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Learning stories of a music care facilitator: fostering wellness in a virtual singing space

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Abstract

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While previous explorations have shown that group singing has clear benefits for mental and physical well-being, there is less inquiry into how well these benefits transfer to online singing experiences. This proposed paper arising from my research will spotlight what I am learning through a study on two virtual modalities of the "Musical Movements" group singing collective offered as a course through the BC Brain Wellness Program (www.bcbrainwellness.ca) at the University of British Columbia's Djavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health (www.centreforbrainhealth.ca). The sessions flow from group-singing, movement, musical knowledge acquisition to supportive interaction. Encompassing a multi-strand participant population, my specialized content design centers around older individuals living with diverse neurological conditions, care partners and lifespan learners in the program's community. Standard virtual technology allows those with isolation or other access challenges to participate in a variety of arts-based collective activities, but high-latency audio lag has previously precluded synchronous music making practices. In this paper, I engage in the narrative analysis of creative non-fiction learning stories, as a musician/researcher/teacher. I explore my creative and practical experience of attempting to foster a meaningful musical connection with older adults in virtual spaces. I facilitate sessions on two platforms, one that requires participant audio be muted while singing, the other allowing for synchronous singing with low-latency technology. This arts-based educational research methodology reveals the positive experiential impact for lifespan learners throughout these online group singing sessions on their social connectedness, music wellness and overall enjoyment.

Keywords: Music Care, Music Wellness, Virtual Singing, Social Connection, Older Adults

But on a bigger level, we're all just trying to connect to each other in some way.
We use music to make that connection. That's just so worth celebrating.

(Gouzouasis & Prest, 2020: 146)

1 A Prelude

First Notes

I remember the day when Peter, my graduate supervisor, placed his office copy of *The Ethnographic I* by Carolyn Ellis in my hands as I was racing out of class to make it to a choir rehearsal on time. He already intuited my preference for every encounter to be palpable, emotional, tangible. Ellis' work has resonated deeply and practically become an 'academic bible' for me. Virtual, computerized, and digital spaces have never been how I want to experience the world. With textbook in hand, I have been on a path of discovering my online self, and this Ellis passage has granted me courage:

I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. Revisiting the scene emotionally leads to remembering other details. The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions – they're often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside it to analyze from a distance, from a cultural perspective. Both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. (2004: 118)

It is this very approach to writing, this window into Ellis' steps of emotional recall drawn from method acting, that also informs how I enter into a virtual space to teach online. With imagination, I bring myself into a choir room—with a piano, a stool, and a music stand in the centre. With my mind's eye, I picture the singers positioned in a close arc around the piano. It fosters a more intimate connection with each learner, from my virtual tile to theirs, as I envision them gathered around me at the piano. Emotionally and physically, I can mentally transport myself. Their personal lives, with little touches of home on full display behind them, do seep into my imagined choir room, but not as much as the absence of sound, not hearing their voices in song together. This is the noteworthy challenge.

Enhanced technologies have slowly evolved for those of us teaching virtually. Some digital tools exhibit the potential to diminish the high degree of audio latency, the time delay in audio while streaming video that complicates most online music making, causing staggered and overlapping sound when we attempt to musick¹ (Small, 1998) together online. Engaging such technological advancements offers us as individuals the experience of joining together online to sing and perform instrumental music as an ensemble.

I recently came across a journal entry I wrote last year, underscoring my intentions in writing this paper. I had quoted Ellis' description of autoethnography's role in reflexive and narrative ethnography as a method by which "authors focus on a group ... and use their own experiences in [that group] reflexively to bend back on themselves and look more deeply at interactions between self and other" (2004: 37). Framed another way, writing about my personal experience can bring others into the virtual spaces where I sing and care for older adults (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008). I hope to evoke the kind of connection that enables us to remove some of the bricks which build the digital walls between us.

2 Background, Purpose, and Inquiry

Across a 12-week online course I facilitated in 2023 for the BC Brain Wellness Program (the current iteration for that class is here: <https://www.bcbrainwellness.ca/classes/virtually-together-in-song>), we explored melody, rhythmic sounds, movement, and simple music theory. We shared stories and memories that came to us through our songs, and a unique experience unfolded for both me and my co-creators. We are a collective of older adults in the BCBWP community, some who are isolated with chronic brain conditions, several care partners seeking social connection, and others who are music enthusiasts striving to age well.

During the first seven weeks of music-making sessions, we digitally connected and played with musical ideas in a standard virtual space without synchronous audio possibilities. The group then shifted into five weeks, during which the technology² enabled us to hear and sing along with one another's voices, all together and in real time. Using this technology seems to solve the asynchronous digital delay that occurs when making music in vocal and instrumental

¹ Christopher Small crafted this theory of musicking, a verb that encompasses all musical activity from composing, to performing, to listening, to singing recreationally (Small, 1998).

² There are a number of platforms available; we have chosen JackTrip (www.jacktrip.com).

online audio-video contexts. It has enabled me—the music-making facilitator—to adapt a curriculum, teaching strategies and tactics, and overall approach to fostering a sense of belonging, unity, and well-being in online collective singing. We have been both challenged and inspired by our virtual music making spaces, especially when the introduction of audio-enhanced technology emulates a group singing together in person.

I am interested in a range of nuanced questions that frame my inquiry: What modifications to program content and delivery are needed to adapt to synchronous audio? What unique adaptations in my pedagogy are necessary with a diverse participant singing group to acknowledge individual needs while sustaining collective engagement? What are the key components to the iterative process of choosing a song repertoire that evokes both emotional and narrative responses? Do these elements impact our interpretation of music as well as our sense of wellbeing? My pursuit of clarity with these questions informs how I address loneliness through music, striving to teach effectively so that I can connect by singing with those who feel isolated, creating a virtual community of lifelong learners.

There is a becoming that unfolds in the spaces of the virtual, coloured with fresh connections. The stories of resilience that arise beautifully demonstrate elements of lifespan development, informed by aspects of attachment which Allport (1955), when expanding upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, identifies as one of the key foundations of our personality development. So, with this paper, I aim to guide us through stories of connection between facilitator and learners, elaborating and elucidating upon the development concepts that weave into my practice.

By the time I was nine years old, I was accompanying my mother on the piano when she led worship in church, as I added texture to her lyrical soprano voice with my vocal harmonies. My parents granted me a childhood in which attachment was fostered with love and care, intuitively nourishing our desire for belonging and esteem within our family culture. Such a childhood foundation prepared me for the various life seasons experienced thus far and continues to inform my becoming. Sharing music blossomed into gifting, an act of service, and this still plays out in how I embrace music as a language of care (Noddings, 2005). Framing this another way, sharing music with others is, for me, a form of spiritual practice. My learning stories flow out of this desire to care for others through music, understanding more about what we encounter and experience far beyond the notes. Therein lies the motivation to learn, write, and share my stories with other educators also aiming to connect meaningfully through music in virtual spaces.

3 Rationale

I am often asked how I foster a space where those learning with me feel at ease enough to explore their self expression and share their voices with others whom they are only just starting to know. Illuminating some aspects of my practice through this paper broadens the reach of understanding how I weave music into care and purpose. Singing with others is an integral aspect of my lifespan development and, by extension, that of those who raise their voices alongside mine. When those who join me in my music care practice are brave enough to step onto an unknown path with me, I feel a responsibility to ensure they feel illumined from our first moments together, and in repeating certain elements week by week, to welcome their creativity with reassurance. We have a ritual of coming into the virtual music studio with an intentional flow through a pattern of inhales and exhales. Slowly, with concentration, we focus on a universally shared element of being as our breath brings calm to our nervous system and reacquaints us with the muscles that support our singing. I invite you as readers to breathe along with me here, to experience this physiological shift yourself and, as Richardson describes, “to ‘relive’ the events emotionally” (2008: 931).

Audio Visual Sample 1: A Listening, Breathing, Sounding Practice
(see <https://youtu.be/od6GCKooj20?si=Mq65ZZuj8j4dFw1v>)

4 Reading the Score

Review of the Relational Developmental Systems Concepts

Within a musical score, lyrical phrases flow one to the next to comprise the movements of a given composition, each part contributing to how we experience that piece of music. Similarly, there are theories and models of learning that inform my music care practice and enhance my approach when music making with older adults. To understand elements of lifespan development as they are informed by Positive Youth Development (PYD), it is helpful to review the theory of Relational Developmental Systems (RDS).

RDS is currently the predominant metatheory in developmental science as it seeks to explain our human experiences of growth and change within a framework of process and relational adaptability (Lerner & Overton, 2017). This framing helps us understand how our development across the lifespan is a duet of influential interactions both within ourselves and contextually with others, sparking our capacity for change. So not only does the process-relational paradigm of RDS give context to the elements of lifespan development arising for collaborative learners in the virtual spaces of our collective's music making, but it also informs my own becoming as a facilitator of music wellness and care, with the emergence of a changing practice in those online spaces.

Positive Development (beyond) Youth as Lifespan Development

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) model emerged in the 1990s, with youth program innovator Rick Little grounding his ideas in RDS theory, formulating what he termed the 'Four Cs' of PYD (Lerner, 2017). In subsequent years, those 'Cs' of competence, confidence, connection, and character attracted developmental scientists such as Lerner, who expanded upon this series of 'C' principles with added concepts of engagement that magnify PYD's strengths-based and non-static developmental aspects, those of caring, compassion and contribution (Lerner, 2017).

Throughout our 12 weeks of virtual music making together, unheard for seven and then heard while singing for five, we played with six concepts of engagement as lifespan learners exploring shared experiences: those of connection, creativity, curiosity, cohesion, collaboration, and care. Explicitly and implicitly, these elements guided the flow of our collective sessions and, inevitably, my personal becoming as a music wellness facilitator striving to foster belonging amongst the learners who were not in a physical space together.

These integral lifespan learning concepts align with the 'Cs' of PYD as well as Reed Larson's (2000) formative research in human development and family studies, exploring the responsibility of educators in illuminating pathways of learning for youth. Carrying the weight of that responsibility in virtual music making spaces, I aim to impact the wellbeing of older adults with my adapted collection of 'Cs' as I focus with purpose on their strengths rather than their deficits. An alignment has revealed itself as I consider my engagement with older adults through music, striving toward "positive lifespan development," especially when they are living with cognitive decline and other challenging diagnoses. By spotlighting the strengths of their musical engagement throughout our sessions together, I aim to foster our collection of affirming concepts, our 'Cs' of positive lifespan development. I am studying the motivational theory of lifespan development that Heckhausen et al. (2010) expand upon, exploring it through stories that illuminate how I, along with my co-learners, share deep care for each other as we connect through songs—even, at times, with repertoire that is new to some of them. Our collection of 'C' concepts enhances the lifespan pursuits in which we are musically engaged: those of purpose, health, and wellness as an outcome of care. When a musical learner describes how synchronizing her hand gestures with those of others feels like collaboration, that action piece not only enhances the collective's pronunciation of vocal vowels but also grants her a moment of creative expression shared with me and the other musical learners. There is a deeper purpose and a sense of connection woven into our practice with that embodied exercise, even when there is no audio capacity for co-learners to hear each other. Informed by an ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) that welcomes each collaborator as a whole person, we develop musically—

individually within their capacity and collectively in the movements and sounds we create together.

As I learn more about how applying a lifespan perspective to my practice is enhanced by an understanding of other developmental paradigms (George, 2003), the C principles of PYD guide the 'Cs' that colour my approach as a music care facilitator. So does a recent definition of music wellness as the pursuit of "interacting with music in a way that can contribute to holistic health and flourishing" (George et al., 2024). When I attempt to describe my own approach to care and wellness through music, the interplay of stories with songs—the expression of and listening to both—features prominently. Learning, relationship building, and the pursuit of purpose are whole life endeavours, and as I adapt to each new stage as a musician, a researcher, and an educator, my becoming unfolds.

5 Improvisations

ABBA in our midst

It's a grey, wet Wednesday. Global acts of violence are flooding our news waves, and there is a heaviness in the air. I sense the need to speak into this space, not with words but with music. Flowing from postural movement into vocal sounding, we open ourselves up with our E flat major medley. *Viva La Musica* by Praetorius is uplifting as we play with shaping the phrases, preparing to explore the lyrical possibilities of ABBA's *Thank You for the Music*.

The classic tune's lyrics are already on the screen. Abel, our class volunteer, is one step ahead of me yet again.

"The price to pay for sharing content though, is that I can't see most of you now. I'll have to imagine your expressions," I say with a cheerful voice.

I attempt to scroll along the tiles below the lyrics to catch their reactions.

Blank screen. I'm out of our virtual space. Goodness.

Dialing up again. Relief. They're where I left them.

"Did you all miss me? Let's sing before I'm bumped out a second time!"

I hold a sustained E in the bass with my left hand, playing an E/A/B major chord pattern with my right before raising it in an upward conducting motion. We begin to sing.

*Thank you for the music
The songs I'm singing
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing.
Who can live without it?
I ask in all honesty
What would life be?
Without a song or a dance what are we?
So I say thank you for the music,
For giving it to me.
(Anderson & Unvaeus, 1977)*

I find myself looking for their reactions on my screen.

"So, was there any one phrase in the piece that helped you be present here? You couldn't hear one another, so let's share now. What speaks to you? Is there a lyric offering a bridge to others, or just brightening your day? Please voice your ideas while I get out some more music."

I audibly inhale to breathe. "Feel the s p a c e," I add after a pause and exhale on the hissing "c."

"Yes, Francesca, did you want to share?"

"The very last line. I loved it. Because I was able to ..." she gestures a release, her arms floating up gracefully and carrying on with expression, "Aaah, to truly go with it."

"Right? And just the concept of music being a gift," I exclaim. "That certainly is something that informs my approach. Whether I'm teaching a new piece or just ..." I see someone nodding in agreement, so I acknowledge her.

"Yes, Tahira, you also relate. Just a song striking such a chord when I hear it that I immediately share it with someone I care for."

Glancing at the collection of musical learners, I see a hand raised.

"Ian, did you have something to add?"

"During the song I was struggling with a backdrop of all the wars going on in the world."

More nodding heads relate. On my screen, tile after tile. Silence. Sad silence.

"The ABBA piece is a contrast and actually kind of an 'if only', if we would just sing together, wouldn't that bring more unity?" Ian's earnest heart is on full display.

"You're tapping into what I imagine many of us are feeling, coming alongside those who are hurting so deeply. And how music can be our response in difficult times."

"Please stand if that's available to you. Feeling the need to sound another exhale."

I raise my arms, inhale deeply, then release body and sound as I fold into myself.

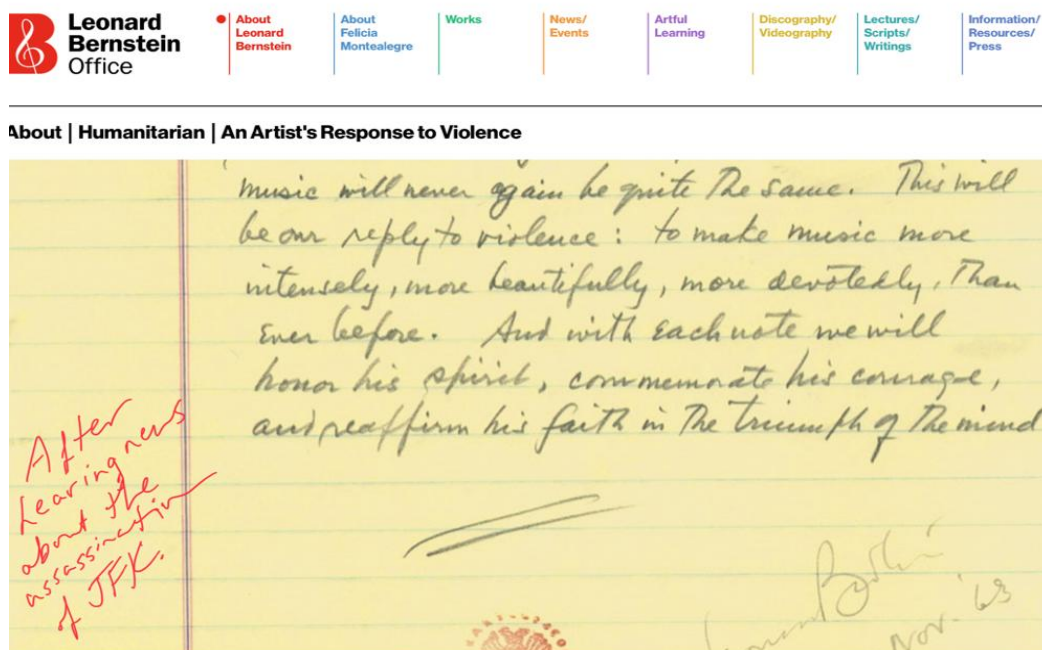
Several of them still have their audio engaged.

Cacophony. Somehow beautiful though chaotic to hear, vocal exhales colliding.

"The esteemed conductor, Leonard Bernstein, recognized music's innate ability to communicate when mere words fail us. I found this resource from his journal notes this week."

"He was most wise, attuned to the power of music to reveal deep insights. And in response to violence, he boldly calls us to make music more intensely and beautifully than ever before. Here's the original note."

Figure 1 *Bernstein Note*



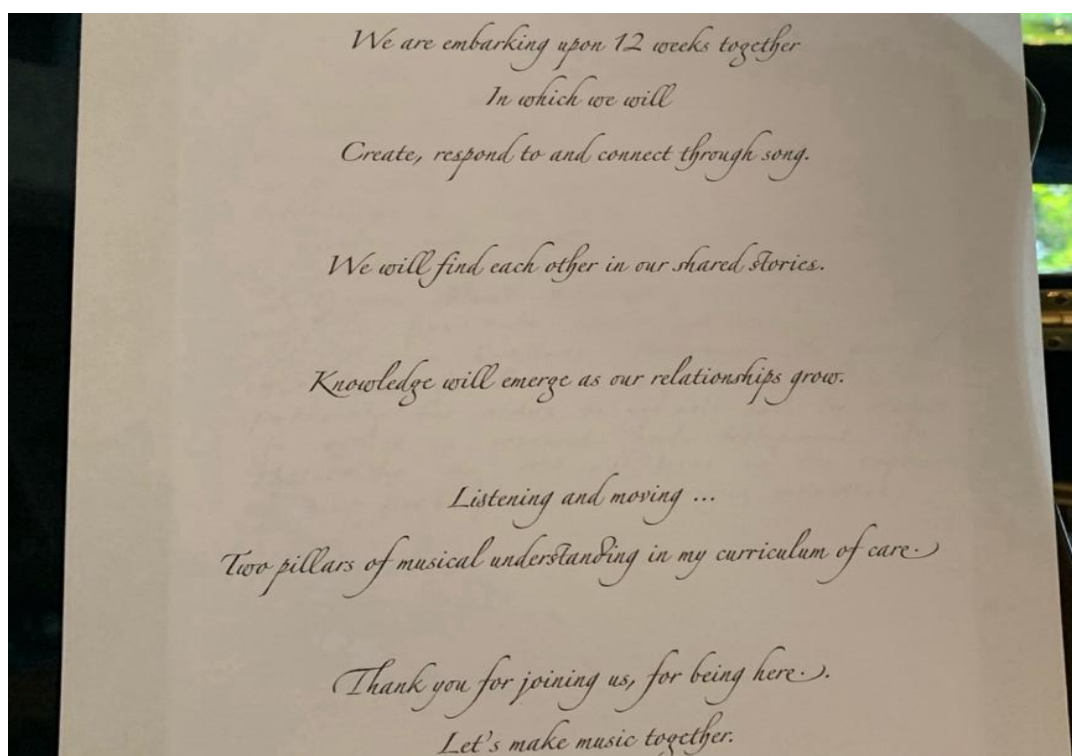
Note: www.leonardbernstein.com (Bernstein, 1976)

The score for the movie theme song of *Schindler's List* (Williams, 1993) is propped on my piano's music stand. The first few measures flow out of me seamlessly. All eyes are fixated on their screens.

As I play, my mind drifts to the collection of concepts guiding my approach for these sessions. Will I find a way to weave connection, creativity, and care into our time together today? I sense that I am, as I witness their intentional listening to the haunting notes my hands are carrying to them through their devices. I am buoyed up by the possibilities, but then further questions and concerns ground me as I wonder if curiosity, cohesion, and collaboration will arise for us all. I gently speak about my reflections, adding to the music I have been sharing.

"I typed out an intention for this singing collective as I was preparing for our sessions together. Abel, would you share those words on the screen please?"

Figure 2 *Singing Collective Intention Note*



There is a moment of palpable clarity as each of my co-learners reads through the words on their screens. I can faintly hear their calm breathing alongside my piano playing.

A cascade of concerns is evident on the faces staring back at me.

"I'm not very mobile so how will you include me in the movement pieces?"

"I don't know if my stories are worth sharing."

"Do you really want to hear my voice? I was told when I was young to sing softly."

This is a seminal moment, to reassure and affirm each unique person present.

"Today is our third session with a gratitude focus, and I hope that has resonated for you.

Our repertoire choices for the next three weeks are shaping up to offer more of a dreamscape, a chance to consider the 'what ifs' in this world. So yes. Yes, to hope. Yes, to unity. Yes, to song."

6 Weaving Theory into Practice

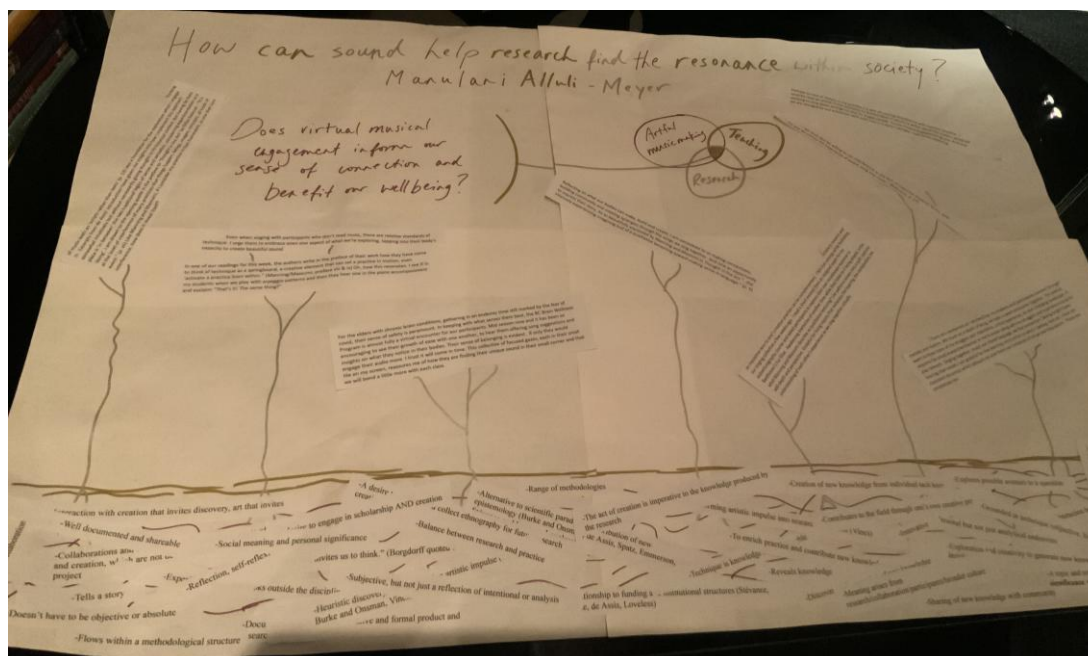
Two years ago, I crafted a rhizomatic exploration of intersecting ideas in which the following question stands prominently: Does virtual musical engagement inform our sense of connection and benefit our wellbeing?

The rhizomes of theoretical and curricular knowledge are complex, process based, and relational (Lerner & Murray, 2017; Overton, 2015), deepening my knowledge of learning stories, stretching me as a musician↔researcher↔teacher³ and simultaneously grounding me where

³ The "↔" symbol of coaction is used in a Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) approach to understanding human development to signify more than intra- and inter-action. It signifies interpenetration, merging, and coaction: see Gottlieb et al. (2006), Lerner & Overton (2017) and various Overton papers. That is why Gouzouasis (2008) dropped the slashes to describe being and becoming, an *artistresearchteacher*.

this path of inquiry began. Coming together as exhausted care partners, individuals struggling with cognitive decline and other health challenges as well as lifespan learners seeking pathways for aging well, a rhizomatic understanding unfolds as I focus on how our hopes for connection intersect.

Figure 3 Rhizomatic Explorations of a Virtual Music Care Facilitator



Since March 2020, and particularly during the first few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many music educators have been obliged to teach from their personal music studios. They attempt to make meaning with their students in digital contexts for the acquisition of music concepts and skills. The ongoing global pandemic thrust this platform of educational transmission upon us, and it became our world's reality from April 2020 through May 2021. Some teaching and learning returned to the classroom in September of 2020; however, individuals who were more vulnerable to medical complications of COVID-19 exposure and infection were often stuck out of fear. More specifically, older adults and others who navigate health challenges were mired in online communications for nearly all forms of human interaction. To date, for many people, online communication has remained a preferred, safe means of connecting with the outside world.

I weave several creative non-fiction stories into this paper, depicted through autoethnographic learning stories (Carr & Lee, 2012; Gouzouasis & Stamou, 2019; Gouzouasis & Yanko, 2018; Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2019, 2020), reflecting the nuances of virtual music engagement. Through my learning stories, I address common logistical realities for online arts-based learning programs, specifically music, in medical environments. My facilitating approach encourages a supportive community formed around a collective drawn together by the sheer joy of singing along with others. We learn and evolve alongside one another, and my stories reflect how theory weaves into our practice.

Collaboratively, my co-learners and I flow through an organic curricular flow with an awareness of one another and a shared desire to learn from each other's stories. As I began to consider the most thoughtful and meaningful way to evoke that experience, I was introduced to educator and author Vivian Gussin Paley's playful yet profound book *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* (1990). Robert Coles, the psychiatrist and teacher who wrote the foreword, describes Paley as "a teacher who lets life's complexities have their full dignity, [and is] quite willing to acknowledge error ... to address her own blind spots" (pp. ix–x). This shone such a bright light

on my own storytelling path. I found even deeper inspiration in Coles' (1989) collection of personal reflections on interactions in his medical school teaching practice, in which he describes the human capacity for experiencing shared, connected moments:

We have memories; we have feelings. We reach out to others. We have the responsiveness that one sees in preliterate infants who cry when others cry, smile when others smile, frown when others frown; or the responsiveness of youngsters, even preschool ones, who sing in response to the sound of others singing, who get choked up when shown a sad picture or told about a sad event. That side of ourselves is not set apart from our intellect. In order to respond, one remembers, one notices, then one makes connections – engaging the thinking mind as well as what is called one's emotional side.

(Coles, 1989: 127–128)

I find the concept of separating our feelings from our thinking difficult to grasp. So, when endeavouring to engage musically together as a collective, we explore both our emotional and reasoning capacities, each informed in unique ways by the songs we sing and the memories they awaken. It is this learning that I am attempting to embed in my creative non-fiction stories so that the insights I have gained are more broadly accessible beyond our virtual music studio.

Through storied vignette, I evaluate my effectiveness as a music care facilitator, my selection of music teaching tactics and strategies, and my impact when the limitation of technology requires all those taking part to mute their volume when singing together. Exploring the experience of how I evolve as a music educator, alongside the technology that enables synchronous virtual singing, I aim to express and evoke thoughts, feelings, sounds and mental images of what this challenge has required of me. I share my stories of fostering a sense of belonging amongst those in our online collective, with hopes of holistically growing both musically and personally, through mindful musical engagement.

And that engagement has shown itself to be almost as meaningful during some of our sessions without audio enhancement as it was in the final weeks of audible synchrony. This demonstrates a capability to find connection in a space that doesn't naturally seem possible. It relates to how the musical learners, volunteers, and I found meaning together—even in sessions that required each of them silencing their volume due to audio latency issues, well before we played with the technology that enabled singing in synchrony.

There is an atmosphere in our sessions together, a nurturing that fosters empathy and acceptance. Perhaps it is the unspoken understanding that everyone involved is either navigating health complexities, bearing the responsibility of caregiving, or engaging in practical ways of aging well. What this environment seems to allow for is a resilience in carrying the load that comes with global crises. And even the isolation of diagnosis is somewhat softened through connecting with others in the singing collective. It is these aspects I aim to explore in this paper, revealing an iterative process of how singing repertoire can evoke emotional, caring, and narrative responses. Those responses often find expression in the sharing of memories; as Coles defines with such clarity for us, "memory is, of course, a story, an aspect of experience that lives in a particular mind" (1989: 183). The process of learning music offers layers of acoustic meaning to stories as we consider how we engage and connect. Our bodies respond kinaesthetically to what we hear, sharing what we draw from certain lyrical phrases and the memories that arise through the music. This impacts not only our musical interpretations but our holistic wellness as it emerges through these music experiences.

There are three renderings of a/r/tography through which I aim to pursue meaning as a musician↔researcher↔teacher: those of openings, reverberation, and contiguity (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, Gouzouasis 2006). An understanding of my own teaching practice through these

three renderings grows in the collaboration that unfolds as I come alongside this collective's musical learners experientially.

When considering our experience of learning *Viva La Musica*, a canon composed by Michael Praetorius in the 16th century, complex lessons reveal themselves. We felt the reverberations deeply, connecting us not only to one another in synchronous voices but also to the myriad of choristers who have sung it in the span of 450 years. My dedicated 'presence' evolved alongside my co-creators' capacity to face their doubts by listening for each other intently, opening up the thrill of singing in a round. Guiding them through breathing to humming, sounding to singing, they bonded with one another while also offering encouragement to me through their demonstration of music care.

One such piece of encouraging guidance came through their curiosity as to why I did not take time for each of them to share their name and a little about why they were participating during the first few singing sessions. As an educator who values names and recognizes a knowing of names as part of our story, as an element of connecting to one another, why did I have them rely simply on their written identities on their virtual tile boxes? I took time to give them the choice of using a different name, a pseudonym, or even no name at all if they preferred for the research recordings, but I did not make space for each participant to share a little about themselves. A few co-learners expressed disappointment about this during the mid-study focus groups and, in so doing, generated some reflection on my part as to why I didn't give space for introductions. I was excited and anxious all at once to finally be launching our sessions together and yet, as someone who speaks so often of holding space for one another and of not rushing through lesson plans, I neglected to honour their unique voices in those opening moments.

Learning from that omission, I wove their spoken names into our conversations about song and memories. By the final sessions of the study, when we challenged ourselves with singing *Viva La Musica* as a round, in canon, and we divided ourselves into three smaller ensembles based on participant numbers, we were so comfortable with our names that I had to remind them of their numbers. They were and are so much more than numbers to one another and to me.

I have been practising my writing with descriptive research methods and applying autoethnography as a form of Creative Analytical Practices (CAP) (Gouzouasis, 2019), which can be construed as an arts-based research methodology designed to reach broader reading audiences (Richardson, 1990). Describing what he understands to be the essence of autoethnography, Andrew Sparkes (2020: 290) describes it as a method "which gains value by embracing vulnerability with a purpose". Delving even deeper, he writes of how "autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ('auto') to describe, interpret, and represent ('graphy') beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ('ethno') (Sparkes, 2020: 290). Sparkes (2020) has granted me clarity about the distinction between autobiography and autoethnography, spotlighting how it is the intention to illuminate cultural elements through the sharing of personal experience that makes autoethnography unique. Therein lies an opening to the reverberations and contiguity I aim to explore in my research, with music listening and collective singing as a stimulus and a response of joys and challenges. I am striving to make these elements more accessible through creative evocative stories to encourage future endeavours of music education, care, and engagement in virtual spaces.

These insights offer me guidance as I embark upon an analysis of my research within the realm of music care, at times an intimate and emotional field. My participation as a singing collective's facilitator and a co-investigator of inquiry is integral to the nature of autoethnographic research—a process and product that includes general perspectives of both the researched and the researcher and enables alternative means of expressing shared experiences. May the thoughts, feelings, sounds and images of moving from being *unheard to heard* in a virtual choir space unfold for the reader as they did for those of us singing together.

7 Harmonizations

Music care: Singing into dark spaces

I am so nervous. Shaking, actually. So much has been built up around this moment. I need to go stretch and breathe in the trees before launching our virtual studio. The forest nearby is calling my name. Let's hope that the calm eluding me will reveal itself before our session begins.

"I'm going to invite you all to just take a deep long inhale, sinking with strength. And then, on that beautiful exhale, think about rising with lightness." I gently guide them into class.

Audible, synchronous breath. I dig deep for a steady voice.

"Now, enjoy welcoming one another. Whatever your chosen greeting, let it go."

Variations of 'hello' roll out, stumbling over each other. A dozen smiles, blushing with childlike wonder.

"So lovely to hear all of your voices."

Time halts as I feel my eyes misting. Grief is running deep. From the comforting lilt of a shared Ashana⁴ to Jerry Garcia's classic *Ripple*, we will finally hear each other sing together today. With such emotional expectation, I'm choking up at the very notion.

"I am going to share, just because I trust you all deeply and I've grown quite close to you, that our family had a very sad loss just a few days ago."

My voice is shaky as I attempt to suppress tears. Do I want to cry with them yet? If I start, I will lose all emotional control, but control is, in truth, seldom all it claims to be. Raw and real Cynthia, that's who is attempting to teach today.

"It was our younger daughter's very dear friend Grace," I manage to utter while trying to catch my breath.

"She died from an accidental overdose on Sunday morning."

The sounds of sadness and shock are cascading across the ethernet.

"So we have been leaning on music. And leaning on light. But I am going to be emotional today. A lot of these songs we share bring up some profound feelings for me."

I'm wearing headphones but can still hear the muffled sound of a kettle boiling in the kitchen. Charlie must be making Jo another cup of tea.

"Grace would have wanted me to just be here with all of you and to share the load a bit, so I hope that's okay," I softly plead.

Kind, compassionate smiles and affirming nods are on my screen.

"I realize you each carry some heaviness too, navigating life's gifts and challenges of both beauty and trauma. But Grace is looking down on us with light. So, let's sing for her today."

These are dark days. There's a thin light streaming into my music studio, though, so I take another deep breath and focus on my laptop screen. Abel looks tired. Several musical learners have been in and out of the virtual music studio, and Abel is patiently trying to assist each of them. Some have no audio at all. It's a lot to troubleshoot.

"I'm going to guide us into a beautiful Ashana, the encouraging piece comprised of four chords which you have all heard before. We are going to gently hum, ooh, and aah to the melody. My hope is that we will find a shared sound in doing that."

Voice by voice, they wade into this new virtual reality of hearing one another sing.

But then, there are gestures of frustration from Francesca.

"Oh, love. Just leave and come back if you're having trouble," I urge her gently.

"I see that Christopher has joined now. And Elaine seems stable as well. Good, good."

My fingers reach for the piano keys again, stumbling at first. Little did Pranali know how relevant this piece would be for our collective when she suggested it a few weeks ago. We have played together with the melody and its stirring mood, but we haven't actually sung through it

⁴ In Arabic, *Ashana* means 'good' and represents the desire not just for personal success but for leaving a mark on the world.

yet. Settling into the chords, I start to hear some hums and oohs. A need arises in me to hear them sing the lyrics. As confidence grows with each repeat, we play in a call and response.

*I am sending you light,
To heal you, to hold you.*

*I am sending you light
To hold you in love.*

(DeMore, 2012)

Synchronized voices, finding their way. DeMore's soothing phrases, offering calm.
"You all sound so, so beautiful."

Audio Visual Sample 2: *Sending You Light* by Melanie DeMore in synchrony
(see <https://youtu.be/d12oHnwbrBA?si=IxtFKhFly6ryvsmQ>)

If we were not committed to completing the 12 singing sessions by the end of 2023, I would have requested some flexibility from my study colleagues to postpone today and nudge the series forward by a week. But such a shift is not possible within the framework of our overall plan, so facilitating this session is my only option. My intimate experience with music's ability to resonate with our very heartbeat convinces me that my only choice is to be vulnerable today.

Am I overwrought with sadness?

Absolutely.

Am I a bit disorganized?

Undoubtedly, yes.

To play and sing without emotion eludes me, as I surrender to my authentic, frayed edges.

And the tapestry of our singing today has inspired previously quiet voices to share. For some, it is a shift in social connection, brought on by both the experience of hearing other singers in unison and by the tender emotions of the hour. I find myself suspended in a liminal space of connection with each of these beautiful souls, some who offer up their own tears along with mine. We are each in our respective physical spaces and yet, we are one voice. If we were together in person, several of them would be embracing me—somehow wrapping me up in care, amidst a tangled mess of ethernet and headphone cords, it is as though they are urging me to press on.

Playing a small part of Mendelssohn's *Song Without Words Opus 19 No. 1* to close our time together, I encourage them each to voice their farewells as they leave the space. But when I finish playing and look at my screen, they are all still there. Kindness and compassion on display. Some audible farewells touch my ears as most tiles close. Only Abel, Vanida and Jean remain.

"It's like we were travelling to the moon for the first time, and we saw the beauty of the earth from space. I must thank you, Abel, for being so calm, like you were at NASA headquarters for us. I now realize the beauty of singing together. Cynthia, you are our shining star."

Abel laughs warmly at this analogy.

"I'm really just trying to figure it all out with the rest of you." He brushes off the praise.

In truth, he sounds a bit discouraged. Yet we smile at each other, both tired and fretting about the technical hurdles, me even more so with my fragile emotions, and the weight of responsibility I am feeling.

Jean breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry for your heart today. An angel is who you are, Cynthia. I lost my son at 17 in a car accident. I returned to my nursing practice, still broken. Right now, I'm off of work because I got punched by a patient in the stomach and it sent me into a flashback."

She is unwavering with each spoken word.

"My home was silent, with no music after he died. You are carrying me into the light."

She pauses. Then exhales and continues.

"I used to say when I was in distress that he would speak through music. And he *would* speak to me through music. I have found this particular collective such a healing experience, and I am grateful to all of you for helping me."

I start tucking away the cables and dongle, the headphones and power cords, thinking about how Jean just shared such a deep piece of herself, profound yet practical.

A creaking sound interrupts my tidying up.

The music studio door slides open on its rollers behind me.

"Heh, mama. You got through it."

My daughters have waited to say their own farewells before driving to our cabin in the mountains. We hold each other. More tears fall. They leave, and I put on the kettle for tea.

8 Learnings and Adaptations

During the class I just wrote about in the creative non-fiction story above, I was far from what everyone in our collective needed me to be. Several care partners were navigating extreme stress with the health pathways of their beloved ones, and they had such hope that our music making that day would be a balm, an escape from the growing demands on their time and wellbeing. In some ways I failed them. But authenticity revealed itself to be more essential for all of us than the kind of hollow encouragement that eluded me that day. I knew if we were going to sing, it would be emotional, and most of them rose to the moment beautifully, carrying my weakened voice from phrase to phrase.

The positionality I hope to inhabit in our music making is one that flows with what learners are needing to receive from me as I use music to facilitate wellness, to open up healing spaces. I learned during the eighth session together that I was able not only to offer but also to receive the healing of shared stories and song. I am curious to understand more about what is learned and experienced far beyond the notes we sing. For the brave souls living with chronic brain conditions, especially those whose minds and bodies insist that they recline and listen while I guide everyone present through breath and song, what aspect of our time together buoys them up? To care so deeply in my practice is perhaps a way of running interference with more common approaches. There is a narrative in this cultural moment about the modern world not wanting to slow down enough to care for fragile people. To me, musical engagement *is* care. And how we are changed by our encounter with such care is the preferred narrative I want to explore.

During our final singing session of 2023, we played with the imagery of a river: that when our voices come together, we are healing one another as well as ourselves. We carried the metaphor further in discussing how that river was just a gentle stream when, as musical learners, they muted their audio while singing and more like a rushing brook when they could hear one another. My caring reveals itself currently when singing online with older adults in recognizing that there are meaningful benefits for all of us, even when muted. That said, while the wellness experienced with synchronous sound is tempered by technology challenges for those living with health challenges and anxiety, their shared sound can ignite their sense of cohesion, collaboration, and confidence. My musical learners return week after week, demonstrating such dedication and resilience. Inspired by Noddings (2013) and the ethic of care she fosters in me, I have no choice but to meet them in the virtual space that is most fulfilling for them, adapting to their unique needs, collectively and individually.

During her inquiry of online neurological choral singing during the 2020 pandemic, music therapist Alison Talmage explored the experience of participants who affirmed that online singing was far better than no singing at all (Talmage et al., 2020) and has developed the scope of her practice to meet that need. Similarly, shaping and adapting my music care practice according to the expressed hopes of online learners informs and sharpens my virtual engagement skills. Listening and adapting are intentional acts of caring and connecting, inviting my participants to be collaborators along our shared learning pathways. Lucy Green from the

Institute of Education at University College London situates listening prominently within the realm of learning. Last year, in a personal communication exchange about concepts she raised in a publication (Green, 1999), she challenged me with this assertion: “I strongly believe that teaching is an exchange of knowledge between people, and how can we exchange if we don’t listen?” (L. Green, personal communication, February 20, 2024). Listening well, and inviting older adult learners into that experience, enhances the purpose of their lifespan learning.

9 Synchronizations

A musician↔researcher↔teacher looks ahead

Most of my teaching and music care plays out in classrooms and workshop spaces where the collective sound of our voices rises for all of us to experience. We know that active music making and intentional music listening benefit us. The very presence of melody and rhythm enrich our emotional landscape, awaken memories and evoke meaning. What is unknown is more of how engagement with music changes us when our shared experience is in virtual spaces. For music educators and older adults singing online, does low latency technology create an experience with synergies that align with those found when singing side by side? Or does the complexity of the technology cause anxiety such that the platform without synchronous audio is more fitting for this demographic? The project that is central to this paper cannot answer these questions. Rather, I pose them to spark future inquiry. My intuitive response can only be one that opens the most meaningful virtual space for these older adults with whom I sing to foster deep social connections and wellness for them. This pursuit then draws my attention again to the collection of ‘Cs,’ how they connect us all when woven into my practice with care. If I can spark their curiosity and encourage their creativity while playing with song and story, we will together learn which virtual space strengthens their connection to one another.

My hope in community music practice is to be a flexible adapter, an educator prepared with a curriculum plan but one that I hold only loosely. A certain rigidity has coloured established choral conventions in the past. This is changing all around us, and I aim to be a part of that change as I seek to evolve and respond in my practice with care.

There are synergies with my practice as a musician as well, inspired by the flow I am attempting to embody in my fifties. Well beyond the classroom and the music studio, flow is attainable when we remember to breathe into the creative canvas we are weaving. Needing calm, I sit at the piano to play and sing. Craving focus, the same. These moments fill my artist-musician cup.

Wider human implications inform how we share our music with others, with nature, in moments both real-life and virtual. Through it all, we breathe and we sing. And as I explore the benefits of singing in diverse musical settings, I hope to share the knowledge gained in meaningful ways well beyond the walls of each space. These hopes are woven into each other as aspects of one creative canvas. If tension arises, that may challenge how I aim to forge new pathways of musical engagement and may see me returning to more traditional teaching methods marked by a paradigm of respect and discipline rather than collaboration. But I am confident that the pendulum will find its balance, that the moments of hearing beauty in the voices of older adults will sustain a posture that ultimately offers my desire to foster relational care.

My lifespan learning will continue to unfold through engagement and research opportunities with Music Care by Room 217 (<https://www.musiccare.org/>), The SingWell Project (<https://www.singwell.ca/>), the Musical Care International Network (<https://musicalcareresearch.com/musical-care-network/>) and Aphasia Choirs Go Global (<https://m.facebook.com/groups/1632141370371583/?ref=share>), giving voice to my pursuit of meaning through collective song. Therein lies the emerging path of meaning and purpose, my personal *becoming* as a facilitator of music wellness and care.

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