

'When a Song Catches Fire': Individual and Collective Experiences of Singing Religious Choral Music

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Abstract

This ethnography explores the experience and significance of singing religious choral music within two groups: a community of shape-note singers in Philadelphia, USA and St Salvator's Chapel Choir in St Andrews, Scotland. It examines the emplacement of singers within each community, and analyses how the social, sensory and material contexts of singing in each group informs the collective and individual experience of singing. The experience of singing in these groups may be best understood in moments of *communitas*, which are affective and qualitatively sacred. These experiences foreground the tension between the collective and individual experience of singing. In each group, the designation of singing as a practice which engenders moments of sacred experience has important implications for the role of the individual and the collective in engaging with the sacred.

Two Vignettes

Summer, in a Meetinghouse

On a summer evening at a simple Quaker meetinghouse in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania, I sang heartily,

What wondrous love is this!
Oh, my soul! Oh, my soul!
(Wonderous Love)

As I sat between my fellow altos, one a local Amish woman, and the other a heavily tattooed girl from Portland, OR I was reminded of a question raised in an article I had read, the very article that brought me to shape-note singing in the first place: "Where else can you find pierced and tattooed city folk rubbing shoulders with plain-dressed Anabaptists?" (Hall 2015).

I felt a sense of warmth and connectedness with those around me – one that went beyond the hot stickiness of summer and our proximity sitting next to one another in the pews; Young and old, urban and rural, conservative Christian and punk, all sat shoulder to shoulder here.

I put down my book and made my way outside for some fresh air. Sitting on the meetinghouse steps, I heard the singing from within echoing around the modest room and out

the open windows into the night as it blended with the music of the crickets and cicadas, floating across the surrounding fields.

Autumn, in a Chapel

We processed down the aisle, towards the nave. Surrounded by stone and stained glass and enfolded in our pews by the chapel and congregation, we sang evensong in a state of flow: standing up, singing, sitting down. Looking across the chapel, I saw my friends giggling and making faces at the readings, listening to the prayers and reflecting on their philosophies. We raised our folders and our voices:

Little lamb, who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee such a tender voice,
making all the vales rejoice!
(Tavener, The Lamb)

Everything in this place - those worshipping, those singing, the chapel itself - seemed caught up in this exact moment, held in a silent reverence. This magical feeling seemed to come from something more than just the music - a fusion of stimuli which allows for these feelings of intense connectedness, of singer to fellow singer to congregation to chapel.

Introduction

In this ethnography, I explore the experiences of singing in two groups: a community of shape-note singers (SNS) in Philadelphia, USA and St Salvator's Chapel Choir (SSCC) in St Andrews, Scotland. Both singing groups are characterized by a close community and sing different styles of what I refer to in this ethnography as religious choral music.

Choral music is inherently interactive, and it cannot be realised without multiple people participating in shared practice. As a result, strong, passionate communities gather around this type of singing. I have personally experienced how singing can become a means for strong social connection. Despite differences in individual interpretations of lyrical meaning and its relationship to religion, individuals within each singing group unite around a shared passion. There is also an element of this singing experience that some individuals in SNS and SSCC label as 'spiritual' (though one need not be religious to find it moving) and this will be explored through my ethnographic encounters with different individuals.

I was interested in the relationship between singing in these communities and religion, as well as the attitudes that individuals had towards religious

music, as singers within these groups are not all religious but are ardent about the music they sing. I set out to understand what is significant about singing religious music in these two communities through asking, what serves to unite these individuals around this shared passion, if not a shared belief. I was interested in both collective (overarching, shared) and individual (subjective, personal) levels of significance.

There is not homogenous religious interest or belief between members of either group, though they all passionately gather in their respective communities around singing sacred music. While the love for the music itself in each community is a given, I was interested in the other elements that influenced the experience of singing and its associated significance.

Furthermore, I noted a tension between collective purpose and individual intent in each of the groups I studied. In SSCC, the collective purpose of singing might be to aid religious worship, but personal worship was not typically a common reason for individuals to become choir members. In SNS, while the singing was non-denominational and not for performance or worship, it was widely recognized that for some, singing provided a significant spiritual or religious experience.

The way both groups speak about singing and their devotion to it makes it seem akin to spiritual belief in the way that the communities consider the practice as sacred. Richard, a seasoned singer in SNS, spoke about the power in singing of 'doing the same thing, in the same place, at the same time'; this ethnography attempts to get to the root of that so-called 'power'. In this way, this ethnographic research will explore the animating and unifying force of singing by addressing the place and practice of each singing group. Namely, the singing environments, the elements which contextualize and influence singing, as well as the experience of the singing itself, on both a communal and individual level.

People, Place and Purpose

Emplacement theory illuminates the complex 'ecology of persons and things' (Pink 2011: 344) that influences, and is influenced by, individuals within these singing groups. In describing the emplacement of these communities and the individuals within them, I aim to highlight the important social, material, and sensory aspects of an environment that contextualizes and influences the singing experience (Pink 2009: 33). In this way, this analysis arises out of my ethnographic

encounters with individuals within these two communities as well as an auto-ethnographic reflection of my personal singing experiences.

The sense of place -its comprising elements and individuals' experience within it- is relevant to the examination of the environmental influences on singing. As Casey explains, 'places gather' (Casey 1996: 24) things immaterial and material in particular and meaningful ways. We partially create and contribute to these forces which create place and are likewise created by them, in other words, 'they interanimate each other' (Casey 1996: 24). In a particular place, 'the things and localities, people', Casey explains, 'are held together not just by their literal location in the same piece of geography, but by the fact that they are part of the same place... exhibiting various material-essential features possessed or reflected by everything in that place' (1996: 31). He writes that place may be partially connected to physical or material aspects of a certain region, but not reduced to those aspects alone. He and Irvine (2011) both write that places have a mutually influential relationship with, and reflect, the life of their occupants. Similar to the monks belonging to the monastery that Richard studied, sense of place reflects what I call purpose for the SNS and SSCC singing communities. The place, constituted

by persons gathering amongst various immaterial and material elements, is imbued with significance that bleeds into the way individuals act within it; they animate each other. While in a more acoustic sense, Calvert (2019) also argues for a similar symbiotic relationship between singers and place and brings into focus the importance of architecture and sound.

But, because singing is essentially an 'aural-oral experience' (Feld 1996), attention to the sensory relations (and those non-visual) within the singing environment was important. As Feld explains, despite predominant Western visualism, individuals experience the world in an embodied way through synaesthesia, making an compelling argument for how sense of place is experienced and evoked through sound (Feld 1996). Place is ordered and experienced aurally, while evoked orally. In a similar way, the singing that each community engages in, contributes to creating a sense of place, as experienced through singing and evoked by singing. The soundscape of a given environment orients individuals within that environment and informs a particular sense of self and experience (Rice 2003). This is applicable to SSCC and SNS singing, as part of the soundscape of these environments is what brings into reality place and community, and one's role within it.

With this in mind, I will present a short account of the soundscapes within each environment, as written from my perspective as a singer in the field as well as being informed by the perspectives of my informants. I go on to describe this element of the sensory environment and show how a sense of self is formed in each context through attention to soundscape. These environmental elements are important influences on communal and individual experience of singing and so engaging with them highlights the important aspects of how singers are emplaced, and how these aspects might influence ‘what it feels like’ to sing.

Soundscapes: Sense of Place, Sense of Self

SSCC Soundscape

In the choir loft or the cloister minutes before the service, there’s laughter and chatter; questions about the order of service, a frustrated cry and shuffling of music; friendly conversation or commiserating over deadlines. Helen or the chaplain calls us to order and we file up, all quiet for a prayer. Some lower their heads, listening or possibly praying. It ends, a semi-collective “Amen”, and the click of shoes on stone as the choir processes

into the chapel. We walk in pairs, shuffle awkwardly side-ways into the pews without knocking off our hymn books, and open our folders -all these sounds are familiar to me. They mark the choir settling into its place in the chapel and starting evensong. Voices rise, the sound swells, filling the whole chapel; all immersed in the atmosphere created by the choir singing harmoniously together.

There is an acoustic flow to the services which is always the same - over time, it becomes familiar and internalized – and the integral role of the choir is ingrained. The way they sound and the fit into the order of the service contributes crucially to a sense of place and soundscape which is particular to the evensong.

As Rice (2003) explained, discussing an ‘acoustemology of the self’, hearing and the interpretation of sound in an environment may be “understood as vital to orientation in a social, as well as a material and spatial sense” (9). Singers experience this environment in part through sound and orient themselves within evensong accordingly: they are both part of the choir collectively singing the canticles and contribute individually through singing solos or reading biblical passages between pieces. They play an important sonic role in the service, and in doing so, fulfil their important

social role in supporting worship and the community. The sound of evensong, and singers' individual input to that sound, contributes to singers' experience of the evensong as members of SSCC (different to the experience as a congregation member). Each assumes an important agentive role as a choir member who leads the service and the singing, developed through contributing to the soundscape and orienting oneself by it – an experience and sense of self which the patients in Rice's hospital environment did not gather from their environment and role within it (Rice 2003: 4).

SNS Soundscape

There's the scrape of chairs being dragged into square formation, gentle chatter, and the rustle of Sacred Harp books taken out of bags. A designated singer stands up, and all talking hushes. He welcomes everyone to the singing and explains how it works: we go around the square, person by person, part by part, and each pick a song - we sing it through on the shape-notes, then on the verses.

A singer picks the first song from the Sacred Harp: "Green Street - 198", and she stands in the middle of the square to lead. A resounding chorus of affirmation for the choice - then a shuffling of books and bodies to the front of their seats as we all prepare

ourselves to sing. Someone sings the starting chord - we sing our parts to 'la, sol, fa, mi', and some singers wave one arm up and down to beat time. Some of the voices are more tentative while others, well-versed in this song, sing out strong and lead those unsure.

We stop - there's a confirmation of verses we're singing, and we begin again - voices rise, sound swells, filling the whole room. Two verses, and it is over. The next person chooses a song and the process starts over again. During breaks individuals chat with their neighbours and friends across the parts. Conversations about families, friends, future singing events, all blend together. This break from the singing for socializing adds to how individuals experience the setting - as one of close community and shared passion for the music.

This soundscape of singing and socializing contributes to a sense of place and influences how individuals experience the environment and their perceived place within it. The way it falls onto individuals to choose and announce the songs sung by the group, and possibly stand up and lead, allows individuals to locate themselves and their contribution within the group and the singing. This fosters a "sonically constituted sense of self" within this environment (Rice 2003: 4): the emphasis on the

individual as actively contributing is especially reinforced when the person choosing also sings the starting chord or leads. In this way, singers become important parts of the endeavour, both individually and as part of a collective chorus of voices, singing when others chose the song. Visually, there are familiar faces and one might watch the leader beating time to follow along when singing, but sense of place and sense of self within place are significantly constituted by the soundscape and individuals' vocal contributions. Singers gather embodied knowledge and sense of place partially through aural-oral experience, often in a dialectic with visual orientation to and within the environment they sing (Feld 1996).

“What it feels like” to Sing: Communitas and the Sacred

I will now explore the experience of singing, and its communal and individual dimensions. Instead of discussing groups separately, I consider the individual accounts from both choirs together, as they speak to the same singing experience.

I found Svetlana Alexievich's style of 'the choir' to be analytically useful when attempting to convey the intersubjective experience of singing

and *communitas*. I attempt to present quotes in such a way so that the singers practically speak themselves; my own perspective and theoretical analysis follows these accounts. Reflecting the nature of my subject matter, a stylistic element like 'the choir' allows singers' thoughts and experiences to flow together into an intersubjective narrative, highlighting important facets of shared experience... giving them opportunity to sound and resonate with the reader in similar ways.

Voices from the Choirs

There are times when, for reasons I cannot explain, a song will just catch fire. And you lose yourself in it.

The rush that comes from singing together... losing awareness of everything except the music and your singing... That's the big payoff. It doesn't happen every time, but when it does it's just wonderful...

(Richard)

There's something in it that's always uplifting... everything is lighter, and there's always something right in the world

Knowing that there's always something beautiful that can be made, and knowing that you can be part of that beauty... I do genuinely believe this a common feeling, true of everyone in choir... otherwise we

wouldn't be dedicating all our time to it.

(Stella)

The best part... is when you get everything locked in and you get tingling, or neck hairs stand up - that kind of feeling.

You can tell because everyone else, lots of other people are feeling it too... in harmony together, or subconscious unity...

... it speaks to the power of the music - that it's able to do that, and so often.

(Ed)

Moments that are musically euphoric –

It's like the closest thing to an orgasm - you just get such good vibrations.

I remember my choirmaster at school told me that when a choir is singing the same music, their heartbeats are all in sync...

I've always been very conscious of that - this one organism that's working together to produce beautiful music - it's really exciting to be part of that.

(Beth)

The 'Power' and 'Atmosphere' Created by Singing

There were two moments in my fieldwork when singers expressed a crucial aspect of singing to me but was I was unable to articulate their sentiments (points bolded). Sitting in Richard's study, we spoke about what it feels like to sing music communally.

"You probably heard the saying... 'he who sings prays twice'... For 25 years at renaissance fairs - they close with something called a pub sing, and at the largest pub... people gather and sing together. I've often felt a sort of exaltation singing the parting glass with hundreds of people - as I would feel in church singing a hymn."

"And singing [shape-note music] together is like that too. People doing the same thing at the same together is powerful."

When I spoke to Beth about her fascination with religious choral singing, she explained she was interested in "how music can create an atmosphere... and how that can make people feel." She spoke about 'atmosphere' as something affective and was perceived and experienced collectively, though on different levels of meaning.

"If there's 100 people in the audience, some are religious and

some are atheist... but there is no way the people in the room [singers and audience] will not be moved in some way by the atmosphere we are creating in that room in that moment..."

"I think it happens when you're aware that other members of the choir must be experiencing the same kind of remarkable change in atmosphere which you know you're collectively creating, which is an infinitely rewarding feeling."

In both groups, I was told you don't have to be religious to be moved or have a 'spiritual experience' when singing; Richard's and Beth's affirmations support that claim. It is clear that there is something about the experience of singing collectively which was intensely affective, generative and significant. The voices from the choirs and moments described above express *communitas*, affective experiences which are qualitatively sacred.

Communitas may be understood as a feeling of intense connection between singers – poetically, "togetherness itself" (Turner 2012: 8). While largely indefinable, *communitas* may be "found when people engage in a collective task with full attention..." (Turner 2012: 3-4), consciousness and intention (Turner 1969: 188), which is the basis of choral singing in

both SNS and SSCC. *Communitas* is not an epiphenomenon of social life, but a social modality (Turner 1969: 96) and 'ontological reality' (Olaveson 2001: 103). It involves and engenders a sense of 'harmony', an understanding that in these moments the group is so unified singers become 'an organism', comprised of singers with hearts beating as one. There was a sense that this unity stemmed from the singing or 'power of the music', from the 'collective creation' and the atmosphere produced; and it was enabled in part by gathering around shared passion.

I found that what unites individuals in these communities around religious choral music was in part the affective and intersubjective experience of singing, regardless of religious belief, encapsulated in these moments of *communitas*. These moments of *communitas* engender a sense of unity and 'uplift' – they reaffirmed the sense of community within SNS and SSCC, as individuals are united in shared passion and experience, which is made more meaningful because of the community in which they arise. The affective dimension of singing, how it feels 'when a song catches fire', foregrounds individual embodied experience of these moments – making readily apparent the place of the individual and individual experience of the sacred. In these

moments, individuals feel as though they are contributing to and part of something bigger than themselves – an experience which is sacred and reflects to the individual and community the powerful and generative nature of human connection through singing.

NOTES...

...on Communities and Informants

To refer to St Salvator's Chapel Choir, I use the abbreviation SSCC. I include quotes and information from choir members I call Nick, Beth, Philip and Stella; I also include quotes and information from the choir's director, whom I call Helen.

To refer to the Shape-Note Singing Community, I use the abbreviation SNS or 'SNS community'. I recognize SNS is specifically self-defined not as a choir; I use the phrase 'choral music' in relation to SNS to stress the communal aspect and describe SNS as a community rather than a choir. I include quotes and information from community singers I call Leah, Mark, Richard, Ed, Sarah and Ellen.

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