

# Making their Voices Heard:

## A Social Constructivist Study of Youth and Men Who Choose to Sing

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### ABSTRACT

*Past literature has been clear in outlining the systemic historical, sociological, and physiological barriers that inhibit males from singing in Western cultures. All social institutions have a significant impact on the formation and reinforcement of varying forms of masculinity, and singing, as a social institution and construction, is no exception. This article draws on the research on masculinity to examine and further understand the phenomenon of male singing. Interviews were conducted with eighteen boys and men ranging from early adolescence to working adults who have chosen to continue singing. Using a theoretical framework of social constructivism, the results are then juxtaposed within the literature on masculinity. A conceptual framework is then created that illuminates the social constructions of why these youth and men choose to sing.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the phenomenon of male singing in Western cultures and juxtaposes the findings against the texts of masculinity research. Historically in western cultures, male singing had its roots in both secular and sacred worlds. In medieval times, the news and indeed the histories of the various European kingdoms were orally transmitted through the voices of the earliest journalists or travelling male minstrels, troubadours, minnesingers. As Christianity took hold of the dominant society, male singing was exclusively allowed for church rituals and in services. The preferred sound, described as 'classical' for the purposes of this paper, was an angelic, and pure tonal quality for boys with unchanged voices, and a resonant and rich tonal quality for the adult men. Combined, standard practice was to train the unchanged treble and changed voices to perfect what might be described as a rich, heavenly and full sound in order to perform specifically composed sacred repertoire in four (and often more) part choirs in weekly services. Although the Western world has become more secularised, and the traditional cathedral male choir schools are diminishing and almost non-existent except in major centres around the world, the cathedral-developed traditions of the training of male singers remain entrenched for the most part in the present education of 'classical' male singers in churches, schools and community. At the same time and especially in the last century, male singers have challenged the dominant norms, and experimentally expanded into a variety of popular culture genres with a proliferation of every kind of singing from rock and roll to jazz; from lyrical boy bands to raucous heavy metal singing; from hip hop to rhythmic rapping. All of these genres of male singing are worthy of study in relation to further our understanding of postmodern masculinity, however this paper limits its overview to focus on the classically trained male singer in schools and community.

Given the preferential and patriarchal treatment that male singers have been given in Western cultures over hundreds of years, one might think that male singing would continue to predominate the musical scene. Such is not the case. The research indicates that females outnumber males in school vocal programs by a ratio of 5:2 (Gates 1989) while the ratio is 5:1 in elective music courses (Swanson 1984). At the same time, the global percentage of singers who are male is only 7 per cent, according to Dr Weston Noble in a speech given to delegates at the 6<sup>th</sup> World Choral Symposium in 2002. With limited male involvement in classical singing, Adler (2002) notes that 'we risk losing a valuable part of our culture, with links to our cultural history and those of other cultures by not encouraging boys to actively take part in music and singing' (p. 6). More importantly, 'to deny students the opportunity to participate in this activity would prevent them from exploring those cooperative expressive aspects of themselves and others with which they cannot connect through competitive activities such as sports, or through "academic" subjects' (p. 7). Ashley (2008) confirms that we have reached a crisis in classical male singing and notes that one of the major factors is 'the hand of patriarchy' (p.229), a conclusion he finds perplexing given that common sense would suggest that patriarchy should operate to support male choral singing.

Research has shown that males stop singing due to systemic barriers that are historical, sociological and physiological in nature. One only needs to investigate standard European traditions which dictated that a boy should stop singing as soon as his voice 'broke' to gauge the impact that historical practices have had on society. At his most awkward time in life of reaching puberty, teachers emphasised to society that singing for adolescent boys was physically, emotionally and morally wrong. An early 20<sup>th</sup>-century manual for boychoir conductors states:

*Some choirmasters retain a boy in the choir after the voice is broken. This should never be done. It is likely to injure the vocal tone for ever after. Many otherwise fair musicians have been deprived of vocal power by this reprehensible practice. A boy whose voice is changed or broken ought no more to be*

*allowed to sing than a man with a fractured limb ought to be permitted to walk or use it. There is no doubt that many valuable voices are lost through overstraining their powers at the period of the break. The custom of retaining boys in the choir after the change has commenced. Although it has some scientific defenders, it is to be deplored. (Martin 1901, p.21)*

It goes without saying that the majority of males who were forced to stop singing in their youth are unlikely to resume singing in adulthood.

Sociological factors also conspire against male singing. In earlier times, young men might have returned to singing through church or social activities, however, with the increased secularisation in dominant society coupled with the subsequent increase in popular media entertainment, a return to classical singing is not occurring. Ideologies and social patterns have shifted within the last 75 years in our increasingly secular society and choral male singing for recreation has basically vanished (Gates 1989).

At the same time, the decline of male interest in singing may also be linked to the 'feminisation' of music, in particular, singing. Ashley (2008) notes that just as sports are seen as the domain of males, music is in the domain of females and for each gender to trespass in the other's field is problematic. Again history plays a major role in this. For hundreds of years of western history, females were required to occupy themselves learning the softer and passive subjects, such as music, art and sewing, while their male counterparts were required to follow intellectual pursuits in maths, sciences, athletics and industrial arts to pursue manly jobs

*How long must our girls break their heads over Algebra, Geometry, Latin and other subjects that prove useless to most of them, that they loathe and despise forever after? Will higher mathematics make these girls better companions for their husbands, better mothers for their children? Why don't we give them more Music, Literature, Dramatics, or Art - more training in activities that they can use through their whole lives? (Meissner 1924, p. 51)*

Koza (1993) suggests that the relatively new phenomenon of male resistance to singing was based on the categorisation of singing as 'feminine' and the construction of paradigms that placed females (or anything feminine) in the 'undesirable other' (p.220). Radtke (1950) states that 'boys of this age, too, frequently use as an excuse for not singing the argument that singing is anything but masculine' (p. 48). The classification of singing as a feminine art has appeared to promote a sociological cycle; that is to say that the perception of singing as feminine initially hindered some male choral involvement, and through social interaction (e.g. peer pressure, parental pressure), that perception was further enhanced, thereby decreasing involvement even more. It is common knowledge that when a perception becomes part of the human and societal psyche, be it natal or learned, that perception is cemented even before formal schooling. Mizener (1997) observes that throughout their entire schooling, girls generally are more positive and involved in music than boys, also commenting that numbers decline with each successive grade as the perception has more time to spread. The boys in Ashley's (2008) studies reported being intimidated from participating in singing by the girls who not only outnumbered them, but referred to them in unmasculine terms, such as cute and sweet, and often described their singing as beautiful, certainly not a description that males were keen to hear.

Sexuality is yet another sociological concern for male singing. Ashley (2008) refers to 'schools as "masculinising agents", engaged in the production of heterosexism and homophobia... [This] is upheld by the consistent criticism of their [schools'] failure to tackle homophobia.' (p.37). Adler notes that 90 per cent of the boys in choir have been

subjected to homophobic harassment. While Koza links this harassment to misogyny, Adler (2002) contends that “anti-singing homophobic labels are not used to devalue the singers by likening them to girls or women, but because their participation in gender-incongruent activities is judged to be a sign of unsuccessful masculinity” (p. 260). Such labels of softness within hegemonic maleness are unacceptable, and have an incredible negative effect on the self-esteem of singing boys, particularly at an age when boys are developing their identity and are searching for acceptance.

Physiological factors complete the cycle of failure in male singing. Many adolescent boys experience a gruelling voice change and endure long periods of unstable vocal production causing some to stop singing as they begin to feel uncomfortable with their ‘new’ instrument and experience an uneasiness to utilise it (Beynon & Keating 2000). A 1997 study showed that 5 out of 6 males perceived their voice change as a positive experience, yet the number of negative comments related to the voice change was eightfold that of the number of positive comments (Killian 1997). And, with adolescence comes obvious physical changes, increased muscle growth and increased hormone production. Boys may gravitate to other activities simply because they experience awkward problems with their vocal instrument and the teasing of their peers. Finally, Killian (1997) notes that children are maturing earlier and boys’ voices are changing sooner than previously recorded, suggesting that in future they may drop out of choirs sooner than before.

From this background, we see that the critical literature on classical male singing is consistent with the emerging research trends in masculinity research. Singing is a highly gendered activity and, as such is framed within the norms of hegemonic masculinity; it is impacted by society’s as well as singing teachers’ gendered philosophies. The dominant masculinities of heterosexism, homophobia, patriarchy, control and power continue to dominate the musical landscape in this case.

## **THE STUDY**

It is apparent that the culminating effects of these historical, sociological and physiological factors intertwine to create significant psychological issues for male singers, and create a fairly substantial case in influencing the adolescent male to stop singing. We accept that we cannot alter history, nor can we have much influence on the physiological changes that affect the adolescent male or change social norms related to singing. Since the impeding factors have been extensively studied already, we need to examine why some adolescent and adult males do continue to sing and this research needs to be situated within the existing sociological and educational research on masculinities. In this study, we examine the question as to why some male choral singers choose to continue singing in spite of the social factors that conspire against male singing. We talked with adolescent youth and adult males at various stages in their development and at different levels of choral involvement in an attempt to find common factors that stimulate male interest in choral music.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology based in social constructivism was chosen deliberately to maximise the voice of the male singer participant and to focus on dialogic interactions and interactive discussions. Ashley (2008), who conducted a major study of male singing in the UK, notes that ‘meaning is generated primarily through interaction in a social context rather than the discovery of an objective order of things’ (p.87), and social constructivism, as

derived from Durkheim and Hegel 'emphasizes the way in which perceived reality is the product of social interaction rather than fixed qualities of individuals' (p.19). This theoretical framework appears to 'provide the more powerful explanatory paradigm within which to understand young masculinity and vocal performance' (p.233). He goes on to note that it is particularly appropriate to the study of male singing situated in the masculinity research because

*Masculinity and femininity have no essential nature (essentialism) but are constantly constructed and re-constructed in opposition to each other (social constructivism). Boys and girls must constantly perform, and be seen to perform, roles that correspond to expectations of their gender. (p.33)*

Informed and open discussion between researcher and participants, in this case male singers, was the critical component in examining male singing in this social constructivist context and allowed us to gather rich and deep data over a series of discussions which provided opportunity to scaffold new reflections and ideas based on previous information. The role of the researcher is a critical component in social constructivist work and in this study, we acknowledged our own characteristics as researchers as critical elements because we too are active and integral parts of the social community of male singing. We were aware that our own personal and professional lenses of personal history, knowledge, assumptions and opinions would color and shape the discussions and interpretations, and it was our intent to equally share perspectives with the participants to help bring meaning to what was heard and observed. Similarly, developing trust and honesty were critical components of the method to facilitate researcher and participant working toward non-hierarchical and developmental discourse during the investigation. In this case, we talked with male singers with whom we were acquainted and with whom we had sung as colleagues or had as members in our choral organisations. We reasoned that they would know us well enough to talk candidly and openly about their reasons for continuing to be singers. As researchers, we became participant observers in the process as we explored significant questions and issues together.

There were 18 participants in six defined groups who sing in voluntary, community based choirs who participated in the study: 1) two adult males, an environmental services engineer and a registered nurse, who had left singing as their voices began to change and returned later in life to sing in a church choir for recreational and spiritual reasons; 2) two working adult males, one a police officer and the other a golf club manager, who have sung in choirs since childhood and do so now too for social reasons and to keep some balance in their lives; 3) three university music students, two of whom are voice majors and one an organ major, and have sung since childhood; 4) three university students majoring in Chemistry, Health Sciences and Philosophy, respectively, who began to sing in childhood and continue to do so; 5) three secondary school students, ages 13 to 15, whose voices, while still in the process of maturing, are able to define their voice range as either tenor or bass; and 6) five young adolescents from 11 to 14 years of age, who are in the actual process of changing voices and moving into a tenor-bass ensemble.

Interviews were conducted in two phases: first in individual interviews and later in focus groups. The data collection was set up in this way to increase opportunities for discussion, to allow for reflection upon the discussion, to enhance social interaction, and to allow new ideas to be constructed through the discourse among the participants. Besides being asked directly why they continue to sing when the factors in the environment conspire against male singing, the adult participants were asked about their current work, musical activities, hobbies, music preferences, previous musical learning and their opinions on their past and present choral experiences. Post-secondary participants were asked about their program of study, current musical activities,

hobbies, music preferences, secondary and elementary school music programs, opinions on past and present choral experiences and their voice change. Younger participants were asked about their current school music programs, their elementary school programs, other musical learning, career plans, opinions on current choral experiences and their voice change. The second phase consisted of focus groups with the post-secondary and younger participants, allowing the participants to discuss the phenomenon of singing with each other. With the younger participants, we were interested in seeing how the presence of their peers influenced their responses, and so some of the questions asked in the first phase were repeated again. The time difference between the two phases may have allowed for a change in perspective on singing in the younger singers, as their voices and bodies may have gone through some significant changes in that time. Generally, questions in the second phase focussed around the voice change and the influence of peers, parents and teachers.

Upon reviewing the data from the first phase, themes were identified as common if they applied to the majority of a certain participant group or the majority of the entire participant pool. The common themes were then related back to the original concept of countering the negative factors. Did these common themes play a part in overcoming the aforementioned challenges? Were certain themes only beneficial when in conjunction with other themes? What further questions could arise from the data? Any further questions were addressed in the second phase, the focus group interviews. Again, common themes were identified. Links were then created between the themes common to the different participant groups, to see if themes were slightly altered depending on the age of the participants. Finally, special focus was given to rationalising the implications of the data and formulating new ideologies and methodologies that would benefit both school and community programs.

## **FINDING COMMON GROUND: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

During analysis, seven themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups and we found that males in this study continue to sing because of: 1) social interaction; 2) life balance; 3) opportunities for musicianship and artistic excellence; 4) feeling valued; 5) leadership; 6) emergent personal perceptions of masculinity, including personal, social and institutional; and 7) paths of resistance. While the themes intersect with each other, they have been ordered from one to seven purposefully and hierarchically because each one seems to lead the singer to a higher level of autonomy in their own decisions about singing as a significant aspect of their lives. From singing for the pure enjoyment of socialising to singing as a means of showing resistance to unreasonable hegemonic practices in traditional forms of masculinity, the participants in this study articulated significant contributions to the literature through these themes. Each is discussed in more detail below.

1. *Social interaction.* The first theme identified by every participant was that of the social atmosphere of the ensemble. For the youths and men in the study, it is not enough to come to sing with a group of other people; it is more about the group of people with whom you sing that keeps the males involved. Two of the respondents, Carter (age 32), a police officer, and Daniel (age 33), a bartender at a golf course, captured the sentiment of all the participants. 'It's a family experience almost,' states Carter who values the social experience of choir. 'There were time constraints on my Tuesday nights rushing from work to choir rehearsal, but the social experience ensured that I didn't skip out on it.' Both participants commented on the laughter shared by members of the group. 'Take the aspect of fun out and it's just not attractive to guys,' states Carter. Daniel fondly recalls music field trips to Chicago and Boston, though his most positive experiences has been putting on shows, where the cast becomes really close. Carter most appreciated that singing was something completely different from what he did

in life; it wasn't work-related. Though he finds his musical commitments time consuming, he takes great pleasure out of doing it. 'I've done it for so long, and there's comfort in doing the familiar.' Daniel appreciates the relationships formed with other choristers. 'The camaraderie is most important. I come back every week because of the people here.'

Some of the participants said that their peers in the ensemble became their best friends through life, and so their involvement in the choir had to continue past adolescence, if for no other reason than to associate with the same group of people. Some of the adolescent singers emphasised that the social aspect is the only reason they remain as singers. It is only later that other intrinsic values emerge to keep them singing.

2. *Life Balance.* According to these participants, the non-singing activities in their choral programs contributed to keeping the adolescents involved while the working men found that singing was an important release from their busy and stressful working lives. Singing contributes to a sense of activity and life balance for these singers, such as socialising in and out of choir, performing challenging and meaningful repertoire, and the feelings of wellbeing that come as a result of singing. Bartolomeu, a father of three children, came back to singing as an adult and brings his daughters with him to rehearsal so that it has become a family event. 'I really enjoy singing in a choir,' he comments. 'It is a good stress reliever for me. I enjoy the people that I am with. I enjoy the challenge of trying something different, something that will take me to another level.'
3. *Opportunities for Musicianship and Artistic Excellence.* The subject of personal musical development and musicianship came up in every interview. As a result of their involvement in singing, the participants discussed their personal desire to grow musically as they began to see themselves as real musicians. In turn, they believe that their musical development supports the overall performance level of the ensembles as they become contributing musicians. The high school and university students in particular were keen on being challenged and developing their skills for both personal and ensemble development. At the same time, it was critical to the participants that they were recognised by peers, conductor and educated audience for their personal and group level of artistic accomplishment and musicianship.
4. *Feeling valued.* Receiving personal, positive reinforcement associated with being an important and contributing musician in the ensemble from conductor and peers was a key factor to each and every respondent. However, the group reinforcement is tempered for the adolescents by the reactions from non-musical peers and community outside the choir which is almost always negative, homophobic and emasculating. The young men who sing told us they appreciate and actually require constant reinforcement and encouragement to overcome the negative stereotypes they have to endure on a daily basis from conductors, peers, parents and others. A parent of one of the young men in this study when giving permission for him to participate in the research noted. 'Some of these kids get way too much bullying at school because they enjoy singing. And for some, choir is a refuge from all the teasing and abuse they receive on a daily basis for being singers.'
5. *Leadership.* Constant positive reinforcement is the one means to support young males 10, 13 or even 16, who are insecure about themselves, their bodies and where they fit in the various social systems, until they reach at point where they emerge as leaders, first of their own selves, and then leaders of other musicians and peers. It takes courage for a male to sing in current society, and that courage

usually develops into self-confidence, strength of inner character and the emergence of leadership characteristics – which in turn, leads to a deeper commitment to the activity of singing. Even as older adults, the confidence that came from singing allowed the older members to act as mentors to younger male singers and to peers who might want to sing but be discouraged from doing so.

6. *Emergent perceptions of masculinity.* Permeating all of the discussion was the question of the male singer constantly interrogating who he is and who he is becoming, not only as a musician, but as a man. Liam, a 15-year old Grade 10 student notes, 'I'm the only guy in my vocal class.' While Liam has little problem being the only guy among a class of 32 girls, he does say it has some negative aspects as well. 'I end up singing alto most of the time,' he adds, explaining that it is not conducive to his vocal development. Liam also does not take kindly to the negative reaction he sometimes gets. 'The jocks definitely make fun of me for being in choir.' Despite this, he enjoys his choral activities. Interestingly, the 32 year old police officer in the study noted that there was always a deafening silence in the male-predominant staff room at the precinct when he would comment that he was on his way to choir rehearsal. The silence was almost always followed by at least one teasing comment about his masculinity. Ironically, making music should not have been a strange element for the police. One of the local police forces had a longstanding and highly-valued in-house rock band that performed for student groups to talk about social issues such as drugs and drinking, and safety and violence.

In the growing body of literature on masculinities in the wider research world, there is no doubt that there are competing images of masculinity, images that are constantly shifting due to the influential media that impacts society so overwhelmingly. Males who sing are constantly exposed to these conflicting conceptions as they engage in such a non-traditional activity as singing, and find themselves constantly questioning their developing sense of masculine identity. As they observe social and institutional norms of masculinities according to traditional masculine hierarchies, male singers find themselves questioning traditional ideologies and trying to make sense of their place in male hierarchies. Adler (2002) created a typology of male singers that followed the traditional hierarchy of masculinities, ranging from the jock singers, to the social singers, the social isolates, the neutral singers, the non-singers, the partial engagers, and the bad-ass singers. Systemic and institutional values and perceptions by others of themselves as males and as singers are significant themes. And as young male singers work through this contested terrain they learn to intrinsically value their art of singing, or not.

7. *Paths of resistance.* Once males value themselves as singers and they are committed to the art of singing as a normal and normative activity for males, they find ways to resist and subvert societal norms traditionally associated with male singing. One of the young men said:

*It was in grade 11 when I decided to out myself as a singer. I am not gay but was always accused of being a fag because I sang in the school choir. I joined the school junior football team to prove that I was a real man – and maybe to prove it to myself too. Finally I decided that my best armour was just to be myself and to be open about what I do and who I am. The remarkable thing was it was relatively painless thing to do, and I was accepted and had the same friends in and out of choir.*

Being comfortable singing seems to be a process of being and becoming; male singers find ways to challenge the norms, even at the very basic level through being very public about their art and the highest level by recruiting others to join them. Once they intellectualise what it is they do and why they sing, their commitment grows into a true quality of life.

## **A FINAL WORD**

While the discussion with the adolescents and the adults were significantly different there were similarities evident in the discussions from which we drew the seven themes as described above. What is important to note, however is one significant difference with the discussion with the youth. Almost all of the adolescents with whom we talked became involved in singing as young boys because their parents (usually the mother) or a music teacher at school had encouraged them to join the choir because they had good singing voices and seemed to have a natural talent for music. Each of the adolescents admitted reaching a time when he considered not singing any longer for a variety of reasons, but at the point of these interviews was still committed to continue singing for the time being.

## **SUMMARY**

### **Negotiating an Identity as Male Singer**

The singers in this study were open and explicit about why they choose to continue to sing. Each of the themes identified represents one step of being and becoming an independent and interdependent male who values singing as an integral activity of their personal lives and knowing who they are as males in their social spheres. The subsequent and final step in this paper is to take the themes as outlined above and merge them into a conceptual framework that shows the navigational complexity and path of singing for males in the context described here. In developing this conceptual framework, we maintain that there are two basic, hierarchical planes of involvement in the normal patterns of male singing.

### **Finding Their Voice**

First, there is participation on a lower plane that is based on dependency, routine, enforced participation and basic transference of the musical experience – or, best described as commitment that is based on compliance and curiosity. As noted above, usually a boy's mother will have decided that either her son has some talent as a musician or that her son can benefit from involvement in a musical group, and chooses a boy choir for any number of reasons. We frequently see resistance on the part of many boys who come to choir and more often than not, they will tell us over and over again that they are in choir only because they were forced to be there. This resistant compliance however requires acquiescence on the part of the chorister and almost always inspires some curiosity in the singer, providing an opportunity for the artistic director, staff and choristers to engage the boy or young man in the ensemble. While many musical aspects within the choir are going on, this is when social activities that are physical and energetic are used to engage the chorister in the life of the choir; he meets new friends and begins to forge new friendships with other singers. The chorister begins to commit to the choir (or not) in a variety of ways, not through just singing in the traditional choral environment where he is passively engaged in the process. As involvement deepens, some level of commitment begins to emerge, and for each chorister the

timing of the commitment varies by age, personality, sense of innate independence and the connection in the various stages as noted above.

In the beginning stages, the educational process within the choir itself is most likely based on a highly structured hierarchical model between teacher/conductor and the boys, with the mode of teaching mainly through transmission of knowledge. In this mode of learning, the conductor needs to work consciously to develop socialisation activities within the rehearsal and outside the formal rehearsal or performance context in order for the new and young singers to feel part of and to begin to bond with the group, if not the activity of singing, so that they begin to value the activity in their lives and to work on their own sense of musicianship. As they gain confidence in themselves and begin to value themselves, the young men may begin to develop leadership initiatives that enhance their involvement and increase their sense of value to the ensemble and to their peers. Their commitment to singing, peers, and organisation will likely increase as they experience some physical bond to the music and organisation. Significantly, at this lower plane, the powers to participate are extrinsic; they reside not within the young male singer but with an authority figure, and he has not yet moved even to a neutral plane where continuation is likely. Depending on the child, the experience, while involuntary may be enjoyable or not, which the adult engaging him in choir may confuse with commitment.

### **Making Their Voice Heard**

At some point in order to remain participating, the singer's commitment needs to move to a higher plane based on an emergent sense of independence, a sense of personal fulfillment, self-actualisation and transformation of musical experience. For most singers, there is a social connection with the ensemble, but for some, the connection and commitment are to the art of singing, and the artistic director needs to be able to recognise where the level of commitment lies for each singer. The goal is ultimately to move to the commitment to the art of singing and making music to an aesthetic experience at the spiritual level of the individual – to make him realise he is a musician and singer. It is critical to remember that that male singers – and perhaps all singers in all choirs – still require the same activities and commitments from the lower planes such as regular opportunities for socialisation, excellent and challenging repertoire, interesting performance opportunities and now even the chance to show their leadership skills as rehearsal and performance conductors themselves of the ensemble as they choose, arrange and even compose the music of performance.

For males to continue singing, they need support to find their personal path in singing where they can develop both a sense of independence with self and music and a sense of identity, interdependence and leadership significance with the music and within the ensemble. At this point, their level of commitment and motivation is highly personal and intrinsic; it becomes forged in dedication, obligation, responsibility and devotion to the ensemble and/or the art of singing. At the same time, they will begin to have a sense of comfort and confidence of who they are growing into as men, and will take whatever path(s) needed to reach a plane of self-actualisation. Through this process males are more likely to find their voice and a continued commitment to the art of singing. These findings are significant on their own but require a re-examination of the literature in which we analyse the factors impeding male singing with new factors that encourage singing.

We conceptualise these findings into a diagram that shows the social-constructivist growth from 1) dependence as a male singer on extrinsic factors such as parent, choral conductor, social activities and peers to 2) a level plane where the singer begins to consciously consider and weigh the values of being a male singer and continuing to be a male singer to 3) a higher plane of commitment where intrinsic forces outweigh most of the

negative factors and stigma, and motivate the male singer to continue as singer. See Figure 1.

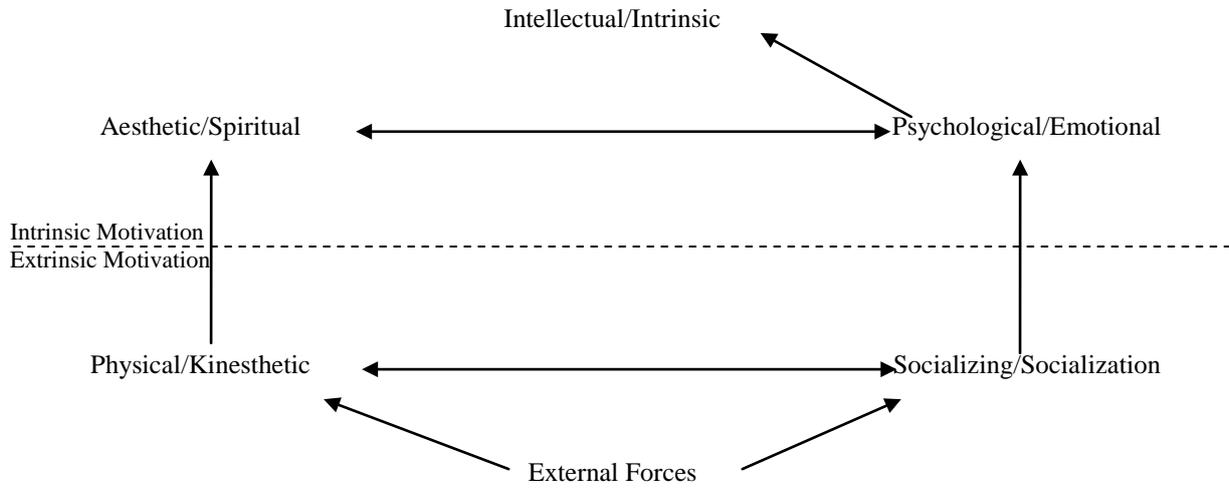


Figure 1

### Practical Findings of the Study

Besides helping us to construct and theorise about why some males do continue to participate in such a non-traditional activity as singing, our respondents provided us with a number of practical and confirming points that teachers of singing and choral conductors should consider seriously in their pedagogical practices. Most, if not all of these, strategies are included in the literature on male choral singing elsewhere, but we list them again here because they did arise out of the conversations with these singers and to confirm their significance. Our participants confirmed that the teacher/conductor is the key to success of maintaining male involvement and cited the following teachers' qualities as critical:

- energetic, sensitive and knowledgeable teacher/conductor who is passionate about male singing;
- understands that males exhibit a high level of energy and enthusiasm;
- plans rehearsals and performance opportunities thoroughly and carefully;
- celebrates achievement individually and as a group;
- demands high standards of artistic excellence
- chooses repertoire that is challenging but engaging and suits various vocal ranges;
- exposes singers to various styles of music and singing through diversity in repertoire from classical to traditional to popular culture music;
- involves singers in selection of repertoire when possible;
- acknowledges that singers may be involved in other personal or sporting activities and works to accommodate singers;
- understands the physiology of singing for males and accommodates to keep boys singing through the voice change and into adulthood;

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we began with a descriptive analysis of the literature concerning the historical, sociological, and physiological factors that discourage males from singing and thus asked the important question: why do males choose to sing? The findings, analysis and subsequent development of a conceptual framework in this study about why males continue to sing adds a significant piece to the extant body of literature about male singing in the context of current research on masculinity. The study shows that once males encounter a higher level of intrinsic satisfaction in singing through participation on a plane of personal growth and musical transformation, there is the possibility that we can understand the norms and ideologies that serve to promote male singing, and perhaps even begin to chart a new history for male singing and the development of concepts of masculinity through singing and the Arts. For example, while the research blames European traditional choir schools and the demise of traditional social activities for singing as the agents for arresting male choral singing, the findings in this study indicate that males who are encouraged to become independent singers, who value their art in terms of their own life balance and musical contributions, see the importance of their role in re-creating a new history of male involvement in choral singing. At present, we are seeing remarkable and incremental growth in male choral ensembles, not only across Canada but in the United States, Australia and Europe. The amazing success stories of gender-specific professional and semi-professional male ensembles like Orphei Dranger (Sweden), Chor Leoni (Canada), Talla (Finland), Amabile (Canada) to name just a few bear credence to the findings of this study. Ten years ago, the number of adolescent male choirs in North America could be counted on one hand; today there are ten times a many. Addressing the systemic issues of masculinity through single gender male choral ensembles is one solution has been cited but that alone will not support male singing.

As singers engage in the development of artistic excellence, the focus in the higher plane is musicianship and the exploration of new terrains in the music and the art. The ultimate goal is about singing and the shared experience therein. Similarly, we have read that it is the voice change that impedes male vocal development and has served to stop numerous males from singing. Yet it is also the voice change that marks new beginnings, new possibilities and the emergence of a new being capable of mature expression and musicality. In the right environment, the physiology of the voice change can be complicated and lengthy, but the process, in the right environment also promotes renewed energy and commitment. Just as the culmination of the various factors led to impairments in the earlier literature, these new ideas may change the course. In the male choir, the physiological factors make the voice whole and are a critical component of the emergence of a new young adult. While admittedly complex, singing provides males with not only a new self, but new outlooks, new confidence and new contributions in leadership to choral singing. It might be posited that males who do choose to sing are forced to confront and develop a personal sense of their own form of masculinity, a subject for future research.

This is a but a brief summary of the analysis in relation to the various factors that once were believed to impede singing and now can be seen in a different light to keep males singing. If we accept as a given that having males involved in singing is a positive thing for their sense of being and becoming males, and that male classical singing is still a valued art form in our postmodern society, then more research needs to be done about the factors that will continue to increase the numbers of male singers.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Length of this article has precluded a full discussion of other significant aspects related to male singing. Specifically the impact of popular culture music as the mainstream venue for male singing requires full discussion and is the subject of a future paper. Similarly, a more comprehensive discussion of the treble voice as a questionable sign of maleness, the changing voice and its impact on keeping or stopping boys from singing further, and the responses of girls and older women to male singing in a feminine domain are but three additional areas that need further examination.

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