# *The Culture Code*: implications for choral leadership

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**Abstract**

*Daniel Coyle's* The Culture Code *(2018) documents behaviours that characterise highly successful organisations. Using case studies from business, the military, sports teams and schools, he identifies a cluster of common themes focusing on group members' sense of belonging.*

*This paper cross-references Coyle's themes with the literature on choral conducting and material from observations of choirs in rehearsal, with particular reference to rehearsal techniques, leadership styles, and nonverbal communication. The comparison suggests that whilst choral singing as an activity inherently generates some of these belonging cues, some of its typical structures and practices also inhibit them. Choral practitioners also tend to over-rely on building a sense of purpose, at the expense of Coyle's two other themes, safety and vulnerability. The analysis produces some clear practical ramifications for choral leaders, as well as insights into changing choral leadership styles.*

## Introduction

> *Are we connected? Do we share a future? Are we safe?* (Coyle 2018, 44, emphasis in original)

These are the three fundamental questions that, according to Daniel Coyle, human beings live with as a social species. In his book *The Culture Code* (2018) he documents behaviours that characterise successful groups in a variety of contexts – business, the military, education – and identifies a cluster of themes focusing on those behaviours that generate a sense of belonging

A sense of belonging is something that choral culture likes to think it offers its participants as a primary benefit. Almost more than the musical satisfactions they provide, choirs tout to potential members the opportunity to make friends and become part of a community. The Choir With No Name, for instance, states that, 'We were founded on the premise that singing makes you feel good; it distracts you from all the nonsense in life and helps you to build confidence, skills and genuine, long lasting friendships' (The Choir With No Name 2019). The City of Birmingham Choir, meanwhile, asks potential members, 'Would you like to sing with friendly people who love singing, too?' (City of Birmingham Choir nd) Accounts of choral singing as a leisure activity in the mainstream press routinely develop the theme of togetherness as a primary benefit, second only to its benefits for mental health and stress relief (Maxted 2014; McDonald 2019; Allan 2020).

One would therefore expect to find a strong correlation between the characteristic behaviours in a choral rehearsal and those Coyle has documented in groups with healthy cultures of interpersonal interconnection. This paper tests this assumption by comparing Coyle's analysis with what actually happens in choral rehearsals, with particular reference to rehearsal techniques, leadership styles, and nonverbal communication. It will argue that, while some of a typical choir's organisational behaviours are well designed to promote a sense of belonging, others can actively inhibit the growth of intra-group connections.

**Rationale and Sources**

Before addressing the detail of Coyle's arguments, we need to consider the validity of using his work as the foundation for scholarly enquiry. *The Culture Code* is unequivocally aimed at a popular rather than academic audience, and, not having gone through the process of peer review prior to publication, thus requires an extra layer of critical scrutiny for the current purpose. The format and style of the book is journalistic, placing people-centred narratives at the heart of the argument. It sits comfortably in the self-help/self-improvement genre of non-fiction best-seller, with a clear aim to motivate its readers to change their lives by changing their behaviours.

Looking beyond the style of presentation, though, we find that the journalist's integrity in citing sources is reassuring to the scholar's evidence requirements. Whilst he is more likely to quote an expert's words from an interview than cite their publications, he is careful to credit the sources of his key concepts, and the wider bibliographical web in which these ideas are embedded is signalled in the endnotes. The methodology is likewise recognisable to those who have documented and theorised the lived experience of groups from an ethnographic perspective, consisting of observation (mostly non-participant, but with some participant examples added in the Epilogue) and interviews providing material from which to theorise inductively. In general the earlier chapters are more thorough, triangulating more carefully between different case studies to make their inferences; the later chapters are more likely to make suggestions for action based upon single examples. The approach is overall rather more anecdotal and informal than one would expect in a scholarly account of this subject, but it is nonetheless sufficiently transparent in its methods and logical in its reasoning to be treated as presenting a reliable working hypothesis.

The argument will proceed by using key elements of Coyle's thesis as a lens through which to examine the principles and behaviours of choral culture, as represented through three types of evidence. The first is Anglophone practitioner literature: books by choral conductors for choral conductors, published in English from the early 20th century on. This material is often accused of being anecdotal in approach – it is dismissed as the 'this works for me' school of thought by those researching choral music in the academy - but it nonetheless offers valuable ethnographic insights into the norms and behaviours in this musical culture (Daugherty 2004, 1; see also Price 1997). In particular, it provides insight into what choral conductors believe they are doing, and the ethics behind their praxis.

Of course, what practitioners say they do (and what textbooks say they should do) does not always line up exactly with what they actually do. Hence, the other two forms of evidence are both derived from observations of choral practice, differing only in their selection process and collection protocol. Ethnographic 'thick descriptions' from around 40 formal rehearsal observations undertaken between 2003 and 2007 provided much of the evidence base for a previous project; details of rationale and method are discussed there (Garnett 2009, 34-41). The ethnographic material is augmented by what I have characterised as 'participant observation data': material derived from reflective journaling on my various choral roles – singer, conductor, conducting teacher, and choral clinician/performance coach – since 2009. The latter represents a less varied and more arbitrary pool of choral cultures, as selection is driven by those groups that I have had the opportunity to work with, rather than to represent any kind of representative sampling; the overall volume of material is significantly greater however. The recording process also differs in that it is written up entirely by memory, rather than based on contemporaneous notes, and the purpose of the write-up is reflection on praxis rather than pre-defined research questions. That reflection, however, is framed by a long-standing research commitment to music's

social meanings, and thus a decade of regularly-documented choral encounters offers a rich collection of supplementary data against which to test Coyle's ideas.[1]

Correlating these observations with Coyle's characteristics of successful groups of course raises the question of how one evaluates the relative health of the choral cultures documented. The obvious criterion of musical accomplishment is not sufficient for the present purposes, as it does not control for the skill level the choirs draw upon. An auditioned choir of semi-professional singers readily achieves a higher standard than an non-auditioned community choir led by an amateur conductor, but the social bonds within the group may nonetheless be rather more fragile. Rather, the following three factors emerge from the observational data as significant indicators of a successful choir:

1. Level of enthusiasm in the singing. This is inferred both from bodily and facial demeanour, and from the sound quality, in particular the volume of sound produced in proportion to the choir size and conductor gesture. There is some correlation here with musical quality, inasmuch as the choirs who sing with gusto tend to enjoy a degree of bodily engagement and relative freedom from vocal tension, but this correlation only obtains at quite a basic level.
2. Reports of rising or falling numbers. Information about this comes from conversations with choir members, and observations of the welcoming and induction of new members. The size of a choir relative to its rehearsal venue can also be telling: whether there are lots of empty chairs in the hall, or whether the choir would ideally be rehearsing in a larger space.
3. Responsiveness to conductor gesture. This, again, is clearly to an extent a function of skill in both singers and conductors, but even within a certain skill level there are qualitative differences in the degree to which conductor and choir appear to be 'in touch' with each other within the flow of the music. This is inferred from the degree to which visible nuances in conductor gesture are audible in the choral sound.[2]

Most choirs observed were, according to these measures, doing reasonably well; some were obviously thriving, some clearly struggling, but most were in the middle of the bell curve.

## Belonging Cues I: Primary Principles

Coyle argues that a sense of belonging is fundamental to the success of human groups as a feature of our evolutionary heritage as a social species. As such, the idea as developed by Coyle encompasses elements that Maslow (1954) would characterise as safety needs and esteem needs, since, he argues, in primitive cultures social isolation or loss of status could be literally life-threatening. Indeed, the ample data to indicate that social isolation still has significant negative health impacts in the developed world is what underpins the move towards social prescribing.[3]

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[1] I have not differentiated between the origins of these two pools of data in the presentation of my argument, both because the distinction is not evidentially salient, and also to avoid compromising the anonymity of the people involved. Consent was obtained for the collection of the ethnographic data before the rehearsal visits in which it was gathered, and where I have cited specific examples from my participant observation data, I have sought permission *post hoc* to include them in this paper.

[2] Garnett (2009) discusses the processes that facilitate the conductor-choir bond; see particularly Part IV.

[3] Robert Putnam discusses social connectedness using the concept of 'social capital', and reports studies that show that increasing one's social capital improves life expectancy almost as much as giving up smoking (2000: 328). Interestingly, while the evidence for the deleterious effects of social isolation appears to be robust, the

At a global level, the practitioner literature appears to offer plenty of support for the principle of creating a sense of belonging. Davison, for instance, argues that a conductor's demonstration is not just for instruction, but helps to develop empathy between director and choir, and that breathing with the chorus acts as 'a symbol of his unity with them and of his vigilance on their behalf' (1954, 8). Brewer, meanwhile, exhorts us to 'Remember that a choir does not achieve real ensemble until every member feels valued' (2002, 12).

These examples are typical, however, in their focus on the bond between conductor and choir as the central relationship. There is much less attention given to the relationships formed between the singers themselves, although recent research suggests that intra-choir relationships can have a significant impact on both singers' confidence (Bonshor 2019) and their intonation (Seaton *et al* 2019). Lewis Gordon integrates both sets of relationships in a diagram intended to describe the intimacy of interaction within the ensemble during the act of music-making (Fig i) (1989, 26).

**Figure 1**
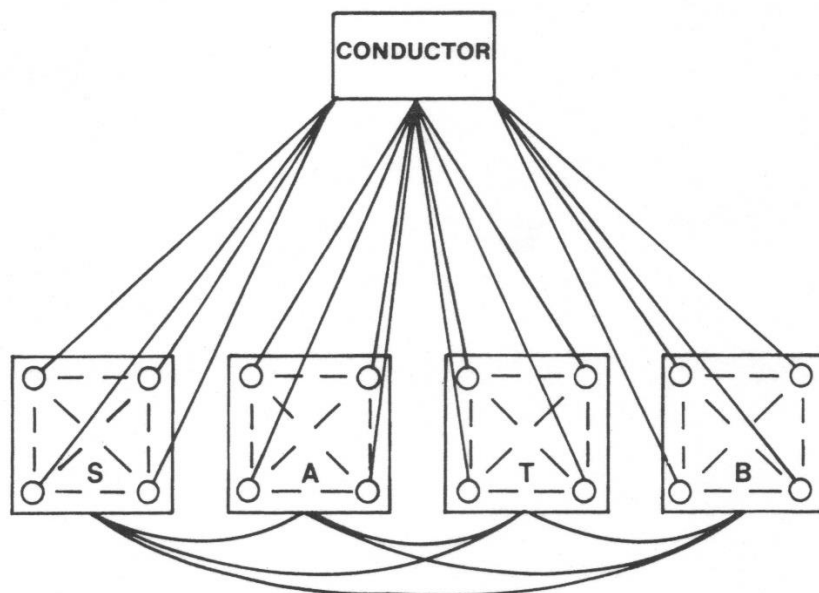


There is a tension in much of the practitioner literature between the ideal of fellow-feeling within the group and a desire for top-down control from the conductor. For instance, John Bertalot's focus slips from the group to the power of the conductor, to the responsibility this places on the latter, in the space of a few short sentences:

> At the beginning of a practice you have before you a collection of individuals. It's your job, within the first ten seconds of the practice, to weld them together into a choir – and a choir is a body of singers which feels a corporate sense of identity. That implies a strong sense of self-discipline – which means listening to every word that their director says. So make sure that everything you say is worth listening to. (2002, 28)

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evidence for the effectiveness of social prescribing, as currently practised, is much less so (see Husk *et al*. 2019 and Bickerdicke *et al* 2017).

William Ehmann likewise shifts from discussing a sense of whole-group integration to reasserting the mystique of conductorly power, when he discusses:

> …the basic relationship between choir and choir director in which the director feels himself to be an integral part of his choir. The leader must be a member of the choral body and should feel at one with it. He should be the central and driving force of his group but his control should be less of an imposition from without than an implicit controlling force originating from his own person. (1968, 112)

The source of this tension comes into focus when we examine the three primary principles that, according to Coyle, underpin the overall sense of belonging:

1. Build Safety
2. Share Vulnerability
3. Establish Purpose

### Build Safety

Making choir rehearsal a safe space is a theme that appears relatively rarely in the mainstream practitioner literature, that is books written by and for choral practitioners. There are isolated cautions to moderate the way a conductor wields their power, such as Brewer's comments that, 'Control should imply care rather than threat,' and, 'Control is positive. Never use negative words' (1997, 11). Neuen's warning is couched specifically in terms of voice, but is rooted in a rationale that extends beyond choral sound into the wider relationship between conductor and singers:

> Our singers are individuals. They deserve to be respected and treated as individuals. They should not be manipulated into some kind of mass unit that has no individual identity. They are all human beings. They will sound similarly beautiful, and surprisingly uniform, if they sing naturally, freely, energetically, and with sensitivity. They need not be forced to sound like someone else, or manipulated into a "special sound" for which the conductor wishes to be known. (2002, 12)

Interestingly, some of the literature aimed at the choral rehearsal written from other disciplinary standpoints makes safety more of an explicit theme. Carter brings principles and techniques from the teaching of acting into the choral rehearsal, and, before addressing any artistic questions, focuses his first two chapters on safety and emotional vulnerability (2005). Carley transfers theories from organisational change, as applied in her profession of life coach, to the rehearsal process (2009). She proposes an approach that focuses on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses in order to free them up to take more risks in rehearsal. Interestingly, she also draws on exercises used in drama teaching.

Rehearsal observations reveal a wide range of practices with regard to safety, from the warmly supportive to the frankly bullying. A key element in the context of choral rehearsals is the response to mistakes. Some conductors blame the singers for difficulties, for example responding to pitch loss with the instruction, 'Try not to be lazy…it's mostly just laziness,' or proclaiming themselves to be 'fed up' with having to repeatedly correct the same errors. Others avoid attaching negative emotion to error. One conductor I observed appeared undemonstrative to the point of dourness, but his patient and methodical approach – simply chunking the music down when something needed attention, and building it back up once corrected – produced a rich and engaged choral sound, which responded flexibly to tiny changes in a very small and contained beat pattern.

### Share Vulnerability

Sharing vulnerability is a theme that appears even less frequently in the practitioner literature than building safety.[4] Imogen Holst offers a rare acknowledgement of the conductor's capacity for self-doubt:

> If you are able to feel confident while conducting at your first competitive festival it will be because you are relying not only on the singers but also on the composer.  The music itself can cure your jittery nerves or your lapses of memory, for it is a continuous whole, from the first note to the last.  If you rely on the flow of the rhythm it will save you. (1973, 118-19)

Far more common, though, is discussion of rehearsal in terms of control and discipline, such as Bertalot's use of military metaphors for the conductor's authority:

> Set high standards during the first few seconds of the rehearsal.  This gives the message to the choir that they must give of their very best.  It's the equivalent of drill in the army – they have to 'snap to attention' several times before they are *able* to feel that they are a team. (2002, 21)

Much of the language choral writers use about their singers serves to maintain emotional distance between conductor and choir. They list the kinds of 'faults' – both technical and moral – commonly found in choral singers, and frame the rehearsal as a process of constant surveillance and enforcement (see also Garnett 2009, chapters 6 and 7). This unwillingness to admit to human frailty is arguably the source of the tension noted above in the choral literature between the ethic of team-work and top-down control: the writers recognise the value of human connection within the choir but are reluctant to risk their authority by lowering their own barriers.

Hill, Parfitt and Ash share a concept of the process of conducting which, while not explicitly framed in terms of vulnerability, does at least include a sense of mutual responsiveness between conductor and choir:

> The term 'conducting' signifies the important characteristic of being in touch with choir members and musicians, engaged in a joint enterprise which, for its success, depends upon give and take on both sides of the podium. … The singers are not only responding to your vision of how the music should be, important though that is, but, through their efforts, they are influencing it, rather as the peculiarities of a violin temper the sound of the music it produces. (1995, 41)

Even here, though, what starts out as an image involving a degree of equality between the parties ('give and take') progressively minimises the singers' contributions: the important vision remains that of the conductor, which may be 'influenced' by the efforts of the singers. By the end of this sentence, these efforts have been reduced to the status of an instrument's 'peculiarities', in an image that dehumanises the choir, erasing their agency by transforming their efforts into

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[4] Dag Jansson (2018) considers the relationship between vulnerability and authority as elements of the conductor's 'existential foundation. He is also unusual in considering the role of the conductor primarily from the perspective of his/her impact on the singers. However, one would not necessarily classify this book as part of the 'practitioner literature' in the sense I have been using it here: whilst it is undoubtedly of great relevance to practitioner, its tone and range of reference places it somewhere the literatures of musical philosophies and empirical business studies.

involuntary idiosyncrasies, and placing all musical responsibility back into the hands of the conductor.

There is more evidence of a willingness to be vulnerable with their singers amongst choral conductors out in the field. Unsurprisingly, this is more evident in accounts I have characterised as participant observation data than the ethnographic material: by definition, people who have invited a visiting coach to work with their choirs are those who are more willing to admit to their singers that they do not have all the answers themselves. Once again, a key differentiator here is in a conductor's response to error – and in particular to their own mistakes. Some conductors hold the choir responsible for all problems that occur in the musical flow; others take the blame for uncertain entries or poor synchronisation: 'Let's try that again; if I direct it better, maybe you'll have a chance of singing it!'

It is a common theme in discussions between choral directors at training events that the conductor's position can be a lonely one. Many choir leaders profess to feel quite isolated in their roles, and appreciate opportunities to share the problems they encounter with others in a similar position. Reflecting on this phenomenon from the perspective of *The Culture Code* produces the hypothesis that those conductors who are willing to admit mistakes and accept help from their singers may find themselves less isolated than those who are not.

### *Establish Purpose*

Of the three primary elements of belonging identified by Coyle, the one that both the practitioner literature and choral directors in practice really focus on is establishing a sense of purpose.[5] Singing and choirs are upheld as both the model for and means to achieve universal human desires to live meaningful lives:

> When people wish to express their innermost thoughts and dreams, they sing – and when they sing together, it is called choral music. (Strimple 2002, 298)

> A conductor's responsibility is to search for a *universal meaning* in each piece that he conducts, a meaning that contains a truth or truths that are applicable to life and living. (Jordan 1996, 175)

> In this ideal [performance] there should be faultless technique and artistic expression – the former to give intellectual satisfaction, the latter to stir the emotions, - the whole to transport the hearer to that exaltation of spirit, free from baser passions, which it is the glory of music to produce. (Coward 1914, 8)

Conductors in rehearsal tend less to the abstract or universal in the significance they ascribe to their choirs' activities; rather they are more likely to relate the music in rehearsal to its intended recipients. For example, in response to a particularly stirring run-through of a piece shortly to be performed, one conductor highlighted the choir's connection to their home city: 'And we want the same attitude next week. It's not just the Mailbox in the city centre, it's *our* city centre'. Another encouraged their singers to focus on communicating the message of a song by saying, 'Remember, your only job is to make somebody in that audience feel less lonely.'

The strength of idealism in choral practitioners helps make sense of the way they retain the loyalty and cooperation of their singers despite the frequent neglect of Coyle's first two principles

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[5] See also Brewer and Garnett for a discussion of how a 'choir's mission asks both the individuals and the collective to place themselves in service of something more important than either' (2014: 270).

of belonging. There is a widespread adherence to the belief that choristers need to feel connected and bound into a team, but the focus on top-down structures of authority, particularly in the literature, means that only the third principle is consistently deployed to achieve this. In practice the first two principles are more evident; as we shall explore next, however, the structures of rehearsal space and procedure often interfere with their full expression.

**Belonging Cues II: Specific Behaviours**

Having considered the primary principles that Coyle contends underpin a sense of belonging, we shall now focus in on the specific behaviours that achieve these principles. Coyle identifies a cluster of types and styles of observable actions and interactions that appear in groups with a healthy culture. This is not just about the behaviour of leaders (though these will have a significant impact on the range of behaviours available), but about the conduct of all members of the group. The presence or absence of these activities is in part a function of group culture, as implied by Coyle's title: that collection of ways of being and interrelating accepted as a group's norms. They are also facilitated and/or constrained by the structure of the rehearsal environment.

Coyle lists the following set of behaviours as characteristic of strongly-bonded groups:

- Close physical proximity, often in circles
- Profuse amounts of eye contact
- Physical touch
- Lots of short, energetic exchanges (no long speeches)
- High levels of mixing; everyone talks to everyone
- Few interruptions
- Intensive, active listening
- Humor [*sic*], laughter
- Small, attentive courtesies (thank-yous, opening doors, etc)  (8)

From a conductor's perspective, it looks at first sight like a list of best practices for effective rehearsing: listen intently, give plenty of eye contact, and avoid talking too for too long at once. An efficient rehearsal style might thus appear to satisfy a choir's belonging needs automatically. From the perspective of the singers, however, the situation is perhaps less rosy. They are usually in close physical proximity, but relatively rarely placed to have access to eye contact with each other, especially in larger choirs.[6] Moreover, the discipline of choral rehearsal deliberately damps down interactions between singers in service of the job at hand.

Further, comparing this list with actual conductor behaviours produces some other uncomfortable observations. Courtesies, for example: some conductors thank their singers for what they have just done, but many simply launch straight into the next instruction. The instructions themselves are frequently couched as insults to the choir:  'That was a bit sluggish'; 'You all look terribly gloomy'.[7] Whilst a conductor may experience a disciplined rehearsal as having 'few interruptions', what Coyle means here is how members of a group express respect by

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[6] Patrick Freer (2019) reports that 'standing in rows' is one of the features that boys say puts them off from participating in choir in American schools.

[7] The first of these examples comes from Black (2019); the second is from observational data.

letting each other finish what they were saying before responding. It is a common practice for conductors to stop their choirs mid-phrase, often by clapping over them.

The nature of 'intensive, active listening' also invites reflection. In interpersonal interactions, this phrase betokens high quality attention to other people's points of view, feelings and contributions. In choral rehearsals, it can often merely mean the level of acuity with which the conductor polices note accuracy; it becomes a mode of aural surveillance. I have cited elsewhere an example from an open rehearsal before an international competition in which a conductor targeted an individual singer with the comment, 'Twelve thousand people just heard that mistake' (Garnett 2009, 95).

Case studies of three choirs in rehearsal offer vignettes that illustrate the variability with which this collection of behaviours is experienced during choral rehearsals. All three are amateur choirs, undertaken by their members as leisure activities.

### Case Study 1: Women's choir, small

The first case study shows rehearsal practices that demonstrate many of the behaviours Coyle identifies in successful groups. This choir had around 20 members, three of them recent joiners finding their way around. The conductor had been in post for around 3 years at the time of the observation, initially as co-director, now holding the post alone.

The choir rehearsed for much of the time standing in a circle, periodically moving into a performance configuration of two curved lines to work on particular pieces. There was a well-established culture of singers using gesture to manage their vocal technique, each working independently, but clearly with a shared gestural vocabulary. They used this much more when working in a circle, gesturing into the shared space; there emerged a clear distinction between this configuration as 'this is for us' and the performance layout as 'this is for an audience'.

There was also liberal use of activities that involved walking round the room interacting with each other or working in pairs or small groups, for example elements of physical warm-up and exercises for rhythm. These provided opportunities for playfulness and laughter, as well as physical touch, and the director always participated in them along with the singers.

Choir members were free to comment on the process during the flow of rehearsal. They did not do this very often, but when they did their contributions were addressed to the whole room, and everyone else stopped to listen. The director usually chose to stop the music at cadence points, and signalled this on the approach so that everyone was ready to stop together. On stopping the music she routinely recognised the singers' efforts with a 'good' or a 'thank you'.

The rehearsal atmosphere was both focused and unhurried. When one section was being rehearsed separately, the others listened carefully and often indicated approval with smiles and nods, and occasionally light applause, when they succeeded at what they were being asked to change. There was very little off-task chatting or other distraction within the flow of rehearsal, though it took some time

to gather everyone back after a break. The choral sound was initially somewhat breathy and unfocused, but improved in clarity and resonance throughout the course of the rehearsal, and once required changes had been grasped by the singers, they needed relatively few extra reminders to maintain them.

### Case Study 2: SATB Choral Society, large

My second case study serves to illustrate behaviours that actively undermine a sense of safety or belonging. This choir had around 70 members at the time of observation, though had reportedly had up to 120 members some years before. It rehearsed in a school hall, with chairs laid out in straight rows, which largely prevented singers making eye contact with anyone except the conductor. The conductor was an experienced musician, having conducted military bands for many years, and had been with the choir for about four years at the time of the observation.

The conductor had a podium at the front of the hall, which he used when leading runs-through of complete sections of music. When engaged in analytical rehearsing, he stepped down and walked back and forth just in front of the front row. The choir rehearsed sitting down, and the body language of the singers was mostly slumped, looking down into their music except when they were being brought in.

The most striking aspect of this rehearsal in the light of Coyle's list of behaviours was the way the conductor routinely interrupted the flow of the singing. Sometimes he would sing over the choir in order to correct something; more often he would stop them by stamping his foot and shouting, 'No!' At one point, when the sopranos produced a strained-sounding phrase-peak high note, he stopped them by scrunching up his face, neck and shoulders, and saying 'Ewww! That was as flat as dishwater'.

The sound of the choir was quite well blended, but quiet for a group of that size, and the tone was breathy and constricted. The conductor's gestures showed considerable variety of shape and weight, but elicited little change in the choral sound in response. He managed blend by pointing out the presence of individual voices: 'I can hear voices; I can hear soloists in the sound'. The sound thereafter was more blended, but even quieter.

### Case Study 3: Mixed SATB choir, mid-size

The third case study is perhaps the most typical of amateur choral praxis in the way it combines some clear belonging cues along with other elements that inhibited them. This choir of around 35 members had formed around 10 years prior to the observation with the aim of providing a welcoming space for members of a particular marginalised group. Connection with the wider social context of its identity community was evident in the notices, which referenced opportunities to take part in activities organised by other groups as well as social events organised by the choir.

The choir rehearsed seated in three rows with a slight curve, such that some limited eye contact was available between singers, especially on the front row, but the primary source of interaction was from the conductor, who made frequent eye contact with a friendly and encouraging facial expression. The singers could and did mix freely during the break, but remained seated in sections during the rehearsal process itself.

The choir was led by a relatively inexperienced conductor who had taken on the role a year before the observation, having previously been a section leader. She spoke to me about the way the choir had supported her development, and her leadership style continued to evince her willingness to be vulnerable with the group. For instance, when the tonal centre dropped, she said, 'That's entirely my fault,' and, though she did show some irritation when it happened again later in the evening, at no point did she blame the choir.

Rehearsal instructions encouraged the singers to attend to each other and work together. For instance, when a couple of basses were holding a note longer than everyone else at a phrase end, she encouraged the group to 'find a whole-choir decision' on note lengths. In a piece that was primarily homorhythmic, she asked the choir to focus on the harmonies, 'so it sounds like one voice', and later, 'like one choir without any individuals sticking out'. This juxtaposition is interesting in the way it frames the same concept first in a way that encourages a sense of shared purpose, but then reframes it in a way that signals less safety, devaluing the individual and threatening exposure.

One immediate observation to make about these case studies is that it is easier to facilitate contact between individuals in a small group.[8] The ranks of seating in which large choral societies are usually placed function both as a means to fit everyone into the rehearsal space, and to minimise opportunities for them to distract each other. Nonetheless, some large groups do manage the space differently, for example with rows of seats on three sides of a square, with the conductor on the 4th side, which keeps the conductor as the visual focal point of the group while allowing singers to see each other's faces.

Another is that a choir's ethos can only achieve so much in the face of habitual behaviours that inhibit belonging cues. The individuals I spoke to before and after the rehearsal of Choir 2 were just as friendly as those in the other two groups, and, like them, chose singing as a leisure activity to access social contact. But the bulk of this contact was relegated to the non-singing parts of the evening – on arrival, in the break, and while leaving. Indeed, it is a testament to the quality of these relationships that they continued to attend despite the way they were treated while actually singing. Likewise, Choir 3 placed mutual support at the heart of its mission, but its rehearsal layout placed the responsibility for providing most of that support on the conductor.

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[8] A recent study that compared social connectedness in small and large choirs found that the participation in the small groups did indeed produce a greater sense of bonding than the larger. Interestingly, though, the larger group generated a bigger increase in social closeness over the course of a rehearsal (though from a much lower base), showing that even where these specific bonding behaviours are logistically implausible, the act of singing together itself creates a sense of belonging (Weinstein *et al* 2016).

**Changing Leadership Styles and Choir Ethos**

There has been a general shift in leadership style propounded by the practitioner literature over the decades, from a strongly autocratic approach, to more egalitarian models of 'servant-leadership' (Wis 2002). Examples from right along the continuum between these two extremes are still observable in practice. These fall to an extent along generational lines, though they are possibly better thought of as older and newer traditions of leadership. It is not that every older conductor is authoritarian, and every younger one is inclusive, but that the more singer-centred approaches have developed in conscious opposition to what is seen as an old-fashioned leadership style.[9] Early-career conductors may start off taking an authoritarian approach in imitation of the direction they have experienced as singers, but are more likely than established conductors to engage in training activities where they will be encouraged to adapt their style.

It is tempting to regard the newer leadership styles as inherently more suited to generating a sense of belonging than the older approaches. However, it remains that the older styles were at one time highly successful in establishing mass choral participation as a leisure activity. In doing so, moreover, they brought together people of a much wider range of socio-economic statuses than most social institutions of their time (Russell 1987).[10] Henry Coward's writing gives vivid insights into how conductors of his generation could attract such breadth of adherence by uniting people around an ideology of music as morally uplifting (1914, 8 quoted above; see also for example 166). This aesthetic is still in evidence by the 1940s, when Joseph Lewis mandates that the novice conductor's 'dominant principle' must be 'a **Sincerity of Purpose** which will over-ride all obstacles – a stern resolve that the ultimate end shall not be self-advancement, self-exploitation or self-glorification, but a consecration of all gifts to the glory of the Divine Art' (1942, 2, emphasis in original).

Nonetheless, the rehearsal observations that inform this paper suggest that the more egalitarian leadership models are proving more successful in creating a sense of belonging in today's choirs. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, they tend to draw more on all three of Coyle's principles, rather than relying primarily on the third. In particular, those choral leaders who assert their authority by undermining a sense of safety actively weaken the bonds that hold their choirs together, resulting in falling membership and an emotionally disengaged choral sound. By contrast, conductors whose approach is basically old-fashioned (top-down, disciplined), but who offer clarity of expectations and an even temper still seem to succeed in building a cohesive group despite cultivating an appearance of invulnerability.

Second, the ideologies that twenty-first-century choral leaders tend to draw on to create a sense of purpose are much more about community and connection than the idealised concept of the ennobling power of music that fuelled the nineteenth-century choral movement. The subservient relationship of performer to Great Art posited by Romantic aesthetics is entirely congruent with a top-down leadership style, in which the conductor's role is as prophet to the absent, deified composer.[11] This structure of leadership makes much less sense if the ideal around which the group is to crystallise is focused on interconnection and human contact.

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[9] Garnett (2017) discusses how some newer choral communities position themselves as specifically more accessible than what they term 'traditional choirs' as part of a quasi-evangelical mission to recruit people who have hitherto identified as 'non-singers'.

[10] Indeed, comparing Russell's account with my observational data suggests that the nineteenth-century choral societies may have been more socially diverse than their twenty-first century descendants (204-5).

[11] Jeanice Brooks gives a useful analysis of this discourse in her account of how Nadia Boulanger negotiated her legitimacy as a conductor when this was an unusual career for a woman by casting herself as subservient handmaid to the Music.

Third, the rehearsal activities of a more singer-centred approach offer increased opportunities for the kinds of interactive, bond-forming behaviours that Coyle documents as constituting the substance of the lived experience in cohesive groups. Eye contact, physical touch, and the opportunity to connect with any and all members of the group are the socially beneficial by-products of developing more educationally-varied rehearsal practices.

This analysis also suggests that the flashpoint between 'hard work' and 'having fun' that can often prove a source of contention in amateur choirs may be a product of social practices as much as of choir ethos. Conductors and the more ambitious members of their choir express frustration about lack of discipline (which usually means singers talking to each other during the flow of rehearsal), while rank-and-file singers complain about constantly being driven too hard when they come to choir to relax. Whilst in some cases there may be a genuine conflict in vision and aspiration for the choir, it may also be that the singers' apparent inattention is simply the expression of their need for social contact, and that planning the rehearsal to meet that need in the course of musical activities might resolve much of the conflict.

**Conclusion**

Analysing choral praxis through the lens of Coyle's ideas suggests that choral singing's grand claims about creating social connection and community are partially justified, though levels of success are variable. Many choral practitioners succeed in generating a sense of shared purpose; indeed the structure of a rehearsal, with its inherent sense of joint endeavour towards a specific, shared goal forms the substrate of the experience of choral singing. The structure of the choral occasion can also support a sense of safety: for singers to lose their individual voices in the overall body of sound offers a sense of protective colouration to their participation. At the same, the conductor's aural and visual surveillance can undermine this safety by making all the singers' efforts subject to continual judgement. Of course, the conductor is also subject to constant observation, though acknowledgement of the vulnerability this engenders is intermittent amongst practitioners and rare in the literature. The way in which choral directors respond to error is a significant factor in the overall effectiveness of their belonging cues. Their reaction to singer error can create or destroy a sense of safety, while their response to their own mistakes can either create human connection or emotional distance.

For the choral director who aims to develop a cohesive choir culture, Coyle's outline of group behaviours offers concrete suggestions as to how to rethink the use of rehearsal space and the type of rehearsal activities that will facilitate intra-group connections. Key elements here are creating opportunities for singers to see each other, listen to each other, or both. Standing in serried rows is an effective formation for a large choir to perform in, but it does not have to be the model for all choral encounters. At the simplest level, a room layout that allows singers to see the faces of at least some of the other choir members allows them to recognise each other as collaborators in the same endeavour when they meet out of the choral stack. Devising rehearsal methods that involve a variety of subsets of the whole (section practices, semi-choruses, pair- or small-group-work) takes more imagination and organisational effort, but brings musical/educational benefits along with the opportunity to cement social bonds.

As well as inviting us to think about rehearsal planning through the lens of the number and quality of interpersonal interactions the singers experience, Coyle's list of group behaviours invites conductors to reflect on our own habits. Courtesies such as thanking the choir, or waiting until they have sung a musically-complete statement before interrupting them may seem like small details, but it is by monitoring the myriad details of concrete lived experience that people

constantly assess their sense of belonging. Indeed, the value of Coyle's list lies in the way it draws attention to the specificity of observable behaviours. 'Culture' and 'ethos' are concepts that often operate at a holistic or abstract level; having a means to test one's supposed values against material actions offers a useful reality-check.

Even where a choir is conspicuously failing to exercise Coyle's three basic principles, and where the structure of the environment actively impedes the kinds of connective behaviours Coyle documents, however, there remains a basic level of successful bonding in that people are still turning up to sing together. This draws attention to the absence in Coyle's analysis of the kind of coordinated behaviour facilitated by activities such as singing or dancing, in which the nature of the activity inherently creates behavioural alignment. Neither does he remark on the way people who undertake these activities develop a striking commonality of posture and body language (Garnett 2009).

These omissions, however, are largely irrelevant to the current purposes. The question is not *whether* choral singing creates a sense of social connectedness, which is not realistically in doubt. The question is about the degree and quality of that connectedness. The act of singing together appears to provide a strong enough social glue that people will continue to participate in it in the face leadership behaviours and organisational structures that simultaneously undermine those bonds. Coyle's analysis provides a useful framework for practitioners to reflect on their work in order to develop habits that facilitate rather than inhibit the sense of belonging experienced by the singers in their care, and thereby enrich the experience for all involved.

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