

Musical and personal success: perceptions of Australian males in choir

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Abstract

This paper investigates musical and personal success from the perspective of Australian boys and men who participate in choir. Findings have been taken from a larger study, which seeks to understand the way in which male notions of success, masculinity and identity influence their choral participation. Participants from four choirs indicated that for them to be in a choir, it must reflect several criteria for success, and these were also strongly linked to the ideology of the Australian male. The research provides valuable insight for music educators and choral directors into how perceptions of success influence male participation, particularly in the context of the Australian male culture.

Key words: personal success; musical success; boys; men; choir; music education

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Introduction

This paper discusses some of the findings surrounding the notion of success in the context of males in choir. The findings have been taken from doctoral research, which has investigated male participation in choir and how it is influenced by perceptions of success, masculinity, and possible selves. Findings show that in an Australian context success is perceived by boys and men in various, but consistent, ways and that a combination of these elements is important for participants to consider it a success. The four choirs involved in the study ranged in age and context. They identified four main areas of success: public, personal, musical and private impact. This paper focuses on musical and personal success. Musical success incorporated technical ability and sound quality, the role of the conductor and working together. Personal success was defined in terms of enjoyment and love of singing, participation, self-confidence and personal expression.

The notion of success involves a variety of meanings, which are largely dependent on the values, beliefs and goals held by an individual and their socio-cultural context (Dyke & Murphy, 2006; Jones, 2004; Pitts, 2005; Rosevear, 2010). Success is frequently depicted in overt ways, such as public performance, earning money, fame and career (Bennett, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Fisher, Pearson, Goolsby & Onken, 2010; Freer & Bennett, 2012; Ginsburgh, 2003; Jones, 2004; Moore, Burland & Davidson, 2003; Strobl & Tucker, 2000) but it is also described according to more individual descriptors, such as personal enjoyment (Dyke & Murphy, 2006; Jones, 2004; Rosevear, 2010). Dyke and Murphy (2006) suggest that the definition of success for a man is directly linked to a dominant view of masculinity and the extensive work of Australian researcher Scott Harrison supports this. His work has focused on the gendered nature of musical activities and has found that musical genres and instruments have specific associations aligned with either masculinity or femininity.

Singing was always considered a feminine activity (Harrison, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Harrison (2009) argues that, historically, Australian boys are raised to understand and embody masculinity in its dominant form and that part of this ideology is the absence of anything feminine (2009). Boys who engage in these 'feminine' activities run the risk of serious consequences, such as being bullied and socially isolated or excluded. Because singing and choir appear on the 'feminine' end of the continuum (Harrison, 2009b), boys are reluctant to participate and music educators continue to be faced with a battle determined by history and permeated by socio-cultural underpinnings.

Musical success can be described in a variety of ways. Jarvin and Subotnik (2010) proposed that attainment levels in analysing music, creativity in interpretation, practical or technical skill, and musicality should define success. They believed that success was the development of ability into "expertise" and then into "the realm of elite talent" (p. 79). To be considered a success, according to Lanier (2007), the performing choir should focus on being the best; it should reach a high standard and it should maintain that standard. This required proper technique, authentic interpretation, appropriate choreography, good leadership and consistent quality of sound. Lanier also believed that there were two keys to success. One was the suitable matching of repertoire with the personality and nature of the choir. The other was the development of appropriate choreography. Vocal quality, however, should never be compromised by innovation and Sigman (2010) endorsed this view in his discussion of successful professional choirs.

Jones (2004) provides another perspective. She suggests a more personal understanding of success and coming from an educational standpoint she criticises the emphasis on outcomes, such as "higher levels of achievement" (p. 7) to define success. She argues that success needs to be defined by the processes associated

with effort and learning, supporting the opinion that success has a subjective nature directly influenced by socio-cultural context. The rehearsal process provides an example of this, where the application of effort is considered to make the experience successful. Enjoyment and satisfaction in this process are also linked to this process. Jones discusses this further by distinguishing between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' success. 'Frontstage' success reflects public elements on show; 'backstage' success refers to effort and process. The subjective and personally constructed nature of backstage success makes it difficult to quantify or even observe. It would seem, however, that there is some consistency of understanding in determining the attributes of personal success. Participants in a summer school music program, discussed by Pitts (2005), identified that success was defined by technical skill and improvement. They also expressed it in terms of personal criteria, which included improvement in social interaction, awareness of others, the development of self-confidence, enjoyment, and a growing sense of belonging. The participants described the integral role of their leaders in inspiring them, and this is consistent with the work of Guise (2013) who discusses the "power" (p. 134) of a conductor to achieve success. In contrast, Bailey and Davidson (2013) describe a choir for homeless men and the beneficial outcomes of participation. They identified clinical, social and cognitive benefits, which contributed to participants' overall "life satisfaction" (p. 30). These men experienced "emotional, social and mental engagement" (p. 30) as a result of working collaboratively and "investing cognitive energy" (p. 30) in complex tasks such as learning repertoire. Choir provided these male participants with a strong sense of focus and an all-consuming experience. It offered them the opportunity to step into a world outside the pressures and hardships of their own. This is also consistent with other research (Hallam, 2010; Pitts, 2005).

Methodology

This research study employed a combination of methodological approaches in order to gain a deeper understanding and picture of individual experience. Phenomenology, case study and narrative inquiry possess similar attributes, thereby complementing each other in their recognition of socially constructed meaning, the importance of context, and the individuality of lived experience. Each of the approaches uses similar methods of collecting data, including observation, survey and interview. The differences, however, add depth to the data by providing information from different perspectives. Phenomenology attempts to establish the essence of a situation or the 'lived experience' of those involved; case study investigates a specific example, which may assist in understanding other similar instances; and narrative inquiry allows the participants to be heard by telling their story (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Cresswell, 2007; Stake, 2000; van Manen, 1997).

There were four choirs involved in this research. Each choir represented a different age and stage, and selection for participation was based on a level of established success and a high standard of technical ability. This definition included criteria such as regular performances at school, in the community or in competitions. Choir 1 was a Junior school choir of about 50 10–12 year-old students from an Independent boys' school in metropolitan Sydney. Choir 2 was a Secondary school choir of about 15 14–17 year-old male and female students from an Independent school in an outer western region of Sydney. Choir 3 was a university ensemble, assembled as part of a course of study, and consisting of 12, 20–24 year-old male students, and Choir 4 was a semi-professional choir of about 30 men aged from 40 years to over 65 years, from across Sydney and Western Sydney.

Semi-structured interviews, surveys and observations were used to gather data. Each choir was recorded audio-visually during one

rehearsal and one performance, and each choir member completed a written survey, the Choir Members' Survey (CMS). The four conductors were individually interviewed and one or two members from each choir sat for a face-to-face interview. Focus groups were used with the younger participants of Choir 1 and Choir 2 in order to facilitate candid dialogue in a peer-supported environment. At each choir's performance the audience was asked to complete a short survey, the Audience Members' Survey (AMS), which, in a small way, contributed to gaining insight into the perspective of the listener. The observations from the audio-visual recordings were analysed with reference to the main themes, which positions the researcher's interpretation more consciously in the research process and adds another participatory perspective. Video Analysis (VA) provided a depth of observational perspective by allowing the researcher to access the material at different stages, over an increased time period, and potentially identify elements obscured or missed in situ. Like phenomenology, case study and narrative inquiry, video analysis interprets contextually, and works from a socio-culturally relevant standpoint (Paterson, Bottorff & Hewat, 2003).

Findings and discussion

Musical success incorporated elements such as technical ability, sound quality, the conductor, and working together. Personal success referred to the impact on the individuals belonging to the choir, which included enjoyment, self-confidence, participation and the value of the experience, love of singing, and singing as a means of expression.

Musical success – consistency across contexts

Describing success in musical terms was more prevalent in discussions with older choristers, particularly those from Choir 3 (university) and

Choir 4 (community), but the younger boys of Choir 1 (Junior school) and Choir 2 (Secondary school), who firmly believed that their choir was successful, also referred to musical features to define success.

Technical ability and sound quality

The most direct discussions surrounding technical ability and sound quality came from the university group, Choir 3. This could be attributed to their experience and skill, reflected in the fact that they were studying music at a tertiary level. In the observed rehearsal the quality of the sound improved rapidly, dynamics were adjusted, and how to breathe effectively for the high notes was discussed. Conductor 3 displayed a determination to perfect accuracy before continuing. On one occasion he said, "Okay, let's look at bar 20 onwards. I know the basses have it. Start from there; see how far we go" (VA, Choir 3, p. 5).

These young men considered the technicalities of the performance as a factor of success, demonstrated in the comment:

If I was to regard our performance just then as a success... I would be thinking about it entirely on a musical level and a technical level, so that is still my consideration when we do the rehearsal (Choir 3, Interview 2, p. 12).

This statement shows the importance of the rehearsal process as a determinant of success, rather than a single performance outcome, and this is consistent with the work of Jones (2004) who discusses the importance of effort and process. One choir member was critical of their performance and felt they were not successful. He did not believe they had reached an acceptable standard of technical skill, and said,

I'm selfish in the sense that I was not happy with it, because I felt that I could give a little bit more or that it could have been a little bit more refined (Choir 3, Interview 1, p. 8).

These responses demonstrate the role of personal standards and goals, consistent with Dyke and Murphy's (2006) belief in measures of "personal criteria" (p. 359) for success. In addition, Choir 3 was preparing this performance as an assessment to be graded and, their analysis reflects this focus.

The quality of the sound was an important factor of a successful performance with one Choir 3 member describing that "the sound to be as close to perfect as possible" (Choir 3, Interview 3, p. 3). Conductor 3 suggested that controlling the harmonies, the dynamics and his own singing, were all important in defining performance success. Lanier (2007) and Sigman (2010) suggest that in balancing innovative performance and maintenance of high standard, sound quality should never be compromised.

In a similar way, Conductor 4 communicated that technical ability was integral to the overall impact and significance of a performance:

Beautiful sound and humour make people either admiring or moved or disposed to think again about who they are... that's the power. I mean, every note serves that – the perfect chord, great. The perfect song, even better (Choir 4, Conductor Interview, p. 6).

Other men in Choir 4 (community choir) identified sound quality as an element of success and one of the reasons they enjoyed belonging. They recognised uniqueness in their harmonies and the colour of their sound and they spent significant rehearsal time practising pronunciation of words, vowel sounds and diphthongs. One man said,

The sound that men make when they sing is unique, and it doesn't have a counterpart... There is something about the acoustic properties of men singing together that defies accurate description (Choir 4, Interview 1, p. 17).

Perhaps the most direct description was from the man who said, "We sound bloody good when everything clicks into place" (Choir 4, CMS, Question 11).

Choir 1 (Junior school) and Choir 2 (Secondary school) each had a slightly different emphasis regarding technical ability and sound quality. They saw technical skill as something they needed to work at and improve. For one adolescent, success was “when everyone opens their mouth and it sounds like one voice” (Choir 2, Interview 1, p. 2) and another said,

If you have the right thing at the same time, and it's all perfect, all polished, I think that's a successful piece of music. Where like in the choir we practise it, we get every bit nailed and polished then that is a successful thing (Choir 2, Focus Group, p. 8).

The boys in Choir 2 suggested they had a lot to learn and believed there were many choirs far better than them. One boy used “elementary” (Choir 2, Interview 1, p. 2) to describe the techniques on which the choir was working and yet, there remained a sense that those involved were “pretty successful in their singing capability” (Choir 2, Interview 2, p. 2). Conductor 2, whilst he believed that the effort to improve technical skill was important, suggested other essential ingredients:

Music works on more than just the level of perfect pitch, wonderful ensemble, and everything else... if you don't have spirit with it then it can...it can be very dry (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p.10).

The quality of sound produced by the ensemble was an important aspect identified by Choir 1 and Choir Members Survey (CMS) responses elicited comments such as, “It sounds good,” and “It sounds great” (Choir 1, CMS, Question 11). References to difficulties were also made. Some boys wrote that it was hard “trying to get the right sound out” and “if you're off key it makes the choir sound bad” (Choir 1, CMS, Question 8). Choir 3 communicated that they “actually sound[ed] quite good together” (Choir 3, CMS, Question 10), and this indicated success. Significantly, technical skill and sound quality emerged with each choir and Conductor 1 believed that it was extremely important to ensure as good a performance as

possible because boys “don't want to stand up there and not sound good” (Choir 1, Conductor Interview, p. 12). For the boys of Choir 1, this was the role of the conductor.

The role of the conductor

The conductor provided the support they needed to improve their skills, such as learning how to breathe effectively and sing with pitch accuracy. One participant said “you get helped to be better” (Choir 1, Focus Group 2, p.2) and another boy, when talking about his struggle to reach higher notes, described the way the conductor provided advice and assistance. Their responses implied an expectation that the conductor would guide them, and this was something they took for granted. There was an innocence demonstrated in summations such as, “She teaches it in a way that's like fun and makes you want to do it” (Choir 1, Focus Group 2, p. 7).

The significance of the conductor was reflected in the CMS as well. In response to, Do you think your choir is a success? Why do you think this way? some boys wrote, “We have a good teacher,” and “our teacher is extremely helpful when it comes to organising the choir” (Choir 1, CMS, Question 11).

Participants from Choir 4 considered their conductor to be a pivotal aspect in their success. They identified his charisma and leadership, his musical and song-writing skills, and his uniqueness. Written comments in the CMS confirmed this view saying, “We have a good and talented leader” (Choir 4, CMS, Question 11) and many other answers identified that the harmonies, the material, and the lyrics being clever and funny were part of this successful leadership. For example, “We make beautiful, relevant, funny, edgy music” (Choir 4, CMS, Question 11). This impression of Conductor 4 was supported by observations from video analysis of the rehearsal and the performance. He showed expertise in his method of teaching new material and in the way in which he maintained flow. He gave directions sparingly, choosing instead to start singing a warm-up

exercise or a new section for the group to follow, echo or join. He made eye contact consistently with the group and worked on elements, such as pronunciation and diphthongs, until he was satisfied. Conductor 4 displayed a balance between criticism and encouragement. He would simply say, "Yeah, I'm liking that!" (VA, Choir 4, p. 4) or "Very nice. Nice, nice, nice" (p. 5) and at the end of the rehearsal he applauded the men for their efforts. His criticism was constructive but straight to the point: "No; you're flat on that note. Do it again" (VA, Choir 4, p.4) and "You're stuffing up the bit that goes [sings]" (p.4). His comments were humorous and at other times they were in earnest: "Lovely work, gentlemen" (p.5). Video analysis of Choir 4's performance showed Conductor 4's role in leading the group, providing humorous stage antics and theatrics; involving the audience; and singing as a member of the ensemble.

Although this was not an aspect that Choir 2 focused on, Conductor 2 recognised the various facets of his responsibility. He identified that professional development of skills, careful choice of repertoire, and his own musical involvement in rehearsals and performances were important elements of leadership. He also referred to supporting boys in choir:

It's my role to be understanding of physical, emotional, social challenges that face boys and of course the thing about having a group means you do all that team stuff (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p. 7).

Video analysis revealed, however, that Conductor 2 demonstrated a range of important skills in rehearsing his choir. For example, he provided encouragement and praise at opportune moments: "You guys are doing really well, by the way" (VA, Choir 2, p. 4). He also made the group work hard, sometimes singling out individuals and always insisting on accuracy: "Stop, stop, stop. Tenors... what happened to you?" (VA, Choir 2, p. 5) and "Now there were some rhythmic issues. Let's go back to the B section" (p. 5). He recognised the importance of peer teaching

between the boys and acknowledged the ability of particular boys to lead. At no point did Conductor 2 appear threatened by this. In fact, part of the rehearsal was led by one of the basses, a Year 9 boy. He assumed this leadership role naturally and in a similar way to Conductor 2, he provided praise for the group, "There were some really good moments in that" (p. 4). This student also took the role of conductor in the performance in which he displayed a confident demeanour on stage and accurate conducting gestures.

Conductor 1 also provided frequent praise and technical advice. The choir showed respect for her and responded consistently to instructions. She appealed to them through humour and nonsense sounds, demonstrating an understanding of child development, learning preferences and learning styles of boys.

Working together

The final aspect that emerged as an essential ingredient to the musical success of the choir, was working together as a team. Conductor 1 noted the power of unity in a group, saying,

They're not all the good kids, you know, there's a real mixture. And I think that's a success, because there are boys standing next to each other that would never stand next to each other anywhere else in their school life (Choir 1, Conductor Interview, p. 5).

Bailey and Davidson (2013) noted a similar thing when they observed the benefits of choir as experienced by a group of homeless men. Initially working together was difficult for these men because they had learned to rely only on themselves, but as time passed the group cohesion developed and the wellbeing of the participants developed with it. Boys in Choir 1 liked the security of being in a large group. They felt more comfortable when they made mistakes because they did not "stand out" (Choir 1, Focus Group 1, p. 3) and many said they enjoyed being

with their friends (Choir 1, CMS). The appeal of collaboration was also mentioned by Conductor 2 who also suggested that students were happy in choir if their “friends [were] in it” and that this “social thing” was “just as important” (Choir 2, Conductor 2, p. 13). Choir 2 boys confirmed choir as an opportunity to “be round my friends” (Choir 2, Interview 2, p. 1) and that “develop[ing] relationships with people in the choir” (Choir 2, Interview 2, p. 7) was a welcome by-product of participation. A 17-year-old boy in Choir 2 believed that “for a choir to work it can’t have any standouts” (Choir 2, Interview 1, p. 7) and part of that was about relationships. He added, “People are more inclined to work with each other if they have a good relationship with each other” (Choir 2, Interview 1, p. 2).

Conductor 2 reflected on the “sense of community” (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p.3) experienced in choir. During performances he felt a strong connection between himself and the group:

When you’re in front of a choir and you smile at them and they smile back at you, you instantly know that you have that engagement... You can be part of it by when you’re standing in front of it conducting or you can be part of it if you place yourself within the ensemble and you lead from within the ensemble. You can be part of that performance, part of the music making, in a way that you don’t always with instrumentalists (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p. 3).

Working together was a vital part of Choir 3’s academic achievement. Some young men revealed disappointment with other group members who lacked commitment. They believed that whilst working with a group could be difficult, having a common goal or “making sure that everyone [had] the same intentions, and the same motivations” (Choir 3, Interview 2, p. 4) made collaboration easier, even in the face of conflict. One participant said, “You have to suck it up because you’re a team, and teams have

to work together and stick together” (Choir 3, Interview 1, p. 6).

Further evidence of support was seen in the suggestions for improvement made throughout the rehearsal and the words of encouragement. For example, one student said to the conductor, “That was really helpful when you went [makes conducting gesture]” (VA, Choir 3, p. 7). Similarly, Choir 2 was encouraged to think as a group and work together, demonstrated in comments such as, “Let’s try to bring things together as a group” (VA, Choir 2, p.7) and “How do you guys think the best way to do it is?” (p. 7).

The appeal and significance of working together was strong amongst the men of Choir 4. The conductor talked about an unspoken element, or innate personality, unique to this group of men. Other men echoed this, one of whom felt that it was “something about this particular group, the actual people, the particular people” (Choir 4, Interview 1, p. 1). Several CMS responses revealed a similar sentiment and described the “camaraderie between members” and the pleasure of working with other “good blokes” (Choir 4, CMS, Question 10). Many even stated that they would only be part of this choir or “one of the same standard” since they had “been spoilt” (Choir 4, CMS, Question 13) by “singing this kind of material with this group of men” (Choir 4, CMS, Question 14).

The degree to which working together was considered significant was somewhat unexpected and yet, the use of a sporting analogy offers insight into its power. One man said:

The experience of playing in a team – it doesn’t matter how rough it is, or not rough – and that exquisite sense of it all coming together as a team; there is that same thing in a choir (Choir 4, Interview 1, p. 10).

The value of sport in Australian male culture cannot go unmentioned here. Although outside the scope of this paper, the broader research considers the power of a sport-obsessed society to define the Aussie male (Talbot, 2010). Choir

provided participants with a physical and collaborative experience, which was satisfyingly akin to that of sport, and this is extremely important to males trying to balance the view that singing in choir is feminine (Harrison, 2007; 2010) with the prevailing cultural norms or stereotypes of masculinity.

Each choir expressed characteristics of musical success in similar ways even though the choirs were quite different. Technical ability and sound quality were understood to be essential ingredients to the musical success of the choir. The role of the conductor was also recognised by participants as a significant influence, and differences in the expression of this could be attributed to the differences in age. Working together offered participants the satisfaction of the collaborative experience and the pleasure derived from belonging to a group, similar to that gained from team sport.

Personal success – consistency across the age range

Success was also considered at a personal level and participants reported feeling satisfied and impacted by being part of their choir. Personal success was described in terms of the meaning of the choral experience to the individual. These elements included enjoyment and love of singing, participation, self-confidence and singing as a means of expression.

Enjoyment and love of singing

Almost every participant in this research expressed enjoyment and a love of singing. This is epitomized in statements such as, "I love singing; it's my favourite thing to do, anywhere any time" (Choir 1, Interview 2, p. 1). Although many boys projected no future involvement in choir, the same was not true of singing. Instead they said that whatever they did in life they would continue to sing, even if that was simply in the shower, at

home or in the car (Choir 1, CMS, Question 4). One 10 year-old boy from Choir 1 was clear saying he would only stop singing if he broke his neck or his spine. One 12-year-old went further and associated enjoyment with success. He said, "You won't have success unless you enjoy what you're doing" (Choir 1, Focus Group 2, p. 6).

Conductor 2 confirmed that a love of singing had magnitude and power, saying, "it can be like a drug" (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p. 3). One boy described singing as "the most amazing feeling" and one that gave him "goose bumps" (Choir 2, Focus Group, p. 17) and another did not care how he sounded, saying, "even if I'm singing like a dying cat, I enjoy it" (Choir 2, Interview 2, p. 3).

Even in their youth these boys were suggesting a profound sense of personal meaning in their attempts to articulate what singing meant to them. Choir 3 also described their enjoyment of singing, despite the fact that the experience was primarily an assessment task. Conductor 3 did not consider himself a singer, even less a choral singer, but had to concede his enjoyment, saying, "I enjoy being in choirs; it's fun, regardless of whether I was conducting or singing" (Choir 3, Conductor 3, p. 9).

Observations of the rehearsal showed most of the group enjoying themselves, laughing and joking together in a relaxed atmosphere. Levels of engagement naturally varied over the time, with some participants tenaciously perfecting their part and others only singing when required; however, some of these reactions indicated a lack of confidence rather than a lack of enjoyment. One participant from Choir 4 did not discriminate between the talking and singing. He saw the two as equal, natural and as an intrinsic part of being human. According to this man it was "unthinkable not to [sing]. It's as human as speaking" (Choir 4, Interview 1, p. 1) and despite his strong feelings against elements of commercial success to which the choir was now accustomed, he conceded by saying, "But I enjoy it because of the total package" (p. 16). Other members of Choir 4 stated enjoyment and love of singing as a major reason

for their involvement: "The simple joy of singing" and "The joy of singing, principally" (Choir 4, CMS, Question 9).

Participation

The significance of enjoyment extended to the idea of participation, depicted in the words of an adolescent from Choir 2, who said, "if it sounds good and everyone's having fun then what more is there to achieve?" (Choir 2, Focus Group, p. 9). The simple act of participating was considered an integral aspect of personal success, but to the boys of Choir 1 mere participation was not an option because being in the choir was an achievement and a privilege, which required their continued effort. Conductor 1 recognised this and directed the choir with a view to excellence and creating "something that was a little bit special" (Choir 1, Conductor 1, p. 3). She also celebrated the joy associated with having boys participate in choir and said,

I think every time we get boys in a room to sing together, that's success, because a lot of schools can't manage to do that (Choir 1, Conductor Interview, p.4).

Having fun was also a feature of participation and one boy believed this was "the biggest part of it" (Choir 2, Focus Group, p. 9) and a member of Choir 4 felt that the value of the experience was more important than the performance side. Bennett (2009) describes "psychological success" (p. 311), similar to personal success used here, and its connection to an individual's identity. She highlights "participatory belonging" (p. 311) as an aspect of identity, which has the power to influence the actions of an individual as well as their self-image and self-confidence.

Self-confidence

Enjoyment, love of singing and participation all had the potential to influence participation in choir and although self-confidence was not

considered in a lot of depth, it was a concept suggested by a large number of participants. Boys from Choir 1 identified that participation gave them "confidence" (Choir 1, CMS, Question 10) and a member of Choir 3 discussed his experience of teaching school vocal groups. He had noticed that as a result of singing together "each and every one of them had improved in confidence" (Choir 3, Interview 1, p. 19). Conductor 1 strongly believed that choir was a significant influence. She said, "I think it affects their confidence in a positive way and their self-esteem in a positive way" (Choir 1, Conductor Interview, p. 8).

Personal expression

The last feature of personal success to which reference was made repeatedly was that of singing being a means of personal expression. This was reflected in comments from Choir 1 boys who said things like, "If I'm angry I just sing and I feel better" (Choir 1, Focus Group 2, p. 13) and "You feel free, like you feel nothing can stop me now" (Choir 1, Focus Group 2, p. 16). Boys from Choir 2 agreed, saying, "it is an expression of yourself" (Choir 2, Focus Group, p. 35) and Conductor 2 described the opportunity for emotional and personal expression:

There's that energy – that physical energy. Even with a mass choir you can feel the air move that they create. You can feel that physical energy that each one of them is putting in (Choir 2, Conductor Interview, p. 2).

Concluding remarks

The four choirs indicated that they perceived success not only in overt or public ways, but also as having musical and personal characteristics. Ideas surrounding musical success suggested that technical ability and the quality of the sound contributed to a choir's success and participants believed that a choir should strive to display a high standard of musical skill. A significant part

of this was the responsibility and role of the conductor. Working together emerged as an influential factor in the musical success of a choir as well as being a source of social satisfaction and an opportunity to build important relationships. Personal success was described in terms of enjoyment and love of singing, participation, self-confidence and singing as a means of expression. It was not simply that these were important features of musical and personal success. Participants expressed a belief that these characteristics had to be present in combination rather than in isolation. For example, high level technical ability had to be accompanied by enjoyment. It became apparent, however, that achieving a high technical standard significantly affected level of enjoyment and so without the high standard they would not have enjoyed choir as much.

Success has a vast array of associated personal and musical meanings, and it is this perplexity that makes it thought provoking and important to music educators and choral directors. The perceptions of success expressed by these participants demonstrate the anomalies of meaning and perspective and they highlight the need to consider individual context. The fact that the boys and men involved viewed success in specific ways also showed a consistency of thought and attitude, suggesting that despite differences between choirs, perceptions of success were overwhelmingly similar across the age range and across contexts.

Creating a choral environment where boys feel comfortable to participate is an important consideration for music educators and choral directors. A large part of this involves cultivating a choir that reflects the different criteria of musical and personal success discussed. Understanding the concerns and motivations of boys and men, whether personal or socio-cultural, is a critical component in planning for choirs. Understanding success will influence a range of decisions regarding the repertoire chosen,

rehearsal techniques, performance opportunities, timetabling and a conductor's overall approach. This research suggests that in order to make choir an accepted and acceptable activity in the Australian male culture, educators must consider the impact of male perceptions of success.

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