

Communication for Conductors: insights from qualitative research

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study focusing on the factors affecting choral singers' confidence levels in rehearsal and performance. A series of individual interviews and focus groups provided over 40 hours of verbal data. The principal themes include the impact of verbal and non-verbal communication upon choral competence and confidence. The effects of verbal feedback are influenced by the amount, frequency, content, style and source of the feedback. The authority invested in the conductor's perceived role as a musical expert adds particular weight to their criticism and praise. Similarly, non-verbal communication from conductors has a strong influence on performance quality and confidence amongst singers. These findings suggest several confidence-building approaches to providing verbal and non-verbal feedback, which will be particularly relevant to conductors working with amateur choral ensembles.

Keywords: Confidence, choral singers, conducting, verbal feedback, non-verbal communication

Introduction

In this article I report some of the findings of a qualitative study, in which I explored the factors affecting confidence levels amongst adult amateur singers, who have been somewhat neglected in research. Earlier psychological studies involving musicians tended to focus on performance anxiety in music students (Hamann and Sobaje, 1983; Kenny et al., 2013), and professional singers and soloists (Spahn et al., 2010; Wilson, 2002). Where choral singers have been studied, the participants have usually been professional and semi-professional choral singers (Kenny et al., 2004; Ryan and Andrews, 2009). More recent research has examined the experiences of amateur singers in various contexts, but studies have usually focused on the widely reported wellbeing benefits of participating in group singing activities (Clift and Hancox, 2010; Kreutz et. al, 2004), rather than upon countering music performance anxiety or developing confidence building strategies.

Throughout my professional career as a singer, voice teacher and choral director, I have always been interested in how choral performers feel during rehearsal and performance, and in finding ways to optimize their experience of singing together. In an earlier research project (Bonshor, 2002) I investigated the phenomenon of music performance anxiety (MPA) amongst amateur singers, as anxiety is obviously one of the factors which can detract from our performance experience. Although many of the singers reported some level of anxiety, I found that very severe MPA was not common in this category of

performers. However, I did find that a significant proportion of the singers involved in my research had experienced confidence issues which affected their participation in group singing activities and the subjective enjoyment of their own performances. I therefore carried out further research (Bonshor, 2014; Bonshor, 2017), which examined some of the positive and negative effects on confidence, with the intention of extrapolating strategies for confidence building amongst amateur choral singers. My main research questions were: What are the main influences on confidence levels amongst adult amateur choral singers? And, from this information, what practical strategies could be extrapolated for increasing singers' confidence in their own performance?

For the purposes of this research project, my definition of an 'amateur choral singer' included any adult who sings in any kind of group singing activity, as a leisure pursuit. Confidence may have a number of definitions, both in popular culture and in the research literature. The usual definition of confidence used in psychological research is derived from Bandura's framework of self-efficacy, and the terms 'confidence' and 'self-efficacy' are often used interchangeably. I used the following definition of self-efficacy to inform my analysis and interpretation of the research interviews:

The belief in one's competence to tackle difficult or novel tasks and to cope with adversity in specific demanding situations. (Luszczynska, et al., 2005: 81)

Method

Each person's voice is a unique and essential part of their being and identity. Vocal performance is inevitably affected by complex interactions between a plethora of fundamental physiological and psychological processes within the 'human bodymind' (Thurman and Welch, 2000). For this project I therefore chose a qualitative methodology, which focuses on exploring human experiences, feelings, perceptions, beliefs and emotions from the point of view of the participants involved. I felt that this approach would facilitate an in-depth exploration of the personal relationships that we each have with our own voice and sense of self-confidence, and take into account some of the nuances of individual experience.

Learning about groups of people and their members by asking them directly about their own experience is one of the main qualitative methods of exploring psychological processes and their practical outcomes. In this study, a series of individual interviews and focus groups (involving a total of 34 participants) provided over 40 hours of verbal data, which were examined using a process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This method involved using a semi-structured interview design, with open questions to provide opportunities for singers to discuss the main influences on their confidence levels; creating verbatim transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups; carrying out a line-by-line analysis of the content; completing a detailed thematic analysis; and relating the themes to relevant psychological frameworks.

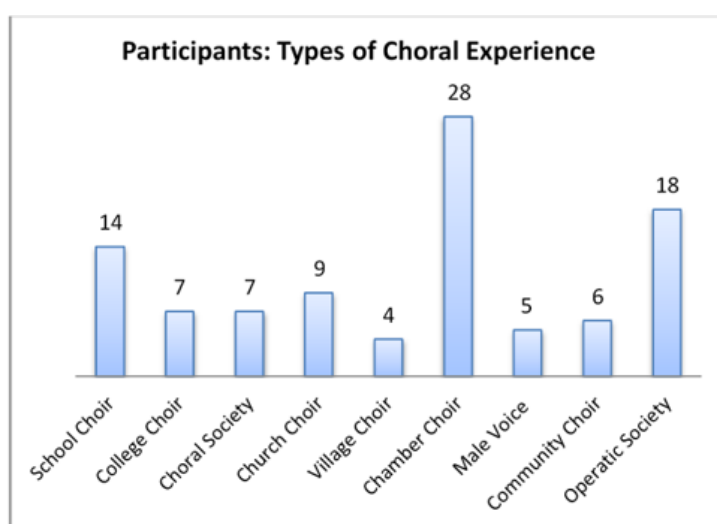
In a qualitative research project, instead of aiming to prove or disprove deductive hypotheses which are formed before the research begins, we identify themes, patterns, categories and theories as they emerge from the data collected (Janesick, 2000). Through this inductive process we draw out meaning, as conceptualized and expressed by the research participants; increase our understanding of the participants' experiences and their responses to these experiences; and develop empirical knowledge which may contradict or support previous modes of thinking (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The evaluation of qualitative research tends to be less focused on the generalisability of results than on 'contextual findings' (Maykut & Moorhouse, 1996: 21), and takes into account aspects such as trustworthiness, credibility, emotionality, and multi-voiced texts (Madriz, 2000).

Participants

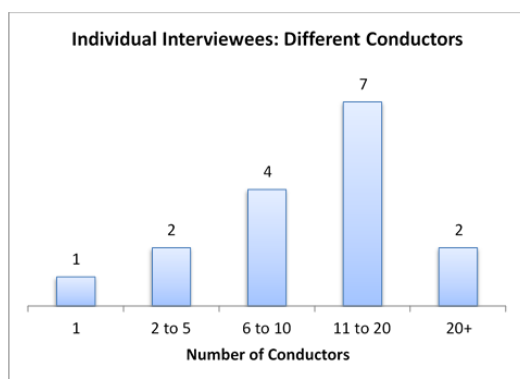
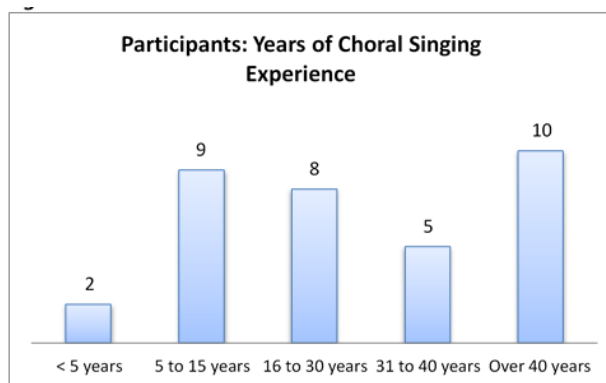
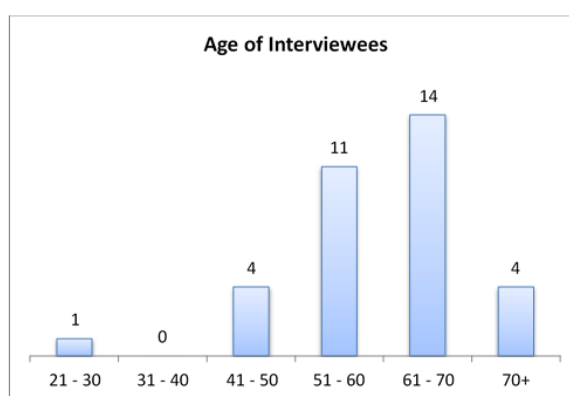
The singers who participated in the interviews and focus groups were recruited from a wide spread of locations, including Wales, Cornwall, Devon, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Leicestershire, Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Surrey and Hampshire. To preserve the anonymity of the research participants, each interviewee has been allocated a random pseudonym, and all identifying details have been removed from the transcripts.

All the research participants (n=34) had experience of singing in several different types of ensembles, including church choirs, choral societies, chamber choirs, operatic societies and musical theatre companies (Figure I). The majority had experience of singing under the direction of more than one conductor, with over half of the individual interviewees having sung with more than ten different conductors (Figure II overleaf).

Figure I



Between them, the singers interviewed in this study had over eight hundred years of choral singing experience. The majority had been singing with choirs for more than 5 years, and twenty-three of them had been involved in choral singing for over 15 years (Figure III). This level of experience is reflected in the age range of the participants (Figure IV).

Figure II**Figure III****Figure IV**

Findings and discussion

One of the most common themes, which emerged from the analysis of the recorded interviews and focus groups, was communication (both verbal and non-verbal) between the conductor and the singers. All three focus groups and 10 individual interviewees talked at length about the impact of the conductor's body language. Most of the singers spontaneously discussed the reciprocal emotional effects of body language and facial expression, usually focusing on the confidence derived from positive non-verbal communication:

If [conductors look] confident, it's bound to make you feel confident. It inspires you doesn't it?
(Dawn)

Conversely, some singers reported that a conductor's negative body language can induce negative feelings in the singers, which adversely affects their performance and their confidence levels:

This kind of like [frowns threateningly] ...You feel like you're with a schoolteacher. And they're pointing at their eyes and looking at you and glaring at you. And again, that throws you and completely undermines you. And it makes you look stupid! [...] (Phoebe)

We all have a natural tendency to mimic the non-verbal behaviour of others, which leads us to share some elements of their emotional state (Ekman et al., 1983, 1991 and 1990, cited in Ekman, 1992), and plays an important role in social bonding and building rapport

(Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). This reciprocal ability to ‘infect’ others with an emotion, or to ‘catch’ the emotions of others, has a long history of being related to the concept of ‘emotional contagion’ (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992; Falkenberg et al., 2008), which is triggered by the ‘mirror neuron’ system’:

Every time we are looking at someone performing an action, the same motor circuits that are recruited when we ourselves perform that action are concurrently activated. (Gallese and Goldman, 1998: 495)

When we sing with other people, our observations of their physical state and emotional expression prompt us to mimic them physically; to synchronize our breathing and bodily movements; to perceive and empathize with their feelings. Reflecting the body language and facial expressions of our fellow performers, can provide proprioceptive and facial feedback on our own emotional state, and affect how we feel. Singers therefore derive confidence from conductors who demonstrate that they are sharing aspects of their performance, and modelling what they require from the choir. This empathic body language helps the singers to feel understood and supported, and to mimic the conductor’s behaviour in a way that enhances their performance and experience of singing together. One of my research participants described this as follows:

I’ve worked with MDs who’ve done everything for you, including singing if necessary. They breathe for you, they look at you, and they’re with you all the way [...] it really boosts the confidence. (Tim)

By modelling positive body language and facial expressions, conductors can encourage singers to adopt this in their own non-verbal communication, which can help them to look, sound and feel more confident. This supports Garnett’s (2009) neatly expressed belief that ‘what they [the singers] see is what you [the conductor] get’ (p. 170), as well as her summary of other writers’ advice that the choirs’ vocal sound reflects the posture, conducting style and gesture that the singers see in the choral director:

If the sound coming back to you is not what you want, you must be willing to accept that the sound is a mirror image of your conducting. (Jordan, 1996: 9)

Most previous literature in this field has concentrated on gesture and its effect on performance quality rather than on the effects of the conductor’s body language on choral confidence. Garnett (2009) cites Kaplan’s (1985) belief that tense conducting gestures convey physical and vocal tension to the singers, and Hylton’s (1995) assertion that the conductor’s general posture has a strong impact on the postural behaviour of the choir.

The singers’ instinctive tendency to copy the conductor’s body language and facial expressions means that conductors should try to embody the ‘sort of sound [they] would like to make if only [they] could sing all the parts at once’ (Reynolds, 1972: 6). If conductors model a tense posture, this is mirrored in bodily and vocal tension within the choir (Decker and Kirk, 1988). Conversely, modelling an open posture can help singers to keep their ribs expanded, with beneficial effects on breath control and voice production (Roe, 1983). The interviewees in my research project independently proposed that, when the conductor models positive body language, this can lead to improvements in the singers’ vocal performance, which can add to the singer’s self-perceived competence and result in increased self-confidence:

I need them to look at me and smile (laughs), just to give me confidence [...] They've got to have the sort of personality that, when I get on that stage, they look relaxed, and confident. (Naomi)

The conductor's verbal communication also has a powerful effect on confidence in choral singers. In all three of the focus groups and all sixteen of the individual interviews, the research participants spontaneously discussed the role of verbal feedback in confidence building. Positive feedback was highly valued:

The praise, and [...] somebody actually saying 'You can do it - don't be frightened of it. You actually can do it and you're doing it quite well', that is a good...that gives you so much confidence. (Joyce)

However, many interviewees felt that, very often, insufficient verbal feedback is provided:

The feedback. The confidence comes from somebody actually saying 'Actually, that was good!' And usually people don't do that [...] You don't hear either way. (Frank)

It was strongly suggested that a higher proportion of clearly expressed, specific praise is helpful in building confidence:

Well, I think one word of encouragement, and two words of explanation that we can understand, and six criticisms is a formula! I think just one bit of praise will cover quite a lot of other stuff, but don't just keep [impersonates conductor growling and cracking the whip]. And, not be patronising, but be clear with your explanation [...] Yeah. Just be a bit more human. But praise of any sort is what everybody thrives on, you know - even the dog! (Angela)

On the other hand, singers can become suspicious about an overdose of non-specific, over-effusive praise:

If you're working with somebody that continually says 'That's good. That's good. That's good', you find yourself thinking, 'Is it?' (Tim)

If the praise is not balanced by a sense of realism, and constructive criticism, the singers find it difficult to trust the praise giver, and never know whether or not the feedback is entirely reliable:

Jackie: [Community choir conductor] could be very fulsome in her praise after a concert.

Belinda: Oh, it was always the best concert ever, so...you never knew...

Jackie: ...if there was any truth in it. [...] There has to be some criticism along with the praise. (Focus group extract)

Criticism was welcomed by most singers, as long as it is constructive:

I'm not offended by negatives. If they say 'That's not right, we'll have to do it again', that doesn't bother me [...] At least if it's constructive criticism, then that's fine. (George)

Providing constructive criticism can help to establish the credibility of the feedback provider, whereas a lack of critical feedback can cause singers to doubt the honesty and judgement of their conductor:

You don't get the constructive criticism. [...] [Fellow singer] and I are always chatting, and [he'll] say 'That was crap!' And I'll say 'It was crap!' And [male voice choir conductor] will say 'That's all right. That's nice'. (Frank)

The source of verbal feedback played a significant role in its influence on singers, who commonly stated that they were most affected by feedback providers who were perceived trustworthy, credible, musically knowledgeable, and objective. They also reported that feedback was most effective if it originated from a conductor who had a reputation for expertise, established a strong rapport with the singers, and demonstrated mutual respect:

My mum's always said I could sing, but she's my mum! So you take that with a little pinch of salt. But feedback from the Musical Director saying 'We need to get you singing some solos and stuff' is worth its weight in gold to me. 'Cause I respect her. (Naomi)

Sadly, negative effects of destructive criticism were also reported by all interviewees and focus groups, sometimes in detail that can make uncomfortable reading:

[Some conductors] absolutely rant. And it gets really quite personal. And it's sort of a case of, you know, 'I may as well pack my bags and go home. I don't come and do this for this, that and the other' – total ranting. And obviously that undermines your confidence. And you stand there and think 'What am I doing here? Why am I putting myself through this?' (Phoebe)

Negative feedback, delivered in a destructive manner, has profound effects upon performance quality and confidence, to the extent that some singers become emotionally affected and vocally inhibited:

It hurt, you know. If you didn't get it right, it hurt [...] If you didn't get it right, [conductor] would belittle you [...] People used to think 'Oh shit', and they used to be afraid then, to actually sing out, because they were afraid to get it wrong. (George)

One of the most common complaints about conductor feedback concerned singling out individual singers or small sections of the choir for criticism:

I think, sometimes conductors can really undermine the confidence, not just of individuals, but of certain groups - so the soprano group or, you know, whoever is the weakest link. They can really undermine their confidence, and that just makes the group underperform even more. (Phoebe)

In extreme cases, personal and public criticism of singers can cause them to lose confidence to the extent that they leave the choir, or give up singing altogether:

A musical director dressed me down in front of [everyone] and [...] I was never going to sing again. It really knocked my confidence and I thought, 'If that's what they think of me I don't want to come anymore'. (Olive)

A bass, who had been singing in choirs for over 60 years, made an eloquent case for a respectful, egalitarian, collaborative and facilitative approach to providing verbal feedback:

It needs to be the positive, musical approach. And not the blamey approach. It's the approach that says 'I'm alright and you're alright'. Not 'I'm alright but you lot are not. I've got to work on you!' (Harry)

To summarise, adult amateur choral singers reported that their confidence was adversely affected by non-specific, generalised or over-effusive praise; person-focused (rather than performance-focused) feedback; and a lack of constructive criticism. Destructive criticism was unanimously felt to have adverse effects on performance and confidence, and included 'personal' comments, a 'patronising' or 'belittling' approach, 'victimisation'

of individuals or small sections of the choir, ‘petulance’, ‘hissy fits’ and ‘paddies’, and lack of ‘mutual respect’. Confidence was enhanced by generous amounts of detailed, specific and clearly expressed positive verbal feedback; detailed and specific constructive criticism; performance-centred rather than person-centred feedback; positive feedback that is realistic and believable; feedback that is provided by a trustworthy and credible source, in an atmosphere of mutual respect: and a healthy balance of criticism and praise:

I do like it when [conductors] say something positive. It may be rubbish, but there must be something positive about it. And I think you need to have...given that it's a pleasure, it's a hobby, it's in your free time [...]. And, yes, criticise. Yes, be constructive with your criticism. That's absolutely fine. But please find something nice to say. We want to come out of it on a high. (Angela)

In previous studies of the effects of conductor feedback in musical settings, researchers have generally found that most participants preferred less copious amounts of feedback than the adult amateur singers who participated in this project. However, other research has tended to feature advanced-level choral singers in school and university choirs, who often value the achievement of their own performance goals over ‘teacher talk’ (Nápoles 2006; Nápoles and Vázquez-Ramos 2013; Spradling 1985; Yarbrough and Price 1981; Witt 1986). However, for the adult amateur participants in the current study, it seems that the intrinsic, immediate feedback derived from the performance itself is not sufficient to build their confidence, and that they are more reliant upon external sources of praise and constructive criticism, particularly from respected musical leaders.

The contrast between the feedback preferences of choral singers in educational contexts and singers in adult amateur choirs may partly be due to latter's involvement in singing purely as a leisure pursuit, as higher levels of positive feedback are particularly effective in voluntary activities (Van-Dijk and Kluger, 2000, 2001, cited in Hattie and Timperley, 2007). It may also be explained by age-related differences in preferred communication styles; the increased emphasis on the enjoyment and social aspects of participating in adult amateur choirs; and the fact that earlier studies have usually examined aspects of conductor feedback in relation to maximizing choral attainment and holding the attention of the ensemble in educational settings rather than choral confidence building during a leisure activity.

Conclusions

From my interviews with amateur singers, the principal emergent themes include the impact of their conductors' verbal and non-verbal communication upon choral competence and confidence. The interviewees report that the effects of verbal feedback are influenced by the amount, frequency, content, style and source of the feedback. The authority invested in the conductor's perceived role as a musical expert adds particular weight to their criticism and praise. Similarly, non-verbal communication from conductors has a strong influence on performance quality and confidence amongst amateur choral singers.

For choral conductors, these findings suggest a number of confidence-building approaches to providing verbal and non-verbal feedback. Modelling positive body language, adopting an open posture, using relaxed gestures and encouraging positive

facial expressions are obvious ways of encouraging singers to improve their performance and build their confidence. Providing clear, specific, performance focused verbal feedback, which includes a combination of realistic, honest praise and constructive criticism, can help to establish the conductor's credibility, and create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in which the singers can thrive.

Returning to my opening thoughts on using qualitative methods for research that examines subjective responses to human experiences, it is worth noting the following points. Qualitative research can help us to see the topic from the 'lived experience' (Smith et al., 2009) of the participants, in a way that provides fresh perspectives from multiple voices. The analytical process helps us to order thoughts, perceptions and emotional content in a meaningful way that reflects the reality of life for the research participants. The data obtained from qualitative research can provide researchers, participants and practitioners with a shared language to discuss and deal with complex phenomena (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The research findings may contradict or reinforce previous ideas about the topic, by providing evidence from those who are experts on their own experience. This evidence may help us to relate real life situations to existing psychological frameworks, create new psychological models that reflect experiences in the real world, and to extrapolate practical applications of the knowledge acquired.

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