lot of younger members were draw choirs – hearing people sing and liking the songs and joining in. Now thai go to pubs or chapel, they don’t hear the songs and then they don’t join.

http://www.stthomas.edu/rimeonline/vol10/rohwer.htm
The most common change that the singers wanted to make to their choral ex the size of the group.

"Bigger!" But there is a good side to being small. We are a family. We s other and attend each other's family's weddings and funerals and such. I is because we are small, not a competition choir and we're not the best ai it but that is ok.

It's the same everywhere. We are all worried about numbers of members have other things to do now. Back to when choirs were formed: no televi radio so everyone went to chapel or church, but that doesn't happen now. alternatives. We try and recruit. You can't just sit back and expect peop to you now. People get older too. I'm one of the younger members and .

Even us....one of the largest choirs....we'd like more people. Being in a ch folds up is very sad.

Conclusions

As in previous research that has documented social (Coffman, 1996; Coffman 1999, 2001; Dabback, 2006; Kruse, 2008; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010b, in pr 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) and musical (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 199 Heintzelman, 1988; Kruse, 2008; Patterson, 1985; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 201 Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) benefits from adult music ensemble particip participants in the current study also had strong feelings about the beneficial music making, with social and musical benefits being the most prevalent resp addition of the Welsh language as an integral part of the music making added component to the list of proposed benefits in this study. Having Welsh songs program made the performance experience not only about the music and the environment, but made the performances authentically Welsh for both the pe their audience. This authenticity and cultural connection may be one of the k Welsh men's choirs are such an integral, supported part of the community in

While Wales is known world-wide for their men's choirs, the Welsh choir mem perceptions of music in the U.S. were spread across (1) styles of music (barb-gospel), (2) knowledge of the quality music making in the public schools, and knowledge that the choral groups in the U.S. sing with a different sound. Cle is not one thing in terms of music and that may be one of the challenges of r in the community. The U.S. is a mix of national backgrounds without a com heritage that is current in today's society. This diversity can make recruitme greater challenge for community-based groups.

Perhaps communities could concentrate efforts on starting ensembles that ali clearly with the cultural heritage of the areas in which individual's reside. If z begin participation in music, having that experience relate to their upbringing relevant to their current life experience may make the recruitment process m forward. So, it may be that mariachi groups could be advocated as a lifelong opportunity in some specific communities and bluegrass groups in others, for
instead of assuming that one type of group will work in all communities. And
similar cultural backgrounds may be able to resonate with this cultural link as
not to say that diversity isn’t valued in our current society. But, for ensemble
grow, they may need support from the community, and any links that can be
help this process should be considered.

In terms of organizational structure, the Welsh choirs have similar procedures:
choirs across the world, with choirs often sitting in a traditional choral set-up
parts or the whole of songs by ear, and having a director in charge and doing
feeling a bit of friendly competition toward like-ensembles around the area. If
ubiquity and continued success of the men’s choirs in Wales, the participants
study still noted organizational challenges that have been documented in prev-
research (Rohwer, 2005, 2008, 2010b, in press; Rohwer & Coffman, 2006); it
challenges with recruitment, attendance and scheduling, health, travel, and ti-
are issues that may be endemic to community music participation. There may
“solutions” to these issues, so much as “concerted efforts” at alleviating the c
may be useful to have the members and the music director communicate abo-
most contextually appropriate ways to work through these challenging issues
within the dedication and financial means of the participants).

Social challenges were also mentioned by the participants in the current study:
issues as many performances, spread of singers to a wider geographic area, is
being perceived as impacting the amount of social time that the singers would
have. If finances are beginning to be an issue in Wales ensembles, as has al-
documented in U.S. community ensembles (McCullough, 1981), then a vari-
etalleviating efforts should be considered by groups, such as finding donors to f-
events, and carpooling to performance venues and bars afterward. The socia-
is such an integral part of the community music experience that it would be a
time between group members was impacted negatively.

While current Welsh men’s choirs are carrying forward the choral tradition evi-
initiating contact of working in the mines together is gone, these groups conti-
ways to grow beyond history to encourage choral participation. It may be im-
for all community groups to envision novel ways to attract and retain new par-
specifically younger participants. While recruiting new members through frie-
ties may still be a useful networking tool, it may not be enough to maintain h-
in ensembles. It may be that the media is going to need to be an ever-prese-
marketing for community programs in Wales and possibly beyond. Business i-
advertising may need to be added to the word of mouth recruitment model of
Understanding the target audience for concerts and promoting the group to ti-
constituents is a basic marketing strategy. This marketing can be done using
traditional media of tv, radio, and newspaper press releases, and/or by movi-
technology; having an internet site for the group, blogging, and using social r-
rources such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ may all promote the group-
to-date fashion than word of mouth.

Even in the traditional modes of marketing like television public relations, cur-
shows are putting a new spin on marketing. As the Welsh men’s choir memb-
shows, like Last Choir Standing, may be novel ways to get the word out abou-
the choral experience. Especially with young adults moving away to college a-
families, television as a PR function may have a widespread ability to recruit a
and demographic lines. Finding novel ways to approach media for the benefit of community music groups seems like an important, yet virtually untapped resource.

While Wales has found great success in maintaining the strength and integrity of men’s choirs, even in changing times, the message seems clear that all good efforts need attention and significant work to maintain currency and usefulness. The U.S. is pondering ways to increase enrollment and deal with scheduling conflicts for members, and how to integrate social time into the mix, so are Welsh choirs. Those who keep a constant pulse on their members’ interests and concerns may be the most important things for the health and well-being of their group. Also, new ways to use technology and media to recruit and retain young singers and audience members, may also be an important consideration in the years to come. Reflection and vision for each group, then, may be key to continuance and sustainability.

Research in community music may help these efforts by adding perceptual information from different styles of ensembles so that pertinent questions can remain at the forefront of discussions about music in lifelong learning.

References


http://www.stthomas.edu/rimeonline/vol10/rohwer.htm


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