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“Compassionate Dictatorship”: Leading Old Singers in Community Choirs in Australia

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Abstract

In Australia, the ageing population generate challenges, pressures and opportunities for both governmental and community organisations. Involvement in community choirs offers older people diverse benefits that increase with ongoing participation. The music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs are pivotal in the success of ensembles. This paper forms part of our wider study into Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria, Australia and addresses the questions, how do music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs understand working with older people? And, how do older choir members understand the role of their MD/C? We interviewed two MD/Cs and thematically analysed our data. We present our findings under two overarching themes that evolved from our data analysis: Understandings of working with older people in a choir and musical leadership in a community setting. We found that the MD/Cs are reflective practitioners who imbued their facilitation and conducting with enthusiasm, skill, knowledge and passion for musical engagement. Our research suggests that to ensure longevity of choirs and to recognise the contribution of MD/Cs, greater attention should be paid to the upskilling of future generations of MD/Cs.

Keywords

Community Choirs, Music Director And Conductor, Older People, Teaching And Learning, Musical And Conducting Competency, Case Study, Semi-Structured Interviews

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“Compassionate Dictatorship”: Leading Old Singers in Community Choirs in Australia

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In Australia, the ageing population generate challenges, pressures and opportunities for both governmental and community organisations. Involvement in community choirs offers older people diverse benefits that increase with ongoing participation. The music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs are pivotal in the success of ensembles. This paper forms part of our wider study into Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria, Australia and addresses the questions, how do music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs understand working with older people? And, how do older choir members understand the role of their MD/C? We interviewed two MD/Cs and thematically analysed our data. We present our findings under two overarching themes that evolved from our data analysis: Understandings of working with older people in a choir and musical leadership in a community setting. We found that the MD/Cs are reflective practitioners who imbued their facilitation and conducting with enthusiasm, skill, knowledge and passion for musical engagement. Our research suggests that to ensure longevity of choirs and to recognise the contribution of MD/Cs, greater attention should be paid to the upskilling of future generations of MD/Cs. Keywords: Community Choirs, Music Director And Conductor, Older People, Teaching And Learning, Musical And Conducting Competency, Case Study, Semi-Structured Interviews

Introduction

Globally, populations are ageing rapidly (WHO, 2019). In Australia, ageing populations (65 and older) will have doubled by 2057 which will generate challenges, pressures and opportunities for both governmental and community organisations (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). Successful and healthy ageing can be “characterized by being able to adapt to changing life circumstances and maintain independence through positive engagement in the community” (Joseph & Southcott, 2018, p. 177). Music making is integral to all cultures and group singing is probably the most common form of music engagement (Johnson, et al., 2018). Involvement in group singing (for example, choir membership) may offer physical and psychological benefits that can address the challenges faced by older people such as social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and a lack of personal validation (Creech, Hallam, McQueen, & Varvarigou, 2013; Escuder-Mollon, 2012; Lamont, Murray, Hale, & Wright-Bevans, 2018). Active engagement in community music can support a sense of well-being in older people, specifically singing in choirs may foster positive health benefits (Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Joseph & Southcott, 2015; Veblen, 2007).

Community choir engagement attracts membership from diverse sectors of society, involving musical novices, amateurs, semi-professionals, and professionals from all walks of life. Community choirs can be accessible and affordable, which provides opportunities for older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to participate. Further, group singing can be done “throughout the life course, thus providing an activity that can be sustained regardless of any changes that might occur with aging” (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 6). Because members bring a range of music experiences and capabilities (Bell, 2008), it is the music director or conductor who is responsible for the creation of a functioning musical ensemble. Most community choirs in Australia do not require auditions or hold the expectation of music reading skills (Ahlquist, 2006; Cooper, 2016). Successful community choirs are generally characterized by a stable core membership, a regular schedule of rehearsals, a calendar of performances and events, an agreed repertoire, and a music director or conductor who must be flexible in working with a wide variety of people. Community choirs may include older people who bring life experiences, different expertise, and different understandings and expectations of both the ensemble and its conductor.

Conducting older adults in community choirs

The role of the MD/C is pivotal to the music engagement in all choral ensembles (Joseph & Southcott, 2018). An effective MD/C must possess a multitude of musical, organizational and social attributes (Apfelstadt, 1997; Durrant, 2003; Page-Shipp, Joseph, & van Niekerk, 2018). Some MD/Cs have formal training but others “report learning on-the-job and through trial and error” (Cooper, 2016, p. 20). Requisite musical attributes encompass both broad and specific skills. An MD/C must have a good knowledge of choral repertoire and the capabilities of the human voice, being mindful that the older adult voice changes with age, breathing may become constricted and less controllable, making longer notes and phrases difficult to sustain, and tone may become breathier. Pitch range may be reduced and voice tessitura, or range, may alter with men’s voices becoming higher and women’s voices lower (Johnson et al., 2018). Broad musical skills and understandings held by the conductor should include artistic intuition, musicality and aural acuity (Apfelstadt, 1997), a mental image of the music in its entirety, its aesthetic import, and should precede rehearsals. To effectively accommodate aging members, effective MD/Cs possess musical technical skills, including gestural, aural, oral, analytical, language, keyboard skills (Apfelstadt, 1997; Durrant, 2017), and “the ability to arrange, transpose, and transcribe music for choirs and older voices” (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 17). The selection of repertoire is mostly the responsibility of the MD/C and should reflect the interests, needs and abilities of older singers who may also wish to suggest songs for inclusion. Negotiating this may require some tact (Joseph & Southcott, 2017), as some songs suggested may just be impracticable or unsuitable. In addition, the MD/C may need to transpose songs to accommodate older voices. Choirs that share common culture and language may only function well under MD/Cs who are from a similar background. Taken together, the role of the MD/C is musically complex and requires considerable musical knowledge and skill.

The MD/C of “a musical organization can be one of the best models of leadership in any human enterprise – whether business, education, or industrial management” (Robinson, 1993, p. 4). Over the years, the qualities required of a conductor have changed with an increasing emphasis on personality traits including innate authority, leadership skills, assertiveness, organizational and administrative abilities (Durrant, 2003). Robinson (1993) identified pre-requisites for success choral leadership. The MD/C must be able to establish and maintain an authoritative presence from the outset. From the first meeting and rehearsal, the MC/C must establish clear procedural expectations. Ultimately the MD/C must ensure that all

choir members find their performances satisfying and fulfilling, as “unless each member of the ensemble achieves a sense of accomplishment ... in their rehearsals and concerts, the leader has failed” (Robinson, 1993, p. 5). Additionally, effective MD/Cs should embody and enact qualities that fosters positive experiences for older participants. For MD/Cs who work with older singers “the interpersonal qualities, teaching strategies, skills, and knowledge of leaders and facilitators” are vital (Hallam, Creech, McQueen, Varvarigou, & Gaunt, 2016, p. 20). These qualities include organizational skills, confidence, enthusiasm, clarity, and empathetic engagement with choir members (Apfelstadt, 1997; Duay & Bryan, 2008). Undertaking all these diverse roles, results in the MD/C being both diplomat and manager, administrator, and performer of leadership.

Teaching older people in a choir

Older adults are strongly motivated to learn new skills but may not learn as quickly as younger people (Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2018), however “they make up for this through a wealth of experiences that tends to support superior reasoning and judgment abilities, if given time to think and reflect on the learning activity” (Delahaye & Ehrich, 2008, p. 2). The teaching of older adults has only recently been receiving attention (Findsen, 2018; Formosa, 2002) and similarly only recently has attention been given to research concerning the facilitation of musical activities for older learners (Creech & Hallam, 2015). Taking part in music activities has the potential to contribute to music development for older adults (Gembris, 2008). In devising educational activities for older people, facilitators should take into account the competencies and capabilities of older learners. Further, there should be recognition of learners’ attitudes and prior experiences, their need for ongoing engagement and self-fulfillment, and the opportunity for participants to take some responsibility for their individual and group (Creech & Hallam, 2015; Pincas, 2007). Teachers (including MD/Cs) should be cognizant of the importance of relationships between learners and their leaders, and “instructors need to provide a rich and non-threatening learning environment in which older students are treated as co-instructors, i.e. colleagues in the learning process” (Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2018, p. 643).

Teaching and learning occur in diverse educational settings including formal, informal and non-formal. Participation in community singing groups constitute non-formal learning environments that are frequently organized by auspicing bodies such as community centers and clubs which are popular amongst older people. Although older adults may be united by membership of these organizations, it must be recognized that older people form a “heterogeneous group with diverse and complex orientations to learning, expectations, social and individual capital as well as constraints” (Creech & Hallam, 2015, p. 45). Teachers must accommodate this diversity and collaborate with learners to foster social inclusion, a sense of community (Wlodkowski, 2008), and create a secure, trusting, supportive, relaxing and enjoyable teaching and learning environment (Creech & Hallam, 2015; Durrant, 2003). In such informal educational contexts, teaching involves discussion, negotiation, repetition, rehearsal and reflection (Chapman, Cartwright & McGilp, 2006; Creech & Hallam, 2015; Formosa, 2002). Older adults who participate in community-based educational activities, such as community choirs, are driven by “a desire to acquire knowledge, to cultivate and develop themselves” (Chene & Sigouin, 1995, p. 435). Overall, teaching and facilitating learning for older people involves maintaining respectful relationships in a supportive learning environment that accommodates different needs and abilities.

The skills required of an MD/C

As described above, the MD/C of a community-based choir must be able to fill multiple roles as he or she is key to the successful functioning of the choir (Apfelstadt, 1997; Britten, 1992; Hedden & Allen, 2019; Kirrane, O'Connor, Dunne, & Moriarty, 2016; Southcott & Joseph, 2017). The MD/C also is responsible for managing all aspects of the choir unless they delegate some to members of the ensemble or supporters. This can include auditions (if required) and “finding performance venues, sponsors and marketing” (Page-Shipp et al., 2018, p. 4). The ability to communicate clearly about both musical and non-musical matters is pivotal. Also essential are a range of interpersonal qualities that foster positive engagement, such as flexibility, enthusiasm, humour, patience and possessing respect for diverse participants and their prior knowledge and experiences (Hallam et al., 2016). Effective communication promotes responsiveness in choir members (Durrant, 2003).

Choir directors are essentially facilitators who develop a repertoire of effective strategies to sustain interest and motivation. An effective MD/C provides more than musical and technical instruction, he or she encourages and motivates the ensemble by fostering a sense of self-efficacy and achievement (Poggi, 2011). Effective MD/Cs have strong interpersonal skills coupled with the ability to create a secure and welcoming environment (Durrant, 2003; Varvarigou, 2016). One strategy to avoid pressure is to create space for questions and discussion, rehearsal and consolidation, and social interaction (Duay & Bryan, 2008). Developing a stress-free ambience creates opportunities for participants to engage with the music, their group, and individual learning. It is the MD/C's responsibility to create an atmosphere wherein people feel positive about singing together. This can be engendered by making rehearsals engaging, challenging and interesting (Durrant, 2017). They additionally ensure that activities are enjoyable, purposeful but not overly long. Further, effective MD/Cs accommodate the diverse “personal and social experiences of participants” (Hallam et al., 2016, p. 30).

Establishing and maintaining a community-based choir requires attention to musical details (Robinson, 1993). Overall, it is the function of the MD/C “to convey musical and technical information to performers” (Price, 2011, p. 58). In community choirs, teaching happens in rehearsals. A well planned and delivered rehearsal offers many teachable moments which can occur during warm-ups, teaching of individual voice parts, modelling by the MD/C, listening for aural acuity, trouble shooting, and discussing interpretation, musical style and genre (Cooper, 2016; Durrant, 2003; Varvarigou, 2016). Effective MD/Cs address the vocal and aural skills of singers, mindful of accurate voicing, pitch, tone, blend, and overall musicality (Cooper, 2016; Durrant, 2003).

An experienced MD/C is well aware that not all choir members will be musically literate, so it is imperative to accommodate a range of skills. In preparing for rehearsals, MD/Cs should anticipate the need for phrase-by-phrase rote instruction for some choir members and provide music scores and/or melody sheets with lyrics for others. The teaching and learning of music can be enhanced by the use of technology such as “recording individual vocal parts and distributing [them] to choir members” (Cooper, 2016, p. 18). During the rehearsal itself, the MD/C must balance the needs of both readers and non-readers (Johnson et al., 2018). Ultimately, the “conductor designs the scaffolds, sequence, schema or strategies to teach the music” (Abrahams, 2017, p. 13).

The MD/C is responsible for repertoire selection and musical arrangements. These often reflect the musical preferences of the MD/Cs who prefer to choose music they are passionate about (Abrahams, 2017; Hedden & Allen, 2019). Choice of music is important because, “if singers feel the music is beautiful and worth singing well, they will strive to do their best” (Poggi, 2011, p. 345). In some ensembles, choir members may also make

suggestions for repertoire choices depending on the “cultural expectations in terms of musical genres” (Hallam et al., 2016, p. 30). Some choirs include songs in foreign languages in their repertoire so the MD/C must be able to instruct singers in correct pronunciation. If MD/Cs are unfamiliar with a particular language, it may be that a choir member or a community member is able to provide the authentic pronunciation.

The MD/Cs of community choirs must take into account diverse factors that the older members of the ensembles bring. They must adopt the role of leader, conductor, teacher, organizer, motivator, musician, performer, administrator, counsellor, and factotum. They must also be directive, flexible, didactic, respectful, and dynamic. The people in the choir in front of them are each the unique products of their lives and experiences, their musical encounters and their aspirations for the choir. As older people, they seek challenge, validation, enjoyment, socialization, and the sense that each is known by the MD/C for what they bring and what they offer. Conducting older people in community choirs is complicated.

In this paper, we focus on two music directors of community choirs and members of their ensembles who are part of our wider study into “Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria, Australia”. Specifically, two research questions drove this exploration: How do music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs understand working with older people? And: How do older choir members understand the role of their MD/C? To attempt to answer these questions, we interviewed the older members and MD/Cs of two community choirs.

We bring extensive personal experience and interest to this work. Both authors of this paper are very experienced choir conductors and choir members. We are both older musicians, singers, music educators, and researchers. This study informs our practice with future teachers and conductors, and our work with community music ensembles.

Methodology

In this article we explore one facet of our wider joint research project “Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria, Australia” which we began in 2008. Our broader study was a collection of ten phenomenological qualitative case studies in which we sought participants’ understandings of their lifeworlds, experiences, and understandings (Finlay, 2014; Smith, 2017). By adopting a phenomenological stance in their interpretations, researchers try to remain faithful to participants’ understandings of the phenomenon and its social context (Clarke, 2009; Vagle, 2018).

In this article, we focus on the relationship between the conductor and the older choir members from two research sites. The wider study included two dance ensembles, a craft group, and seven community choirs. Not all community choirs had a designated MD/C, operating more as non-hierarchical organisations. We selected the two studies that had rich, deep data from both the older members and the MD/C (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). Further, we revisited our two data sets to focus on the relationship between MD/Cs and older members and found that new themes emerged (Sargeant, 2012).

Both research sites were community choirs with older members living independently in suburban Melbourne. La Voce Della Luna (LVDL) is a Melbourne-based women’s choir of first, second and other generations of Italian-Australians based in Melbourne, Victoria, conducted by Kavisha Mazzella (Southcott & Joseph, 2015). South of the River (SotR) is a community gospel choir that performs African-American Gospel music and South African Freedom Songs. They are conducted by Anne Marie Sharrie (Joseph & Southcott, 2017). Both conductors agreed to be named.

In our initial studies, we gathered interview data in two ways. Firstly, we invited older choir members to participate in focus group interviews with our research assistant. She was an

older woman in her seventies who was a trained researcher. We selected her for her interviewing skills and her membership of the same age bracket as the interviewees. We reasoned that, if we sent a younger research assistant, our participants might censor their statements to what they might share with a grandchild. Similarly, we thought that if we interviewed them (we are about 20 years younger than the participants), we might be only given statements that they might tell their daughter. We decided that being a peer of the same age, our research assistant would be able to elicit more unfiltered, in-depth information.

All focus group interviews were undertaken in English and there were no mitigating cultural factors. The focus groups were purposefully conversational and the researcher “aimed to appear friendly and interested, apprehending the phenomenon by reflecting back understandings to check for shared meaning” (Heath, Greenfield, & Redwood, 2015, p. 48). The questions asked included: How does the music director/conductor engage with the choir? What things does he or she do that resonate with you? How are decisions made about repertoire and performances? How do you learn new things? Does the music director/conductor influence your decision to stay in the choir? Depending on the answers, we followed up and probed for further detail as necessary.

Secondly, we interviewed each MD/C. We decided to personally undertake these interviews because we are both experienced music educators and choir directors. Thus, we shared a base of musical and teacherly understandings with the MD/C which allowed us to ask both general and specific questions. For example, our general questions might include, how do you approach teaching older community choirs? Why did you take on this particular choir and how long have you been involved with them? Specific questions included, what criteria influence your choice of repertoire (aural abilities of the choir, voice textures and tessitura). What is your pedagogical approach to teaching new songs?

In Australia, all university research involving humans must be approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committees. This ethical oversight protects the rights and privacy of potential participants, who should experience no sense of coercion or power imbalance between researchers and participants. We work at two different Australian universities and we gained ethical approval for our research from our respective institutions. With ethical approval, we organized the focus groups and individual interviews at mutually convenient times and locations. All interviews were audio recorded with participant permission. One MD/C was interviewed by phone, the other in a mutually agreed convenient meeting time and place, such as a local cafe. We de-identified focus group members for publication but the MD/Cs were named because the choirs were also named. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed, and transcripts were returned to participants for confirmation and amendment.

We analysed our data using thematic analysis, focusing on the participants’ lived experiences (Aronson, 1995; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Smith & Osborn, 2014). We sought “an insider perspective on the lived experiences of individuals” (Fade, 2004, p. 648), to understand the participants’ subjective experiences whilst trying to explore the underlying meanings (Joseph, 2014; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Particularly for the MD/Cs, we invited them to explore their “thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories in their own words” (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin 2005, p. 18).

Once the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, we initially independently read and re-read the transcriptions, we individually undertook line-by-line coding the text, identifying ideas, feelings, and understandings by participants. We continued to note emergent themes in a margin. It was not until this point that we met to share and discuss our initial emergent themes. We then took additional individual time think about our themes and met again later, at which point we grouped the emergent themes into overarching themes. We

attempted to bridle our biases by challenging each other's interpretations as we organically built our themes from emergent to overarching (Vagle, 2018).

This process provided additional perspectives on the data. Our intention was "to try and ensure a rigorous analysis" (Tew, Bennett, & Dixon, 2016, p. 1647). In doing this we were able to limit the impact of any one analyst's assumptions as different analysts bring prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions to the process of sense-making (Mjøsund, et al., 2016). Independent analysis of the same transcripts has the potential to increase trustworthiness and reach thematic consensus (Rodham, Fox, & Doran, 2015). We believe that we attained this in our study.

Following, the data from the choir members are reported and illustrated by direct quotations (Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011). Before proceeding to our findings, we offer a description of the research contexts based on information contributed by the MD/Cs and members.

Research context: The organization of the Choirs

Both MD/Cs, Kavisha and Anne Marie, spoke about the organisation of their ensembles which involved a lot of liaising and administration. South of the River (SotR) members described the liaison process:

Anne Marie asks us every performance who is available...it's not automatic, we're not expected to be there for every [performance]...Anne Marie puts a list out, this is what we are doing, and who wants to do it. And then we'll put our name down and we'll go from there.

The MD/Cs described similar somewhat negotiable processes concerning management of the group, membership fees and performance schedule. Kavisha explained that, "we have committee meetings and there is an agenda and they'll bring up things that they want to discuss." Both choirs have a busy and varied performance schedule in Melbourne and across the state at community folk festivals, arts festivals, Christmas events, and so forth. La Voce Della Luna has sung at the National Folk Festival and the National Theatre Festival Conference. South of the River has sung at quite unusual locations including at pubs, in hospitals, on trams, and in prisons. The latter is in line with their strong social justice agenda. La Voce Della Luna also performed in Sydney at a large celebration for the anniversary of votes for women in Australia.

Members of both choirs pay a subscription fee which covers rent of the venue, public liability insurance, tea and coffee, and minor administrative costs. Both Anne Marie and Kavisha are paid to direct the ensembles. Kavisha discussed this with her choir members and insisted that she be paid,

because I said if you want to work with professional musicians you should always pay the professional musicians...I wanted them to have a respectful relationship with professional musicians who are often asked to do things for nothing all time because they think it's not like a real job. I say, "I'm like a plumber, I need to get paid to clean the pipes, to put the pipes in."

Her choir saw the logic, and all agreed to pay. Anne Marie initially accepted a very low fee seeing her work as "a bit of a labour of love until I sort of turned this with my other workplace [making it] a self-employed business...which isn't easy."

Findings

We present our findings under two overarching themes that evolved from our analysis of the interviews with the two MD/Cs and members of their respective choirs. The themes are understandings of working with older people in a choir and musical leadership in a community setting.

Understandings of working with older people in a choir

Both Kavisha and Anne Marie spoke in general terms about working with older people. Kavisha said, “They’re like my aunts and grandmothers” which tempered how she worked with them, meaning that she was more patient and conciliatory than she would be with a younger group of people. Anne Marie noted that, in comparison to younger people, the older choir members were less busy and more available for rehearsals during the daytime, more reliable in attendance, and had fewer family and work commitments. Anne Marie was initially concerned that older people might find it difficult to be led by someone younger. She found that they suspended judgement, despite her youthful appearance, and that they adopted a “give it a go and see what happens” approach which begins with “personality—they come along and if they like taking instructions...then I think there’s trust...[because] I’ve been doing this for a long time, I’m passionate about it, and I know what I’m talking about.” She realized that what the older choir members were looking for was someone who knew what she was doing as their leader and were not fazed by her age.

Kavisha teaches primarily by ear and has adapted her teaching style for her aging choir. Occasionally she writes out the music but generally hands out only the words. For her older singers, her pedagogy is intentionally slow and repetitive, phrase by phrase, section by section, repeating each line until the song is learnt. Kavisha explains that this slow, carefully progression, is because

they’re ageing, their memories get worse and worse as they get older. Their enthusiasm doesn’t go but their memories do, it’s really hard. I’ve been slogging on certain pieces for years, literally for years, and they don’t remember it the next time, so you have to sing everything from scratch again and it’s really tiring. And the thing is I don’t realise how much hard work I’m doing until I work with another choir who are younger, and the memory is there.

Members of LVDC described the process thusly: Kavisha “sings the song bit by bit and corrects us when we go wrong.” They do not seem to understand that she is going much slower for them than they would for others.

Anne Marie has a mixed age group choir and does not alter her approach as much as Kavisha. Anne Marie’s older choir members commented on the pace of her teaching, “she goes very quickly and you just wing it if you can’t keep up ... there’s not chance to go and get yourself a cup of coffee ‘cos you’ll miss something.” Older members of SotR described, “[Anne Marie] teaches each section bit by bit through the song.” Anne Marie gives out the music for those who want it but remains “aware that a good chunk of the choir can’t read music at all.” Non-readers can follow the lyrics or the contour of the notes on the staff. Anne Marie also encourages singers to bring recording devices. Basically, Anne Marie teaches all her choir members the same way, and the older members spoke about it being too fast and their being unable to keep up.

Kavisha also found ways to negotiate the direction and behavior of older LVDL members. She described an occasion when she hoped to introduce social justice issues to her older Italian-Australian singers because it was vitally important to her. Kavisha recalled,

About ten years ago when the refugee issue started becoming very politicized, I said “the choir’s been invited to sing at a benefit for refugees, who wants to do it?” and not one person put their hand up. I said, “that alright, I’m doing it so if you want to sing with me turn up at this time at this day” [at this place].

Despite their being initially non-committal, “they all turned up. And they all sang, they were singing their guts out. It was really powerful, and they were going ‘wow, that was amazing’.” Kavisha recognized that by singing in the choir, the members had opened their social horizon and become more empathetic to the needs of others. When she recently left her position as MD/C of the choir, she told us that the members said, “thank you for introducing us to this idea of social justice which we weren’t so aware of.” She talked about being really pleased that they had realized what they had accomplished. Kavisha also remembered, “the first time we sang a feminist song they were ‘ohhhhh’ [uncertain] and yet now it’s become their anthem. It’s been a journey for both of us because I wasn’t trained as a choir leader.” She summed up her experience with the group, “they have trained me to be a choir leader” for older people who can accommodate their abilities, behaviors, and understandings.

Musical Leadership in a Community Setting

Both Kavisha and Anne Marie are experienced and realistic about working with their respective choirs. Both recognise that potential members may have had past experiences that would colour their understandings of formal auditions. Kavisha explained that, “for a community choir I don’t believe in auditions because I believe that a lot of people had a bad experience at school where a music teacher flicked them off and then they felt wounded in that area and they always wanted to sing.” Anne Marie is realistic about accepting choir members, “I just want it to be musical, it doesn’t have to be perfect and spot on rhythmically because you’re just not going to get that because they’re amateur singers.” Although she acknowledges that a few of her singers are professional and talented “but at the end of the day, it’s a community choir, ... a people’s choir. I’ll be putting my head up against a brick wall if I tried to get a sound that is a more professional sound.”

Members of both choirs described their MD/Cs in appreciative terms which spoke of both personal qualities and musical traits. They described their MD/Cs’ personal qualities and touched on their general temperament, sense of humour, patience and tolerance of mistakes which made participants feel comfortable and supported. For example, a member of SotR said that Anne Marie is very inclusive and very giving. Another member of this choir described her as “straightforward, you know where you are so ‘what you see is what you get’.” Both MD/Cs were described as very organized and very popular. Choir members recognized the musical aptitudes of their respective MD/Cs as this interchange between four members of SotR in their focus group illustrates:

A: she’s got a great ear

B: a really good ear, her timing, her sense of time and her ear are both excellent, [her] ear is so good that she can tell if someone is slightly off and she’ll tell you—you’re slightly flat or you’re slightly sharp—she’s done it to me

A: but not publicly

B: It’s done lovingly

C: not threatening at all

D: She has very high standards without being performance orientated

A: she has clear goals and excellent standards but she's not ambitious or egotistical.

As is evident from their comments, being able to see their MD/Cs modelling expertise as musicians and performers was vital to the participants.

Anne Marie reflected on her stance as leader. She described how she ran the choir as “a compassionate dictatorship [laughs]” and recounted that,

maybe five years ago, there was almost a little uprising within the choir [laughs] with certain personalities who'd got together and decided that they felt like things needed to be more formalized, and decision-making needed to be spread amongst people within the choir.

She considered herself to be sensitive to their needs to voice their opinions “about stylistic choices and all the rest of it and ideas for gigs and performances and the way the choir should be run.” Anne Marie was open to suggestions and “thought a lot about it” coming up with the notion of “compassionate dictatorship.” She decided that choir members “were always welcome to come and talk to me, but the upshot was that I would make final decisions, and I didn't want it to be a committee-based choir.” Anne Marie surmised that, “I've sort of learnt how to deal with those different personalities and also not take a lot of things to heart, and it's always going to be problematic with a whole lot of different people putting in their two cents.”

In both choirs, the MD/Cs explained that much of the repertoire is new and selected by them. Kavisha “generally felt responsible for the repertoire.” She stated that, “it's easier to teach them something they don't know than something they do know” because they all remember their own versions which often do not match. Further, individual singers, “don't wait for the finish of the bar to sing the next line, they'll just come straight in ... because they're really keen so they get very excited.” Kavisha recounted that choir members may bring songs that use different languages and dialects. The members of LVDL sing “songs from the old country, from every different region of Italy in different dialects sometimes is hard because our dialect is not all the same because we come from all over Italy.”

Anne Marie initially chose only gospel songs because “they're relatively easy to teach, and I think people just it appeals to them because most of them have grown up with a Western tradition of music and harmony and popular music.” As the members of her choir have aged, she has added other styles. The responsible teacherly understandings of the MD/Cs extend to ceasing working with a choir. At the time of the interview, Kavisha had thought very carefully about moving on. She explained, “I wanted to leave ages ago to be honest.” She was losing her enthusiasm but as a conscientious and committed teacher, she did not want to leave the choir stranded. She explained to the LVDL members that, “I wouldn't leave unless I found them the perfect person that I think could fulfil the passion for Italian folk music [and] the passion for Italian people.” Kavisha worried that a more conventional choir leader would not be able to “handle the Italian energy, it's too wild for them.” She found an ideal person, who had been an original member of the choir and who was “passionate about Italian folk music and working with elderly Italians.” As a transition, the new MD/C attended for three months to see how Kavisha operated. The LVDL members were comfortable with the change Kavisha left.

Discussion

In this article, we explored how two music directors of community choirs and members of their respective ensembles in Melbourne, Victoria described the unique challenges of working with aging performers. At the outset we asked two research questions: How do music directors/conductors (MD/C) of community choirs understand working with older people? And, how do older choir members understand the role of their MD/C? In this research, we particularly sought the ways in which MD/Cs understood working with older people. We presented our data under two broad themes that addressed how our MD/Cs understood working with older people in a choir and how the older people understood their practices, and we addressed how community-based leadership was demonstrated and perceived in these ensembles.

In both choirs, the capabilities, skills and personal traits of the MD/C were seen as pivotal to the ongoing engagement by older members of the respective ensembles. Older choristers look for and respond positively to an MD/C who is welcoming with good communication and social skills but if the MD/C does not demonstrate musical and conducting competency that meets their expectations, ongoing commitment to the ensemble is unlikely. For older choir members, it was also important that their MD/C possessed strong organisational skills (Durrant, 2003, 2017). As stated earlier, Anne Marie (MD/C of SoTR) described her approach as being a “compassionate dictatorship” that met the needs of her ensemble. Kavisha (MD/C of LVDL) spoke of ways of negotiating behaviour and direction which was effectively imposing her sense of purpose and collegiality onto her group. Both choirs, consisting of primarily older individuals, responded well to this. As evident in our findings, choir members also spoke about their sense of musical and social satisfaction and fulfilment engendered from ongoing participation (Apfelstadt, 1997; Durrant, 2003; Robinson, 1993). Older choristers responded well to the evident drive and passion for the ensemble and the repertoire demonstrated by the MD/C.

Both MD/Cs were realistic and pragmatic about teaching and learning music in the ensemble. They are patient with non-music readers and find alternate ways to introduce and rehearse materials (Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2018). Most commonly, MD/Cs use modelling and a rote learning approach to introducing new materials, supported by take home CDs for inter-rehearsal practice and reinforcement of new material. In addition, sheet music is often available for those wish it. Diverse musical skills and experiences held by the heterogeneous older choristers are catered for by the MD/Cs so that no choir member feels bewildered or patronised (Creech & Hallam, 2015). Both MD/Cs are open to choir member suggestions about repertoire and politically manage unrealistic or inappropriate expectations, rather, depending on the ethos of the choir, MD/Cs choose music that they know to be a good fit and that they are passionate about. This amalgam of MD/C choice and chorister suggestion creates a rich and balanced program of music that all are keen to perform. Further, the musically skilled MD/Cs modify and arrange music to suit the older voices and the abilities of the ensemble.

Both MD/Cs are interested in social justice which they enact via their voluntary commitment to working with community ensembles. Admittedly they are financially recompensed, but this is more of an honorarium than a commensurate payment for time and labour. This sense of commitment to community emerges in the concert programs and venues of the choirs. One choir (SoTR) sing in prisons, the other (LVDL) have performed at concerts for refugees. These engagements have an expansive and educative function, opening new horizons for their older choristers (Joseph & Southcott, 2017; Southcott & Joseph, 2015). Another way we noted commitment to the community ensemble was how MD/Cs addressed the longevity of the choir after their leadership had ended. Kavisha (LVDL) put into the ensemble a possible new leader so she could learn the ethos and ways of the group, before

Kavisha announced her departure. This careful succession planning involved mentoring the new MD/C and preparing the older choir members for change (Southcott & Joseph, 2015).

Our findings overall suggest that both MD/Cs engage in a thoughtful, reflective, and insightful practice that involves patience, perseverance, and a willingness to adapt music teaching and learning to the capabilities and interests of their older singers. We believe these two MD/Cs modelled good musical leadership of their ensembles which would be appreciated by choir members of any age. The difference that we found was that MD/Cs spoke about modifying materials, and teaching strategies when they worked with older people. The MD/Cs also described imbuing their practice with enthusiasm, skill and passion for musical engagement which was motivating for their choristers and likely to motivate choristers of any age.

Although the expert MD/Cs who participated in this study describe modelling good practice, we acknowledge that we only spoke to two enthusiastic and committed MD/Cs and long-standing members of the choir. We had no opportunity to find anyone who had left and so our data may seem positive, but this was what we were offered. No participant spoke ill of the MD/C or the other members of the choir. We recognise that this might be considered a limitation, but in a focused case study design, small numbers of participants provide deep data that reflects their lived experiences.

We identify several implications from our data. The first concerns the training of MD/Cs. Both our MD/Cs had little or no formal training about facilitating and leading community choirs, or in working with aging vocalists in particular. Both have learnt “on the job” and developed well-articulated principles and practices that seem to work well. Neither mentioned having opportunities to shadow another community ensemble conductor, other than their own experiences of being in choirs. To address the need for such mentoring, Kavisha put in place careful succession planning but this was her choice. Although it may be different in other countries, in Australia there are formal (university programs) and non-formal (professional organisations) avenues for learning how to conduct which may be framed in ensemble management. Leading community choirs is different, and we are unaware of programs that are specifically targeted to this practice. If such programs were developed, we would argue that drawing on the experience and abilities of MD/Cs like those in this paper, would be an advantageous inclusion. This could be undertaken by classes and workshops, but we argue that shadowing skilled and experienced MD/Cs who can mentor others would be an appropriate, community-based way that would benefit both MD/Cs and choir members.

We also question how recognition and accreditation might be awarded in a way that is fair and equitable, and also understood across the community. We do not advance an answer and note that this is a thorny and long-standing issue that remains unresolved in Australia and in some parts of the globe. Currently good practice is recognised at the local level by appreciation and word of mouth, and sometimes by community awards but the latter is not common practice. We are concerned that good work may go unnoticed and uncaptured, and good choirs may not survive if their MD/C moves on. One strategy might involve the role of the increasingly prevalent social media that has the potential to give choirs and MD/Cs coverage and advertising that supports their ongoing efforts. Social media platforms may also provide forums for sharing, collaborations, fund raising, and advocacy. Ultimately, community choirs and the MD/Cs that lead them contribute to the wider Australian community at many levels. These begin at the micro level in which participants learn, teach and share, benefitting from their musical and social engagement. At the macro level, they engage with the wider community, contributing to social outreach and enriching our musical world. We would all be poorer without community-based choirs.

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