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## “I Tried Hard to Control My Temper”: Perceptions of Older Musicians in Intergenerational Collaboration

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## **“I Tried Hard to Control My Temper”: Perceptions of Older Musicians in Intergenerational Collaboration**

### **Abstract**

Combining choirs for a large-scale performance can be rewarding. If the choirs comprise different generations, differing vocal timbres can add musical possibilities. A school in London operates two choirs in partnership: one for adult members of the school community and a student choir. They perform large-scale works together regularly. Interviews were undertaken with adults to understand their experience of the partnership. Frequently research explores students’ engagement but rarely are the views of adults sought. Intergenerational music-making involves challenges such as participants working collaboratively and not in competition. Participants in this case study discuss the impact of singing in a choir with sons or grandsons and implications for family and community cohesion through music-making are explored.

### **Keywords**

Collaboration, Intergenerational Music Making, Music Performance, School Music Departments, Adult Musician Perspectives, Qualitative Inquiry

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# **“I Tried Hard to Control My Temper”: Perceptions of Older Musicians in Intergenerational Collaboration**

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## **Introduction**

Choral singing can provide connections between demographically varied people in a homogenous, communal activity (Bithell, 2014; Parks, 2013). Connecting people in positive community activities such as singing promotes a sense of purpose and well-being for participants (Custodero, 2006; Johnson et al., 2015). These health benefits are an important factor for older adults who can feel more isolated in later life. To strengthen family connections at the same time is an attractive proposition for older adults (de Vries 2011; Varvarigou, Creech, & Hallam, 2011). As teenagers approach adulthood, finding a mutually satisfying activity to participate in is an important way for parents to maintain a connection with children and grandparents with grandchildren (Stollak, Stollak, & Wasner, 1991). Choirs with different generations can benefit musically as well as socially. Intergenerational music making is usually found in community ensembles as “the strength of the community choir comes in the diversity of its age groups” (Smith & Sataloff, 2013, p. 17).

In the intergenerational partnership that is the focus of this study, two choirs that both belong to a school community combined. I conducted interviews with adult and student participants. The data were so rich and the themes so divergent however, that I deemed two separate articles appropriate. This case study was focused on the adults singing in the Choral Society. The second case study reflecting student perspectives is reported elsewhere (Sutherland, 2017). The research question for this study was, “What perceptions do older people have of younger people in intergenerational music making activities?” This purpose of this study is to provide community music ensembles with an increased awareness of the factors that contribute to positive intergenerational integration.

## Intergenerational Collaboration

For adults taking up choral singing for the first time later in life, developing the skills to participate effectively can be difficult. Opportunities for involvement in the arts can decrease with age and this is exacerbated if music skills are underdeveloped or have lapsed over time (Parks, 2013). Adults who are raising teenagers often need to find a reason for adding choral singing to their list of activities rather than delaying the decision until later. A study in Ontario revealed that few institutions with the facilities and human resources were initiating intergenerational choral programmes and that “the prevalence of intergenerational singing programs is surprisingly low, with only about one-quarter of the total institutions indicating that they had such programs” (Beynon, Heydon, O'Neill, Zhang, & Crocker, 2013, p. 181). Although research literature recommends intergenerational singing as a way of enhancing a sense of community and well-being, it is not always successful. If not properly structured, there can be negative effects for participants (Beynon et al., 2013). Intergenerational connections must be nurtured and developed in an organisation alongside musical considerations in order to be successful.

## Background

A secondary state school in West London operates a well-established choral society incorporating an adult choir and a student choir. The adult choir rehearses on Wednesday nights in the school Music Department. A letter is sent out annually to the school community inviting new members. An open invitation also exists on the school website throughout the year. The choir consequently consists of parents, grandparents, ex-students, staff, and friends. Many of the current members have long since had their children or grandchildren leave the school but remain singing in the choir. There are no auditions. Membership requires a subscription fee of £35 single or £60 for a couple per term, which covers the cost of hiring a professional orchestra and soloists for each concert. The Choral Society typically performs large, choral, and orchestral works in churches around West London. At the time of these interviews, the choir was preparing for a performance of Verdi's *Requiem*. The musical director of the choral society also directs the students in separate rehearsals during the week. The student choir is known as the “Chamber Choir” and includes around 80 singers. The Chamber Choir automatically joins forces with the adults to present the large-scale choral works each term. Both parts of the choir do not rehearse together until the day of the concert when they both join with the orchestra for the first time.

Membership of the choral society fluctuates between 60 and 80 adult members with each performance project. The choristers enjoy a 30-minute break during their weekly rehearsal and wine is available. The rehearsals typically start at around 7:15pm and finish at 9:00pm and take place in the choir room in the school's Music Centre. The school has a flourishing choral programme and the Choral Society is one of several school choirs. In addition to the school's musical outreach, a choir for children between the ages of 4 and 11 rehearses on Saturday mornings in the Music Department. Some of these singers later apply to attend the school.

## Methodology

This qualitative inquiry is grounded in the social constructivism worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2007). According to Butler-Kisber (2010), the lived experience of the individuals is socially constructed, and researchers situate themselves in the research process.

I began teaching classroom music at the school in January 2016, and although I had no direct contact with any of the participants of this study prior to the interviews, I took a keen

interest in the choir. I had previously researched collaborative musical projects and have been involved in large-scale choral music performances throughout my career as a singer and a music educator. As the pupils attend the same school that I teach in, a methodology which allowed an emic view into the participant's world was necessary.

Qualitative research is a process of identifying, connecting, and finding meaning in human reality (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). I used open-ended interview questions to explore the experiences of a small group of choir members. The purpose of open-ended questions is to understand the world as seen by the respondent (Patton, 2015). Data from the interviews were analysed using a categorisation approach appropriate for thematic inquiry. Several common themes emerged from the analysis process which accounted for the group and the situation (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The themes were interpreted by me and as such, my subjectivity is acknowledged (Maxwell, 2013).

Ethical approval to conduct the research was given by Monash University and the Headmaster of the school. Participants were then invited at a rehearsal to participate in the one-to-one interviews conducted I conducted. Interested choristers were asked to complete a consent form and hand it to the choir conductor. Of the 40 choristers I asked to participate, four people agreed to be interviewed. The conductor, a colleague of mine, then passed the forms on to me and I arranged interview times with the participants by phoning them. The interviews took place in the school Music Centre before four respective Wednesday evening rehearsals. I designed eight open questions to allow participants to discuss their experience of the choir without being led by any preconceived researcher bias (Patton, 2015). Examples of questions in the interview include: "Why did you decide to be a member of this choir?"; "What do you enjoy most about being in this choir?"; "Is there anything about being in this choir that you don't enjoy?"; "How does this choir differ from any other choirs that you sing in/have sung in?"; and, "If you were to encourage friends to join this choir, what reasons would you give for joining?" Follow-up questions such as "How did this make you feel?" were sometimes added to extract more reflection from the participant. Accompanying these questions were prompts that sought deeper reflections about their perceptions of being part of the choir. For example, "What do you enjoy most about being in the choir?" I asked, why do you think this is your particular preference? Does this relate to other experiences of singing with others? Depending on their answers, I probed for further reflections and insights. I then transcribed the four recorded interviews which were each around 40 minutes long.

I began my analyses as soon as I completed my interviews as matter raised in one may drive questions in subsequent interviews. Sufficient meaningful data were collected so that second interviews were not necessary. By the time I had completed each interview and its analysis, it was clear that I had reached saturation. Although Seidman (2006) recommends a sequence of three interviews of increasing depth, my participants moved quickly to offer their understandings and feelings of the phenomenon. I felt I had reached saturation as there were mounting instances of the same codes but no new codes occurring (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Urquhart, 2013). The first three interviewees all discussed the same issues and the fourth confirmed that no additional matters were of concern to participants.

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Patton, 2015). As I transcribed each interview, I made mental notes, and began my initial analysis which was comparatively informal involving jottings and ideas that I thought were important. However, it was not until after the final transcript had been completed that I began formal coding of all the data. A column was created on the right-hand side of the interview transcript. As the data were read repeatedly, emergent sub-themes were noted on the basis of repetition or emphasis. I felt that words such as "professional" had a depth of meaning as one participant used the term 19 times during her interview. The first step in the coding process involved the identification of important words or phrases that provided insight into the participants' lived experience. These

formed sub-themes as shown in Table 1. Participants repeatedly used emotive terms such as “amusement,” “embarrassed,” or “frustration” which indicated to me a depth of meaning in the way the participant experienced the phenomenon. The second step of the process required me to group words and phrases that had similar meanings into common themes. Strong, emergent themes for each participant are included in the findings. An example of this was the thematic grouping of “family” for each narrative involving discussion of children. I cut and pasted each relevant sentence in the manuscript onto a single document so that the themes were presented logically and systematically. Unnecessary repetition of ideas was then removed, and the remainder was used to create a meaningful account. Quotations from participants are provided verbatim to appropriately represent their voices.

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Family                       | Sharing singing with family<br>Family tradition of singing<br>Family support<br>Importance of family  |
| Intergenerational disconnect | Friendships / isolation<br>Little intergenerational connection<br>Membership beyond child/school connection<br>Parent/teacher relationship - community<br>Socialising |
| Challenge and reward         | Achievement<br>Beauty / aesthetics<br>Repertoire<br>Variety – boredom<br>Mixed Feelings   |
| Professionalism              | Professionalism in preparation<br>Music focus – not social<br>Aspirations for professionalism   |

*Table 1: Overarching themes and sub-themes*

In this study, I checked the participants for credibility through discussion with the choir conductor who confirmed that there were no conflicting agendas. To establish trustworthiness, I ensured that participants were asked open but non-leading questions, and that the data analysis was checked and confirmed by a colleague who independently looked at my data and noted emergent ideas. My colleague and I agreed about the important matters which I felt offered me internal validity within this small-scale enquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Elo et al., 2014). I have used thick, descriptive data to provide transferability (Shenton, 2004), and the data were checked by a research colleague and sent back to the participants for dependability.

## Participants

Qualitative inquiry is best served by a small, homogenous sample allowing for depth of understanding. The four participants who belong to the Choral Society include: Fiona, Lucy, Sally, and Tracy. The names and identities of the participants and the school have been suppressed and pseudonyms have been used.

Fiona moved to London from Italy around 23 years ago. She had previously sung in a small parish choir and was waiting for an opportunity to sing in another choir, once her children had grown up. When her son joined the school, she received the letter of invitation to join the Choral Society. Her children have all had music lessons and so she has some music knowledge but “can’t sight-read.”

Lucy is a staff member at the school and joined the Choral Society with persuasion from the director, a close friend of hers. She sang in a very good school choir as a student and later, joined a community choir which she did not enjoy as she felt it was very unprofessional. Lucy is currently the only staff member singing in the Choral Society although there have been to her knowledge several others in the last 5 years.

Sally moved to London from Northern Spain where she has been singing in choirs since she was 10. She attended the local School of Music in Bilbao, singing in the choir which frequently performed with the orchestra. Although Sally's sons attend the school, they do not sing in the choirs but she was keen to join after receiving the letter. She has been a member of the Choral Society for 3 years.

Tracy began singing in her school choir in St. Albans and has sung in several community and church choirs including during her time spent living in North Yorkshire and Lunigiana in Northern Tuscany. She joined the Choral Society 7 years ago as the grandmother of choristers at the school as her daughter was too busy. For Tracy, singing is an integral part of family life.

## Findings

Following an analysis of the data, four important themes emerged; Family, Intergenerational Disconnect, Challenge and Reward, and Professionalism. These themes are discussed in turn.

### Family

The adult choral society and the student chamber choir combine on the day of each concert to rehearse together for the first time. There are sometimes family connections between the respective choirs and these relationships can be enhanced through mutual enjoyment of a shared activity. For Fiona, being able to sing together with her son was important. She explained, "My son also is in the Chamber Choir and I found it was just the cherry on the cake. Being able to share an interest with my son because he's my youngest of four and I know once they grow up, they just go." Fiona felt that singing together in the same concert not only helped bond their relationship, but also that she was participating in engendering his love of singing. She continued, "This is my chance to share something with him and also maybe cultivate this interest within him because I know how good it is to cultivate the interest in music and singing." Although the two parts of the choir rehearse separately, the connection occurs regularly at home. Fiona recalled,

When we are at home at weekends, if I struggle to sing certain parts I'll ask for his support and we'll be singing it together and we'll be looking at it together and most of the time he would correct me or I would correct him. It's lovely too. The best thing that has happened to me after these two years is the first time with my son, just before the *Requiem* he told me in the morning of the concert, "Shall we put it on the internet so we can listen to it?" That told me a lot. It told me that he was enjoying it and there was a deep interest within him as well.

Fiona felt that she had achieved something meaningful when she experienced this moment with her son. She concluded, "I was rushing and he said, 'Maybe we should listen to it.' It made me very happy." For her, it was a confirmation that he was enjoying being involved in something positive with her. Singing and learning music together was for Fiona, an important activity for strengthening family connection.

The intergenerational structure of the choir also provides the adults opportunity to form friendships through the connection of their children. Sally elaborated about her friendships saying, “Oh we have because you end up meeting people who have children in the same years as your own boys.” For Sally, these friendships are an important part of her sense of belonging and connection. Sally’s children do not want to sing in the choir, but they are happy that she enjoys it. She continued, “They loved it. They really like it, but it was a bit too long for them, especially the younger one.” Fiona’s experience with her children supporting her is very similar. She stated, “They are also quite musical, but they find when I am practicing, they find it quite comical sometimes and annoying, but I think they are pleased because they can see I am enjoying it.” She continued, “They reluctantly come to the concerts, you know . . . teenagers. Some of them, not all of them. They are not great supporters but they kind of like that I enjoy it. They are pleased.” For Sally and Fiona, their family support is important.

Tracy felt that singing was very much a part of her family life. She recalled, “I think it’s possibly your upbringing. My mother sang to me, I can always remember her singing nursery songs and folk songs. She was from South Yorkshire.” To continue having singing as a central activity in the home was a natural step for her. She explained,

I did the same with my own children, they sat on my knee, I played the piano and sang them nursery rhymes. I did it with our grandsons as did our daughter. It was something you did in a family, you played and you sang. Just family background I suppose.

Tracy discussed the social interactions between family members at rehearsals, observing, “I think it’s interesting in terms of the dynamics between, in my case, grandson/grandmother or between mothers who have got their sons. It’s often quite interesting to observe the diversity of parenting behaviour.” For Tracy, the family relationships in the choir are varied and provide her with another perspective from which to consider her relationship with her grandsons. Tracy continues,

It’s just highly amusing sometimes because you can see the boys thinking, “Oh God Mother, why did you say that?” It’s usually mothers who have got sons. I don’t think I know if there’s a father, a tenor or bass. I know my grandsons have probably cringed as well.

Tracy’s reflections suggest that by observing other familial relationships during choir rehearsals, it provides her with an insight into her own grandson’s view. Tracy is able to understand how to relate better with her grandson through observing others and avoid moments of cringe-worthy embarrassment for him. The fact that the two choirs rehearse separately until the final stage of the project allows discussion to happen at home about the music without the need for both family members to be always rehearsing together.

The theme of family highlights the importance of maintaining meaningful relationships with participants’ respective children. Reflections on participants’ own childhood music interactions emphasised this view. How their children perceive parents of grandparents in the choir was equally important, as the participants’ considered social interaction in a public forum from their children’s perspective.

### **Intergenerational Disconnect**

Although singing together allows intergenerational connection, participants discussed the disconnect that occurred when participants in the two choirs wanted different experiences

and outcomes from the project, disconnecting the demographic constituents. Tracy considered that collaboration between different generations as the choir's *raison d'être*. She stated, "It is the [school] Choral Society so I think we should actually do things with the boys, otherwise it could be any choral society. So I think whatever we do, the boys ought to be involved." Sharing music-making between generations is the point of difference for her experience in this choir. Sally also noted the advantages, saying, "In this choir, there are all ranges of voices and all ranges of ages as well which means that you can achieve a lot." Lucy similarly suggested that combining different generations is advantageous. She explained, "I think on the whole people like it. It's good because you've got someone else supporting you. Isn't this what it's all about? These are meant to be friends of or parents so you're actually singing with the boys I think is very good." Despite these positive view points, there are difficulties during the process of putting on a concert.

Fiona felt that bringing the two halves of the choir together on the day of the performance did not allow enough time to put everything together. She explained, "I wish we rehearsed at least once more. Not with the orchestra because I know that is practically difficult but with the Chamber Choir and with the [Chapel Choir] or whoever is joining us for that particular performance." Fiona suggested that there is not enough time for the two choirs to get to know each other. She continued, "...because we only see each other a few hours before the concert and we have so many things [to do]." Fiona discussed the need for more time for the choirs to work together for musical and emotional reasons. She concluded,

You really need more time to practice together so you can have a better outcome. Once only before the concert is just not enough. It's not enough. Especially because you are doing it with the orchestra as well so there is a lot to sort out. The outcome of the concert would be better and everybody else would feel good if things had been done properly and we would approach the concert happier.

Bringing the two choirs together so late in the process, does not allow for purposeful interaction between the choristers which Fiona felt resulted in behaviour issues with the younger singers. She stated that these issues were, "Musical and also behaviour with the boys. The last experience has been dreadful. It was marked by the boys and it was a very difficult concert to enjoy because they were so badly behaved." She describes the boys as being, "so badly behaved that even people at the end of the church noticed and some friends of mine told me, 'What a shame, what a shame. You could see.'" Fiona goes on to suggest, "Eventually, if you do get the chance to rehearse a few more times together, you kind of set the boundaries." Fiona concluded, "There must be a particular year. You always have some years more difficult than others. You don't get the chance really to sort things out on that front behaviour-wise with the boys." The most recent concert was generally felt to be successful, however the concerns about the boys' behaviour during the performance was important. This impacted the level of enjoyment experienced by Fiona who clarified,

The latest experience with the boys has been quite frustrating, there was a phone going off and they were playing pass the bottle. All this in the middle of the concert. I tried hard to control my temper but there were occasions when I was getting so cross, I and another member, a continental lady. Everybody else was very composed. I couldn't help myself. How could you just sit and watch?

Lucy expressed similar concerns about the disconnection between the adults and students being linked to the limited time spent rehearsing together. In discussing the events on the day of the

performance, she stated, “[The conductor is] suddenly focused on the orchestra, he’s got to get that right. Nobody knew where they were, where they were going to be sitting, where they were going to be standing; you’ve got the boys all over the place.” As a teacher at the school, Lucy’s enjoyment of the experience is diminished as she felt she is on duty when there are issues with the boys. She stated, “My perspective, I’m suddenly teacher-in-charge because I’m not a parent there. The parents are looking to me to sort of say, ‘Shh, stop. Put that away. Do that.’” Although Lucy is aware of the fact that she must assist in her role as a teacher, she felt that it could be avoided with a more prepared approach. She continued, “Suddenly on the day it does change very much for me really. In previous times I have been asked just to sit there and look after the kids because ... somebody needs to. I think it’s quite crazy actually. I think it’s not so nice.”

According to Lucy, the two choirs do not interact socially. She describes the interaction, “Socially I think there’s no connection. There isn’t really because they’re kids and these are parents or grandparents.” Lucy suggested there is respect for the boys but is unsure whether it is mutual. She stated, “I think the Choral Society are very respectful of the boys and what they can do. I don’t know what the boys would think of us really.” She continued, “I don’t think they’re merged into one choir. I think there are two choirs there that just actually happen to be meeting.” Lucy recommends more time spent with the two choirs together. She concluded, “I think actually, if it was possible, it wouldn’t do any harm to do it a bit more often, actually get the two together.” Sally concurred that there is little social interaction between adults and student choristers. She says, “It’s not social. They would probably be too embarrassed to be talking to us or not interested in people who are the parent’s age anyway.” Sally is more philosophical about the lack of time spent together. She stated, “We haven’t really got the time to be together. Most of the time is spent just rehearsing so it’s really no time for any other socialising. It’s just the way it is.”

Tracy added to the view that there is a lack of intergenerational understanding. She reflected, “Sometimes I feel sorry for them because very often I suspect the boys are far more competent than we are. Some of them are musically gifted and I think, ‘Poor souls, they’ve got us warbling in their ears.’” Conversely, Tracy also observed that the boys need more direct instruction during the collaboration process. She claimed, “Sometimes they turn up and they don’t sing or they’re all over the place.”

Fiona observed the experience of the conductor rehearsing with young students and then rehearsing with an adult choir. She noted, “Just when he gets cross with us and he treats us like children, he says ‘I just want to get rid of you. I can’t cope with you anymore.’” Fiona enjoys the comments, stating, “It’s just hilarious. He doesn’t mean it, it’s just frustration, he tries hard and we are so disappointing. In the end, all of his comments are out of frustration.” This interaction allows Fiona to understand the connection the conductor has with the students. Sarcasm from teachers can be misinterpreted by parents when reported anecdotally by children, but here it is understood and enjoyed.

There were mixed feelings about the intergenerational connection and the negative perceptions from the participants were substantial. The disconnect between the two generations was a source of frustration for the adults. They conveyed that this disconnect should be fixed rather than intergenerational connection be dispensed with. They liked singing with the boys but wanted a more shared sense of purpose and belonging.

## **Challenge and Reward**

The theme of challenge and reward occurred frequently and was a major factor in the participants’ enjoyment of the choir. Being challenged by the complexities of singing difficult music was rewarding but this was experienced differently by participants depending on their

level of skill. Lucy expressed a view of the challenges she experienced that differed from the others. For her, there was a paradox. She found some aspects of the choir repetitious and tedious, while at the same time felt that there needed to be more rigor and time spent on detail. She explained, "It would be nice to see a completely different style of doing things really. I think I've done enough of just overdoing it." She suggested that the process of rehearsing needs variety. She continued, "It's continuously the same music. Last Christmas, we did *Messiah*. When I first started 5 years ago, we did *Messiah*. I can't believe there's not enough music out there that we have to do *Messiah* twice in 5 years." The repertoire was determined to be a positive factor by the other three participants but for Lucy, repetition presents a problem. She noted,

Most of the pieces we're doing now are pieces they've done before. They [the other choristers] said, "Oh yeah, when we did the *Requiem* last time" which also means that a lot of the members of the choir have been doing this for a lot longer than I have, so they all know it which is quite hard really because he [the director] says, "Oh we won't rehearse this bit because we've done this before, you all know this." I don't know this bit.

Lucy feels that some members of the choir miss out on the opportunity to carefully rehearse the music that has been done by the majority of members in recent years. She inferred that the conductor did not cater to the individual needs of the singers.

Fiona discussed how she enjoys being challenged,

I found the challenge rewarding and [got] great satisfaction from it. At the end of the day when you're tired, and in winter, the last thing you want to do is come out in the rain and in the cold, but I always found it to be really rewarding and really fulfilling.

Fiona works hard at learning the music at home. She described the feeling of mastering her part: "It's being able to manage it, just to manage the challenge and especially the result, the outcome at the end." She explained further, "It's not only about doing it here; if you don't do some work at home, you don't achieve much." The challenge is provided by the opportunity and the pace of the rehearsal. Fiona finds fulfilment out of knowing she has worked hard. She said, "When I know that I've covered it on my own and we are about to perform. It's fulfilling. We worked hard and it's like an all-day of work and you get a reward, it's your reward, you feel fulfilled." She continued, "It's satisfying, it's difficult to put it into words but I found it really rewarding and fulfilling, just the sense of achievement. A sense of calm as well, very therapeutic coming to choral society."

Being challenged in a choir was not always the case for Fiona. She noted, "Previously, I was in a little parish choir and it was nice but there was no challenge. I like the challenge and I like the final results, the beauty of it." Aesthetics were important for Fiona. She elaborated, "It's also interesting that at the end of it, there's a sense of emptiness. It's all gone; it's finished and that makes me a bit sad but then I say, 'We'll do it again.' It's all that work and then it's all gone within an hour." Fiona explained what the level of difficulty was like for her, "It's more of a serious choir. It's more challenging for me as a complete beginner with experience to choir. For me personally, it's the challenge."

She reflected on the importance of the repertoire to remind her of her roots, saying, "I've always had a deep love of classical music; my parents introduced me to classical music. Being able to join a choir that comes back to my childhood and where I can train into it makes a difference." This is music that Fiona is familiar with but never had the opportunity to perform.

She stated, “It’s the difficulty of the repertoire. Not having done it before, that is the main thing.” It is this sense of challenge and reward which provides the greatest sense of fun. She concluded, “It’s quite enjoyable. It’s not boring, it’s fun. You’re doing something challenging but if it’s fun at the same time, why not?”

Sally values the high musical standards of the choir. She explained, “I find the level is very, very high and it’s not only enjoyable but it’s a bit challenging like the last concert that we did, Verdi’s *Requiem*, that was fantastic.” For Sally, the reward came from presenting a work of an epic scale. She claimed her enjoyment is “because the music itself is challenging, it’s much more operatic to anything else we have done before and also because the orchestra was a bigger orchestra and the sound was fantastic. I can’t describe it any other way.” Sally further discussed the reward she experienced from the challenge of the learning process. She stated, “The level is fantastic. It is very funny as well, very enjoyable although by the end of it, when the concert is getting closer you can feel the pressure. You really have to put the effort in. It’s definitely something to join in.”

Conversely, Tracy values the relaxed atmosphere she experiences in the choir. She explained not joining another choir because of a sense of pressure. She recalled, “There’s the Leeds Festival Chorus which is actually conducted by a friend of mine and I didn’t fancy auditioning for him. It would have been terrifying.” Unlike the sense of challenge that Sally and Fiona enjoyed, Tracy found the choir relaxed. She explained,

It’s a very good choir to join because you don’t have to audition, you don’t have to tie yourself in knots, run through hoops learning music thinking, “Oh my God, can I hold a tune properly, am I singing in tune, can I sight-sing?” It’s friendly, we sing some lovely music, [and] you are not expected to audition.

The participants experience the choir in very different ways. For Sally and Fiona, the level of expectation provides a satisfying reward. For Tracy, the absence of challenge is what makes the choir enjoyable and for Lucy, the repetition of repertoire and rehearsal style provides unwanted challenges which she feels should be avoided.

### **Professionalism**

The final theme of professionalism was discussed by participants in terms of attitude, behavior, and approach of singers. They did not define the term but suggested that being professional reflected a willingness to be involved in making music with a degree of proficiency acquired through motivation to improve. This theme was expressed most frequently by Lucy and Sally, however, Fiona discussed how she felt her abilities fit into the context of the other choristers. She recalled her first rehearsals with the choir, saying, “I can’t sight-read but I have basic knowledge. I was a bit scared; I thought I wasn’t up to it.” She continued, “Eventually my confidence built up and I could see there were a lot of people who were beginners like me and I started enjoying it.” This reflection suggests that her perceptions of the standards of the choir were higher before joining.

Lucy reflected on another choir that she once joined, stating, “I joined this public choir, this local thing and it was terrible. Nobody really cared what note they sung.” She elaborated, “There was no going back and checking it and I thought I didn’t like that which actually put me off singing in choirs for a long, long time.” Lucy considered this choir to be somewhat unprofessional in its approach to rehearsing the music which contrasted with the Choral Society. She explains further: “It wasn’t really professional in my mind. It was purely, people wanted to have a sing-song. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s actually quite nice. It’s like singing in the shower, isn’t it? Or singing in the kitchen, it was that type of thing.” She

explained how she felt about joining the Choral Society, “When I joined the [Choir] I recognised that actually, this might be a real choir and I could sing and do it properly.” Lucy felt that the Choral Society offered a professional environment. She then described her musical commitment in context of the other choristers. She noted, “I think everybody else is very dedicated in the sense that they all go and get the CD and they all sit and practice and they come back and they’ve perfected that bit.” Lucy suggests a professional approach by the other singers. She continued, “I do nothing from the moment I’ve left rehearsal to the next rehearsal. It’s a bit like Groundhog Day. That’s me and I haven’t got time to put anything else in really.” Lucy insinuates that her commitment is not as professional as her fellow choristers.

Lucy considered aspects of the Choral Society to be less professional. She noted, “It is professional, but it is only two hours a week. Invariably it doesn’t start until 7:30pm and then they have half an hour to drink, so it’s an hour. That doesn’t give you much time.” Lucy felt that the limited rehearsal time did not allow for a professional outcome. She continued: “I think it’s just a big social. Everybody likes a wine. I think in a way it would be better if it went on longer. I do think that 7:30 – 9:00pm isn’t long enough.” She elaborated: “You look at what we’ve just done, Verdi’s *Requiem*, how big that piece of music is. Probably all-told, maybe 12 rehearsals. That isn’t very much time is it? I would rather probably work on something until its perfect.” Lucy feels that the standard of the performance could have been higher.

Lucy did not always describe the behaviour of the other choristers as professional. She recalled the dress rehearsal in which the choir was resituated in a double choir formation. She said, “We had one set of altos over there and one set of altos over here and suddenly there was a complete ‘We can’t exist, we can’t do this, we’ve got to have all altos together, we’ve got to hold hands – panic.’” Lucy describes the reaction from a chorister, “One person actually said, ‘That’s it, if we can’t be with those people, I’m leaving now.’ I did say to her at the end of it, ‘We did OK, didn’t we?’ She said, ‘Yes, maybe I was over-reacting.’” Lucy felt that this kind of over-reaction was more amateur than professional. She then clarified how she considered the choir to be both amateur and professional in approach at the same time. She posited, “Generally it’s a professional choir because there is a set amount of people who do know what they are doing because they’ve done it before.” This is not the case for everyone, however. She continued:

There’s whole bits that you look at the score and you go, “When did we cover this?” And I’ll know if I’ve been there because I’ll have my notes on it, and we all sit there and go, “We haven’t been through this, we haven’t seen it.” And it’s only on the day sometimes that you’re suddenly going through bits and you’re going, “Hold on a second we haven’t covered this at all,” but because there were enough people there who sing in lots of other choirs, who have covered it may be somewhere else, they will make it, they will keep us going.

Lucy felt that the professionalism of the conductor was partly responsible for the sense of the choir being professional. She noted, “When we rehearse it, he rehearses it well. He is very precise. There is a lot of help; there is a lot of support. In that sense, it’s good. He doesn’t let anything go which from my perspective is good.” Equally, Lucy considered the conductor to be contributing to the difficulties with achieving a professional standard. She said, “I think what happened with David is he’s tried to get more complex and more complex pieces.”

Sally felt that the Choral Society is professional which contributes to her enjoyment of it. She said, “Here the level is very high and I quite like that. I do enjoy it. I loved it.” She reflected on her first rehearsal with the choir, “I found it absolutely hilarious because I thought if anyone who doesn’t know anything about music comes here thinking, ‘Oh, I like singing,’ they will really have to work hard to follow it.” Although people of all abilities were invited,

Sally suggested that the reality is that it is aimed at experienced choristers who have a professional approach. She continued:

The new ones didn't know what it was going to be like and certainly they found that unless they knew some music, it would have been a bit hard to follow. It's not because it's hard, it's because it's fast and you have to know the music terminology. So unless you know the very basics, you will be struggling to really know where you are at.

Ultimately, Sally felt she belonged to a professional choir. She explained, "The last piece we did which was on Saturday, I felt like I was in a professional performance. It was really good. I don't know about the public, but that is how we felt from our side of things." She continued, "The orchestra was amazing, the soprano and the tenor were fantastic, and the choir sounded really good from our side of things." Sally then clarified her sense of the word "professional" by stating,

The standards are very high and the director, Mr Terry is wonderful. It is very enjoyable because obviously we are not professionals we are just amateurs, but he tries to reach a very high level, as high as possible. It doesn't mean that because we are not professionals that the performance has to be lacking. Nothing like that, he's expecting the best and he really put the effort [in] to make sure that we reach the level.

Tracy concurred with this view, stating, "I think that's what he brought into focus, it was done with humour but discipline as well." The participants felt that the conductor made the most of the limited rehearsal time available. Lucy simply thought there should be more of it.

The distinction between *being professional* and *acting professionally* are implied in the participant's reflections. A professional approach is something that is highly valued by the adult choristers who appreciate such an approach by those around them. Feeling like the choir is perceived as acting professionally is considered important.

## Discussion

In providing families the opportunity to participate in the Choral Society, this West London school has made a positive statement about the significance of community. The participants with children or grandchildren also involved in the choir reflected on how importantly they viewed this connection. Participants who did not have children or grandchildren involved held similar views and held up this model of family participation as fundamental to the life of music at the school. As well as strengthening relationships within families by providing a positive and common goal, the inclusion of adult family members helps strengthen the choral culture in the school. These adults fully appreciate the difficulty of choral singing and music-making generally and they respect and admire the skills of the student choristers. Studies of intergenerational collaboration tend to focus on changing attitudes of younger people to older people (Alfano, 2008; de Vries, 2011; Smith & Sataloff, 2013). The attitudes of older people to younger people in such interactions is under-represented in the literature. The fact that the school operates a choir of children, still too young to attend the school, completes the intergenerational outreach efforts. Family members of all ages can contribute to the flourishing musical community of the school.

In some ways, the intergenerational aspect of the choir seems to be a missed opportunity. The participants enjoy singing with the students but there is consensus that not

enough time is spent together. A lack of rehearsal together for the two choirs produces musical, logistical, and social problems. Musically, the choirs could be benefiting from each other and intergenerational learning could take place. Logistical issues such as time to seat people so they feeling comfortable and familiar with whom they are close is important to singers. Difficulties with behaviour could be dealt with much more satisfactorily if the different generations felt more connected. Rather than feeling awkward or frustrated with the behaviour of the boys in the recent concert, adults would have felt more at ease in communicating with them effectively. A greater sense of connection and *camaraderie* with the group as a whole would from the perspective of the adult participants, improve the experience and reduce stress on the day of the performance. The importance of singers being appropriately placed was discussed. Daugherty notes that “the issues of choir spacing and choral sound are concerns that refer to simultaneous, multiple strata of data in complex relationships” (Daugherty, 2013, p. 86). Ignoring the complexity of collaborative relationships and the importance of how the choristers are placed was a significant cause of anxiety.

The adult choristers are motivated to perform the works chosen by the conductor. They are keen to get it right and take what they are doing seriously enough to put work in between rehearsals. The sense of challenge, however, is not uniformly experienced. Some participants feel that more time is needed to accurately perform the music. The rehearsals are felt to be too short and the length of the rehearsal season is also. The participants suggest more attention to detail so that they feel less rushed in rehearsals will help maintain chorister motivation. The singers enjoy feeling competent about their singing and their reward is intrinsic. Furthermore, “choral singing may allow attainment of the needs essential for motivation and meaningfulness, leading to improved wellbeing” (Livesey, Morrison, Clift, & Camic, 2012, p. 21).

The participants frequently used the term “professionalism.” The definition of professional and amateur choristers is complex, however, Finnegan (1989) and Green (2002) discuss the concept as being contextual and existing on a continuum. An external definition could detract from the voice of the participants who suggest there are several components that they find professional about the Choral Society: the repertoire, the orchestral accompaniment, the efficient use of time in rehearsals, the general standards of the choir and the attitude of members to take responsibility for knowing their music. Rensink-Hoff (2009) notes, “Singers with higher estimations of their respective choirs were most inclined to appreciate and value the exposure to quality choral repertoire and the presence of personal challenges and self-discipline” (p. 188). Although the participants in this study noted that certain individual singers have limited skills, the choir generally had a professional attitude.

Participants who had participated in other choirs uniformly felt that the Choral Society had a professional approach which impacted their enjoyment of it. In a study of choral collaborations between amateur and professional choristers, Ruck Keene (2015) notes, “The arrival of singers perceived to be better seemed to undermine the achievement of the amateur singers, and to challenge their musical self-confidence” (p. 15). This was not the case in this study in which the student choir was not introduced into the process as “better” or “more professional” even though they are generally perceived to be by the participants.

The literature dealing with singing in a family context is mostly concerned with parents of young children where the parent acts as teacher or facilitator (Berger & Cooper, 2003; Custodero, 2006). In this study, the children are now adolescent and have had a significant amount of choral training. The parents find themselves impressed with what the boys at this school can do. When singing together, the adults know how difficult it was for them to learn the music and the boys seem to do it skillfully and with relative ease. In this way, the paradigm has shifted. The child becomes the expert, assisting the enthusiastic parent.

The adults appreciate singing with the students. Although, there is not a strong social cohesion between the two choirs, there is an abundance of musical admiration from the adults

for the students. If more time was provided for the two choirs to sing together, the issues raised by the participants could be addressed. The frustrations of adult choristers for details being left to the day of the concert when so much collaboration happens at once could be alleviated. Further opportunities for informal learning, Vygotskian peer-learning processes, and intergeneration understanding could enhance the sense of professionalism the adults are already perceiving. de Vries (2011) recognises the importance of bringing older musicians into schools, stating, "I strongly recommend that, rather than simply keeping such music making in the wider community, music educators bring these older musicians into schools to be part of a rich music curriculum" (p. 354).

The limitations of a study such as this lies in the temporality of the lived experience of the four participants. Their understanding of the phenomenon can change with each interaction with the younger singers. The data in this study are enlightening but not necessarily transferable due to both the passing of time and the small number of participants. As the perspective of older musicians in intergenerational collaborations is rarely researched, the findings were unexpected. The degree to which the participants both valued the younger musicians as well as abhorred their behaviour was particularly surprising. The lack of social interaction was unforeseen and disappointing to me as an experienced music educator. The contribution that older musicians make to community music-making is important and their interaction with musicians from younger generations deserves further examination. This could be equally important for discreet music ensembles which comprise several generations of musicians. Future studies could explore how adults view the contribution of younger members of other performing arts disciplines such as drama, dance, or music theatre.

This study shows the strengths and weaknesses of this collaborative model in recognising intergenerational music-making but also demonstrates where it misses important social and learning opportunities. Varvarigou et al. (2011) recommend an intergenerational approach, positing, "More intergenerational group work could be promoted by local authorities, schools, universities and organizations that cater for activities for the elderly, given the considerable benefits that bringing different generations together in musical activities can have for both younger and older participants" (p. 218). More schools should adopt this model of intergenerational music making with family involvement but should take care of the needs of the older generation. It is hoped this study will help address the imbalance in the literature of the perceptions older people have of younger people in intergenerational activity.

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