

The Effects of Secular Choral Singing on US Singers

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Abstract

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This study qualitatively explored how singing in a US-based secular chorus affected adult members. Based on telephone interviews of 16 individuals, we found that most had participated in school-based choral groups pre-adulthood, and most had taken vocal music lessons as children. Participants joined the choruses because they sought a high-quality musical experience, wanted to build a sense of community, or considered a musical outlet an important part of their life. Challenges to singing in these groups included time/scheduling, interpersonal struggles among members, and the strain of singing. Benefits to participants related to singing in such choirs included emotional (enhanced well-being, escape from life), social (connection/collaboration), cognitive (intellectual stimulation), spiritual (ethereal experience), and physical. Benefits to others included family and friends enjoying concerts, and improved relationships between participants and family/friends. The COVID-19 pandemic (during which data were collected) drastically limited in-person rehearsals and performances, weakened participants' sense of a music-based community, and reduced the benefits experienced through choral singing; virtual choirs were an insufficient replacement for in-person choral singing. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: choral singing, music, benefits, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Historical Context for Secular Choral Singing

Music is a widespread human activity, with no society lacking this form of expression. Music sustains national, cultural, and ethnic identity, and collective music (choir, orchestra) requires synchronization of groups of people (Clarke, Dibben and Pitts, 2010). In cultures with limited industrial or technological development, active participation in music is pervasive, and all persons are considered musical. Furthermore, creating music is an innate and universal ability, one that may inspire intense emotional experiences that lift individuals out of their ordinary world and transport them to a more

ethereal realm (Bailey & Davidson, 2002b). Thus, music is a source of powerful experiences both intimate and communal, and involvement in music can be transformative (Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski, 2015).

Choral singing, including secular choral singing, is the most popular form of participation in the performing arts (Liu & Stebbins, 2014) and is open to all (vs. instrumental music, which requires access to an instrument). In the US, more than one in six adults sings in a chorus (Grunwald Associates LLC & Chorus America, 2019), with 44% singing in more than one choir. Clearly, choral singing holds a vital role in many Americans' lives.

Our study focused on secular, rather than religiously affiliated, choral singing, because involvement in the latter may be imbued with its own potential benefits (comfort accorded by belief in a divine presence; membership in a religious community; 'To sing is to pray twice' [St. Augustine, n.d.]). We were interested, instead, in the benefits of choral singing experienced by those for whom singing need not carry with it a religious association.

1.1. Empirical Literature Regarding the Effects of Choral Singing

Some empirical literature exists regarding the effects of choral singing on singers, largely originating from Europe and the United Kingdom. Much of this literature, however, especially that using qualitative or mixed-methods designs, targeted specific populations (elderly; homeless; those with chronic health conditions; cancer, stroke, Parkinson's patients; Abell, Baird, and Chalmers, 2017; Bailey & Davidson, 2002a, 2002b), whose experience of choral singing may differ from those without such concerns. Because our study included adults not identified as having such concerns, the review of the literature will focus on these broader populations.

1.2. Psychological Effects

Emotional Effects. Myriad emotional benefits have been reported for choral singers, including enhanced mood and wellbeing (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clarke et al., 2010; Clift & Hancox, 2001; Clift, Staricoff and Whitmore 2008; Clift, Hancox, Morrison, Hess, Kreutz and Stewart, 2010; Livesey, Morrison, Clift and Camic, 2012; Moss, Lynch and O'Donoghue, 2018; Saarikallio, 2012; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016), more positive and/or less negative affect (Bullack, Gass, Nater and Kreutz, 2018; Busch & Gick, 2012; Clift & Hancox, 2001, 2010; Grunwald Associates et al.; 2019; Judd & Pooley, 2014; Liu & Stebbins, 2014; Sanal & Gorsev, 2014), self-expression and catharsis via emotional expression inherent in singing chorally (Clarke et al., 2010; Clift et al., 2008; Liu & Stebbins, 2014; Livesey et al., 2012), a sense of transcendence (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clift et al., 2008; Moss et al., 2018), positive effects on anxiety/stress and coping (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clift & Hancox, 2001; Judd & Pooley, 2014; Moss et al., 2018; Sanal & Gorsev, 2014), and a welcome distraction from daily routines (Livesey et al., 2012; Tonneijck, Kinnébanian and Josephsson, 2008). Among those who perform professionally (likely more as soloists than as choral singers), however, the competitive nature of the career occasionally yields distress (Ginsberg, Spahn and Williamon, 2012) and impairment in mental health (Gembris, 2012).

Social Effects. Several researchers have identified social connection and social support as benefits experienced by choral singers (Bullack et al., 2018; Busch & Gick, 2012; Clarke et al., 2010; Clift & Hancox, 2001, 2010; Clift, Nicol, Raisbeck, Whitmore and Morrison, 2010; Grunwald Associates et al., 2019; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2018). Others have illuminated more specific findings: singing in a choir offers the opportunity to meet new people (Clift & Hancox, 2001); to engage in a collective and coordinated activity (Clift & Hancox, 2001; Clift et al., 2008; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016); to experience reciprocity between choir and audience (Bailey & Davidson, 2005); to contribute to the wider community (Clift et al., 2008); and to indirectly gain access to other resources (medical providers, hospitals; Liu & Stebbins, 2014). Judd and Pooley (2014) found that choirs also develop their own ethos (personality as a group that forms a unique organism and reflects the group's values) and their own

dynamic (connections between members that feel like family); relatedly, Stewart and Lonsdale (2016) noted that the membership of the group may be a more important contributor to singers' psychological wellbeing than the act of singing itself. Finally, choral singers report better relationships and social skills; are strong contributors to their communities (financially, volunteer work, leadership roles, voting); are better collaborators and listeners; and are more reliable, adaptable, and accepting of those different from themselves (Grunwald Associates et al., 2019).

Cognitive Effects. Less research has investigated the cognitive effects on singers of engagement in choral singing. In what research exists, many point to the mental stimulation and learning inherent in choral singing (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clift & Hancox, 2010; Clift et al., 2008; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2018). A few studies have also found that engaging in choral singing enhances singers' musical skills and knowledge (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Liu & Stebbins, 2014), perhaps via the focused attention required (Clift & Hancox, 2010).

1.3. Physical Effects

The physical effects of choral singing on singers are equivocal. Many studies found that choral singing improves respiratory functioning (Bullack et al., 2018; Clift & Hancox, 2001, 2010; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al.; 2018), cardiac and immune functioning (Bullack et al., 2018; Clift & Hancox, 2001), and reduces stress (Bullack et al., 2018; Clift & Hancox, 2001; Clift et al., 2008). Other physical benefits have been reported, including increased energy (Clift et al., 2008), endorphin release and pain relief (Judd & Pooley, 2014), and improved posture (Clift & Hancox, 2001). Not all effects have been salutary, however, for professional musicians report discomfort associated with making music, and note difficulty prioritizing their physical well-being, managing their stress, or engaging in regular physical activity (Gembris, 2012; Ginsberg et al., 2012).

1.4. Summary

Choral singing is associated with predominantly positive effects, whether emotional, social, cognitive, or physical. Some research does speak to emotional and physical distress that may be associated with choral singing, but such effects appear less often, and may arise more in those for whom choral singing is a vocation rather than an avocation.

1.5. Limitations

Much of the extant research comes from Europe and the United Kingdom and is also quantitative and/or experimental. These methodological choices may make it difficult to capture participants' rich descriptions of how singing in a choir affects them. Furthermore, the extant qualitative or mixed-method research often targeted specific, rather than general, populations. Many of the existing studies also do not identify whether their data came from singers in secular or religiously-based choirs, further confounding the findings. In the current qualitative study, then, we recruited a broader US adult and secular population (not identified with pre-existing health concerns nor with a religious choir) so that we may deeply examine and better understand how the experience of secular choral singing affects them. As Bailey and Davidson asserted (2002b: 231), this remains an area largely unexamined:

The paucity of research which addresses the effects of amateur group singing warrants that any investigation into this activity must begin with the experience of those involved in singing at the amateur level ...

Clift et al. (2008) echoed this sentiment, finding the lack of research regarding the benefits of singing remarkable.

2. Current Study

In seeking to begin to fill these gaps in the literature, we examined the effects of choral singing on US-based secular chorus members. Exploring this phenomenon may provide useful information for those involved in the singing endeavour, including singers themselves, conductors/directors, agencies, or institutions that support such activities, so that they may better understand what brings people to choral singing, what sustains them in such activities, and how these pursuits affect them. In addition, such information may prove useful to physical and/or mental health providers seeking to identify activities that may support their patients'/clients' health and well-being.

3. Method

Given our stated purpose, we used a qualitative method. Qualitative research fosters understanding the meaning(s) that participants give to their experiences (Creswell, 2012) and is thus well-suited for examining this topic. Specifically, we chose consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Thompson and Williams, 1997; Hill, 2012 a, c) to explore the meanings participants give to their experience, and the benefits thereof, of secular choral singing. Founded upon an exploratory, discovery-oriented approach to research, CQR possesses a level of rigor and specificity often lacking in other qualitative methods (Hill et al., 1997; Hill, 2012b). Further, CQR is well-suited to investigate phenomena not easily captured in quantitative designs.

Data collection and analysis in CQR rest on these core principles (Hill et al., 1997, 2005; Hill, 2012 a, c): CQR interview protocols use open-ended questions to elicit rich responses from participants, while also focusing on participant narratives and the way(s) that participants make meaning from their experiences; CQR requires multiple researcher perspectives, including primary team members and an auditor, to reduce the role of researcher biases; data analysis is an iterative process in which emerging categories and understandings are constantly compared to the raw data to ensure trustworthiness and reliability.

3.1. Participants

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 66 ($M = 44.67$; $SD = 16.04$); 14 identified as female, two as male; 15 identified as White, one as African American. They had sung in between one and 15 choirs as adults ($M = 5.03$; $SD = 3.47$) for between four and 42 years ($M = 18.66$; $SD = 14.50$).

3.2. Researchers and Research Team Biases

The primary research team included two female university faculty (ages 59 and 43) and one female counselling psychology doctoral student (age 24). The faculty were White licensed (US) mental health professionals; the doctoral student was a South-Asian Indian credentialed in Scotland. The auditor was a licensed psychologist (US) practicing in a behavioural healthcare setting (35 years old, White, male). The faculty members and the auditor were experienced CQR researchers; the doctoral student was new to the method.

Prior to data collection, team members discussed their biases related to the study's focus. Each team member responded in writing to the following prompts, with subsequent discussion: 1) what types of musical experiences/training have you had as an adult or child; 2) why did you engage in those experiences/trainings; 3) what challenges did you face in those experiences/trainings; and 4) what benefits, mental health-related or otherwise, did you gain from those musical experiences?

All researchers recalled early and consistent exposure to music as children (vocal, choral, instrumental), and all spoke fondly of their childhood experiences with music; some had taken lessons

(vocal, instrumental) as children. All chose to engage in those activities because they enjoyed it, and also because music was part of what their family did; all were supported by family members for their musical activities. As challenges, researchers mentioned lack of formal training or few financial resources for lessons, competition to join certain music groups, feeling pressured by family members to continue musical activities, or feeling less skilled in music than in other endeavours. As benefits of participating in musical activities, researchers noted that engagement in music brought them joy; fostered social connections; facilitated emotional expression, resilience, and creative ways of learning; offered an artistic outlet; and provided opportunities to learn from being vulnerable and accepting our imperfections.

4. Measures

4.1. Demographic Form

Basic demographic information, including age, sex, race, and ethnicity, were collected. Each participant was also asked to provide information regarding the number of secular choirs with which they had sung as adults, how many years they had sung in such choirs as adults, and the names of those choirs.

4.2. Interview Protocol

A draft of the protocol was developed by the primary team and sent to the auditor for comment and revision. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit rich participant responses, while avoiding prior assumptions and biases stemming from researchers' own perspectives on the benefits associated with secular choral singing.

The final protocol opened with contextual questions regarding the types of experiences participants had singing in secular choirs as adults, as well as any specific choral or other musical training they had received prior to joining a secular choir. The main section of the interview focused on why participants chose to sing with their specific secular choirs, and the challenges and benefits of singing in these choirs. Because data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also asked about how the pandemic affected participants' experiences of secular choral singing. The interview closed by asking participants why they took part in the study and how it was for them to talk about their secular choir experiences (see Appendix A for the complete interview protocol).

5. Procedures for Data Collection

5.1. Recruitment

Potential participants were recruited by the primary investigator (PI), who is a member of a secular choral group and knows members/directors of other local secular choral groups. The PI emailed members of the secular choral group in which she participates. She also emailed the director of another local secular choral group, who provided the PI with members' email addresses; the PI then emailed members of that group. In addition, at least one participant learned of the study via another participant (i.e., snowball sampling). The recruitment email included information about the study (i.e., focus, participation requirements) and the PI's contact information for those who wanted to take part. Participants had to be at least 20 years old, have sung in a secular choral group as an adult for at least two years, and were willing to complete a 45-60-minute audiotaped phone interview. Those who contacted the PI indicating an interest in participating were emailed the informed consent and demographic forms, and the interview protocol. Twenty individuals contacted the PI, and 16 completed the interview (the remaining four did not respond to emails to schedule the interview).

5.2. Interviews and Transcripts

The PI conducted 15 of the 16 ~50-60-minute audio-recorded telephone interviews; 1 participant preferred to be interviewed by someone other than the PI. Interviewers asked all questions on the protocol,

as well as follow-up probes (for example, ‘Please tell me more,’ ‘Can you clarify...?’) to gain additional information. All interviews were transcribed verbatim (other than minimal encouragers, silences, stutters). Identifying information was removed, and each participant was assigned a code number to protect confidentiality.

5.3. Participant Check

We sent a draft of the manuscript to participants, asking them to comment on the degree to which their individual experiences matched the group results, and to confirm that their confidentiality had been protected in any examples included. Five participants responded, one suggested minor editorial changes, which were made.

6. Procedures for Data Analysis

Data analysis in CQR is a collaborative process whereby primary research team members analyze data through the following steps (Ladany, Thompson and Hill, 2012; Thompson, Vivino and Hill, 2012): 1) develop domains, or broad topic areas, that emerge from the transcripts, and assign interview data to these domains; 2) create core ideas that summarize the raw data in each domain accurately and succinctly, and stay close to participants’ words; 3) develop a consensus version of each case, which includes the domained and cored data, and send that document to the auditor to review the accuracy and completeness of data analysis; 4) review the auditor’s suggestions and make necessary changes to the consensus version; 5) cross-analyze the data, during which researchers examine the core ideas across cases within a domain and identify common categories or themes that emerge from the core ideas; 6) send these emerging categories to the auditor for review (for example, do the categories capture the data as depicted in the core ideas?); and 7) revise the category structure until all researchers (primary team and auditor) agree that it best depicts the findings. This process is more cyclical than linear and demands constant discussion between team members to achieve consensus on domains, core ideas, and categories.

7. Methodological Integrity

Several elements of CQR speak to its methodological integrity (see Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson and Suárez-Orozco, 2018). In addition to the use of consensus, auditors, and returning to the raw data during analysis, methodological integrity is strengthened by the following: identifying a guiding research question, grounding that question in the extant literature, and demonstrating the rationale for the importance of answering that question; establishing the appropriateness of CQR to address this question, given its elicitation of rich data through open-ended questions asked of those who have experienced the phenomenon of interest; providing participant demographic information and inclusion criteria; providing researcher demographic information and relevant experience; describing data collection and analysis processes; presenting findings logically and coherently; including excerpts to ground the findings in the data; asking for participants’ feedback on the findings; identifying the most central results and discussing how they add to the existing literature; and acknowledging the limitations of the study.

8. Results

In presenting the findings (see Table 1), we followed CQR guidelines in labelling category frequencies (Hill, 2012 a, c): General categories refer to 15-16 cases, typical categories refer to nine-14 cases, variant categories refer to four-eight cases, and rare categories refer to two-three cases. Findings that emerged in a single case were not included. To protect the anonymity of the two male participants, we used female identifiers for all participants. When words were deleted in quotations, we used ellipses (...).

8.1. Choral/Vocal Experiences Prior to Adulthood

Typically, participants took part in school music programs before reaching adulthood. One was part of a ‘very vigorous’ public high school music program; another had sung in a range of high school choirs (women’s choir, concert choir, show choir). Participants variably took part in choral/music programs outside of school, with one noting her involvement in summer vocal camps, and another recalling her experiences singing with adults in choirs when she was very young. Finally, participants variably asserted that their family influenced and supported their pre-adulthood choral/vocal experiences, with one describing that she ‘grew up in a family of singers... music was a constant part of [my] life,’ and another recalling that although her family was not musical, they encouraged her to ‘follow the music’.

8.2. Formal Choral/Vocal Training

Typically, participants’ formal choral/vocal training consisted of private voice lessons (‘I took voice lessons from middle school on’). Other formal training occurred via participants’ involvement in choirs in academic settings before and during college. For instance, one participant ‘engaged in vocal pedagogy’ in her high school choir, and another received ‘high quality choral training’ in school. Variably, participants received choral/vocal training outside of academic settings (one attended a choral workshop at a prestigious performance venue).

8.3. Choral Groups with which Participant has Sung as an Adult

Types of Groups

Participants generally sang in community-based groups. For instance, one was a member of an early music ensemble, and another sang in several choral/orchestral groups (symphony choir, larger and medium-sized choirs). Typically, they sang in university-based groups, including both audition- and non-audition-based choirs.

Reasons for Joining these Groups

Typically, participants joined these choirs because they sought challenging and high-quality musical experiences. One participant ‘looked for places where [she] could push [herself] musically’, and another wanted to sing with the ‘highest calibre singers’. Participants also typically joined these groups because they wanted to build a sense of community and friends: When one member moved to a different country, she sought choral groups to ‘connect with people ... to meet people ... to make friends;’ another found choir a ‘social way to do fun things with people [I] know and to connect with the community’. Participants also typically joined these choirs because they wanted an outlet to sing, for singing was an important part of their life: Choir was ‘part of what made me tick’ or was an ‘important outlet’.

Variably, participants joined choirs because they liked/sought a specific repertoire. One participant wanted to sing pieces that could only be sung in a large choral group with an orchestra; another was drawn to a group’s focus on early music. Participants also variably joined because of convenience or availability, such as location and rehearsal time. For instance, one member affiliated with a university joined a choir because rehearsals occurred over lunchtime; another joined a group because it fit her work and family schedule.

As a rare category, participants joined choirs because they were academically required to do so (as voice majors, they had to sing in the university’s choirs).

Challenges to Participating in these Groups

Participants typically reported challenges related to time or scheduling. One person noted that, because she is not a professional musician, her own career often ‘takes over’ her life and her time for music suffered. Similarly, a participant described difficulties juggling time and the logistics of being in a choir with her family responsibilities.

Interpersonal struggles with other choir members, or group dynamics, were also typically reported. In one chorus, many members tried to ‘make corrections’ to what the director requested, and some were ‘diva’ members who ‘were not nice people’. One participant was also challenged by some members working harder than others in practicing, and another participant stated that some of the ‘intense choir people lord over the peasants.’

Typically, the strain of singing was also a challenge, an overarching category with two variant subcategories. In the first subcategory, physical strains were a challenge, as exemplified by the participant who found it difficult to keep her voice healthy because of the demands of her job, and by another who experienced medical procedures that limited her singing capacity, making it hard for her to manage her ‘vocal budget.’ In the second variant subcategory, participants identified feelings of musical insecurity as a strain. For instance, one participant was weighed down by feeling she had to prove herself, and another questioned whether she made a contribution to or was even needed in choir.

Several other variant categories also emerged. First, participants identified mental health struggles as a challenge: One participant’s ‘short spells of depression’ made singing hard, and another referred to ‘nerve-wracking’ performance anxiety. Second, participants’ work demands were challenging (the difficulty of going to rehearsal after a long day at work). Third, tension with the director was challenging (there was a ‘lack of joy’ because of the ‘cult of personality’ about the director; the choir director ‘didn’t always love’ the participant’s voice). Fourth, practice proved challenging, with one participant stating that it took lots of work to get ready for a performance, and another admitting it was hard to practice without knowing what was wrong. Fifth, the musical content or repertoire was challenging, with one participant stating that she had sung in many different languages and had done some ‘wild stuff’.

Finally, and rarely, the size of the choir was challenging, with participants noting that some choirs were too large (an ‘explosion’ of members) and others were too small (the ‘terror’ of joining a group that was ‘so small’).

What Participants Did to Meet/Overcome these Challenges

To meet or overcome these challenges, participants engaged in a range of activities, all but one of which was a variant category. First, they became more selective about the choral groups in which they participated, a category that itself yielded two variant subcategories. In the first subcategory, participants stepped back from certain choral groups (‘I stopped singing with a choir that wasn’t bringing me joy’; ‘I closed the door’ on a difficult group). In the second subcategory, participants became more selective about which groups they joined (they sought the ‘sweet spot’ between warmth and challenge; they avoided choirs that were too rigid in how tasks had to be done).

Participants also variantly let go of previous sources of frustration: One participant felt that ‘ceding control’ was good for her, and another let go of perfectionism and accepted that choral singing need not be a place where she was always the best. In addition, participants variantly recommitted to practice. One participant stated that she would do what needed to be done to learn the music and would have a positive attitude; another put in extra work to learn pieces. Variantly, participants also sought external support to meet or overcome these challenges. In one case, the participant worked through

technical issues with her voice teacher; another practiced ‘tricky spots’ with a family member who was a choir director. Participants also variantly took care of themselves and their voice to address these challenges (they got sufficient sleep, drank water, and reduced their stress; they tried to use choir as a mindfulness exercise).

Finally, and rarely, participants altered their schedule to address the challenges (after a full day at work, they went to a coffee shop instead of home to stay motivated to go to choir).

Benefits of Singing in these Groups

Benefits to Participants. Participants spoke of a range of benefits they reaped from singing in a secular choir. The specific nature of these benefits is described below.

Emotional. Emotional benefits emerged as an overarching general category. As a general subcategory, participants reported that choral singing facilitated their well-being; this broad subcategory was further divided into more specific sub-subcategories. In the first sub-subcategory, choral singing typically mitigated participants’ negative emotions and mental health struggles or was positive for their mental health. One participant stated that singing in a choir allowed her to feel that she was ‘good enough’ and thus quieted her internal critic. Another noted that when she was depressed and in her own ‘made-up crazy world of terrible feelings and thoughts,’ choral singing got her out of this ‘false’ world. In the second typical sub-subcategory, participants reported that choir provided an escape from life. One participant noted that singing in a choir required focus so that ‘life difficulties’ had to be ‘put in the back’ for a short time; another referred to choir as a respite from whatever else she was working on, an ‘escape’ that was ‘all mine’.

Variant sub-subcategories related to the facilitation of well-being also emerged. In the first, singing in a choir provided a sense of calm or stress relief. One participant stated that choral singing fostered calm and focusing on music ‘so tensions can fade away’, and another said that when she sings, she slows down and enjoys the presence of what she is doing. Second, participants variantly noted that singing in a choir facilitated their well-being by enabling them to make a contribution that had a positive impact on themselves or others. One participant acknowledged that she can be ‘judgy’ about her vocal contribution, so singing in a choir was a way to say to herself that she was good enough, she could contribute. Another stated that being part of a team with a purpose was ‘insanely beneficial’ and ‘immensely rewarding’. Third, participants variantly reported that singing in a choir provided skills applicable to other parts of life. One participant noted that she learned more about how communities work, how to be a good team player and a better leader; another reported that singing in a choir helped her learn ‘how to be mature’, how to handle mistakes, how to understand different skill sets and adapt them to build a stronger team. Fourth, choral singing variantly facilitated participants’ well-being because it was a crucial part of their identity and essential to their lives. One participant noted that her identity was tied to her voice; another stated that choral singing was ‘a primal instinct’, an essential need like water, food, and connection... she ‘needed’ choir, it was part of her ‘hierarchy of needs... [her] life battery’.

Emotional benefits of choral singing also typically included positive affective experiences not necessarily tied to well-being (for example, feelings of self-confidence/self-esteem, satisfaction, pride, happiness, validation). This typical subcategory also yielded two variant sub-subcategories. In the first, participants experienced joy and excitement via their choral singing (it boosted a participant’s joy and love of singing; it was a constant source of excitement). Second, participants expressed gratitude for their involvement in choirs (one described herself as one of the luckiest people on the planet because of her musical experiences; another was ‘eternally grateful’ to be part of a choir).

The final emotional benefit, a variant subcategory, related to participants' sense of emotional release and expression via choral singing. One participant described her choral singing as an opportunity to experience a range of emotions without getting 'stuck' in them, which helped her equanimity. Another found that choral singing afforded her a chance to express parts of herself that she could not in other places, and was a chance to be more fully herself.

Social. Participants generally reported social benefits of singing in a choir, an overarching category that also yielded subcategories. First, participants' social benefits generally consisted of a sense of connection, collaboration, or relationship with others. One participant described connecting with people she would not ordinarily meet and feeling 'warmth' and 'rejuvenated' by such connections. Others spoke of singing in a choir as broadening their social circles, nurturing a sense of belonging and community, with one participant asserting that her connection with other choir members who like to do the same thing was a 'huge deal... a strong bond'. Variantly, participants noted the powerful and meaningful experience of creating music with others (something 'magical' happens when human voices create beautiful music together, such as feeling awestruck and 'wrapped within the music' while being 'just one piece of it'). Finally, a rare social benefit included choir as something participants talked about with non-choir members ('it made [me] a more interesting person to others').

Cognitive. In addition, participants generally reported cognitive benefits, another overarching category with two subcategories. First, choral singing typically benefitted participants via intellectual/mental stimulation and focus. One described choral singing as a great mental exercise; another noted that when singing in a choir, she must be focused and present because she has to pay attention to the notes, the director, and the other parts. Variantly, participants enjoyed being part of the creative process (they 'use different brain muscles... to be creative').

Spiritual. Spiritual benefits emerged as an overarching typical category that contained one subcategory. Typically, participants reported that choral singing benefitted them because it was an ethereal or spiritual experience. One described realizing that 'it's not about the self [it's about] ... giving up to something that's greater than you'. Another described 'transcendent moments' in which she connected with a broader spiritual existence.

Physical. Typically, physical benefits of choral singing were also reported. More specifically, these benefits included choral singing as good exercise; a physical release; an activity that gave energy and released endorphins; and benefits arising from having to breathe, stand, and sit in specific ways.

Benefits to Others in Participants' Lives. Typically, participants noted that their family and friends enjoyed attending their concerts. One participant's family 'got a kick out of' seeing the participant sing in the choir; another participant reported that her concerts opened her family to a wider range of music and increased their appreciation for the arts. Participants also typically found that their participation positively influenced their family/friend/work relationships: One participant acknowledged that because singing kept her happier, more balanced, and less grumpy, she was a better family member; another noted that singing made her a better person, which 'always has a good effect' on those around her. Participants variantly reported benefits to children when adults take part in choir (singing in a choir set a good example for participants' children with regard to pursuing a passion, committing to something, being responsible). As a rare category, choral singing provided a shared connection or experience in participants' families (choral singing as a shared activity with another family member was 'cool, special'). In the final rare category, participants' contributions to the choir benefitted other choir members (if one participant sang well, it benefitted others in the group).

8.4. How Pandemic Affected Experience of Singing in These Groups

Given that data were gathered from November 2020 – January 2021, we wondered how the COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' experiences of choral singing. Generally, the pandemic reduced or cancelled in-person rehearsals and performances. One person stated that the pandemic 'took it all away'; another said that she 'lost' the choir when the pandemic hit; and a third reported that the pandemic 'tanked it' because everything was cancelled. Typically, participants lost their choral community and were missing in-person choir (not seeing people was 'rough'; they missed the 'real thing' of in-person singing, which highlighted how meaningful choral experiences were for them). In addition, the pandemic typically led to a loss of the benefits of singing: One participant stated that the pandemic limited what she could do to take care of herself; another acknowledged how much her 'creative muscles' had atrophied.

Participants also typically noted the challenges of virtual choirs, an overarching category with two variant subcategories. In the first, participants found that virtual choirs were not a sufficient replacement for in-person choirs (they were 'not what making music is about'; video recordings were not rewarding or satisfying because they were produced and not a real-life experience). Second, they had difficulty managing the technology required for virtual choirs (they could not make the technology work at home). Participants variably reported that it was hard to practice or perform alone during the pandemic (it was hard to prepare a virtual choir or recital in an empty space with no audience and no colleagues).

In contrast, participants variably discovered the benefits of virtual singing. One participant loved the application of technology to something personal and intimate that connected people around the world, and another noted that virtual choirs still put music out there 'in neat ways'. Similarly, in a rare category, participants reported some benefits from singing from home (as 'horrible and isolating' as the pandemic was, they still had the freedom to practice singing in their own way and not be frustrated at rehearsal). In the final rare category, participants found that the pandemic afforded them an opportunity to reflect (they re-evaluated the groups with which they sang; they asked themselves what they were getting out of each group).

9. Discussion

Sixteen members of US-based secular choirs provided rich data regarding their experiences singing as adults in these choirs. Prior to discussing the effects of such activities, which was the primary focus of the study, we briefly examine the contextual findings.

9.1. Contextual Findings

First, participants had substantial musical experience and training, and had sung in both community- and university-based groups. They joined these choirs in pursuit of high-quality musical experiences, to build a sense of community, and to provide an outlet for an activity that was important in their life. These more foundational findings are the first to examine the context from which secular choir singers come.

Second, these singers faced several challenges related to their participation in secular choirs, which may be inevitable when coordinating and synchronizing groups of people (Clarke et al., 2010). On one hand, many challenges involved scheduling and time demands inherent to choral participation, for these participants spoke of balancing work, family, and personal responsibilities, along with the responsibilities incumbent in choral singing. On the other hand, they spoke of interpersonal challenges within choirs, wherein group dynamics became distressing. In meeting such challenges, no common pattern emerged, other than that singers largely looked to themselves rather than to others to resolve the challenge (they were 'pickier' about the groups they joined; they let go of sources of frustration; they

practiced more or took better care of themselves). In only a few cases did they seek help from others (rehearsing a piece with a voice teacher). These data, too, are the first to illuminate the challenges faced by secular choral singers, as well as how they sought to meet such challenges.

9.2. Effects of Secular Choral Singing

Benefits

Participants reported a multitude of benefits from their participation in secular choirs. First, each spoke about mental health benefits, including the facilitation of their well-being that occurred through their choral singing. Whether ameliorating their own negative affect or mental health struggles, providing an escape from the demands of everyday life, or eliciting positive affective experiences such as joy and excitement, secular choral singing yielded powerful emotional benefits, findings that largely echo the extant literature (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Bullack et al., 2018; Busch & Gick, 2012; Clarke et al., 2010; Clift & Hancox, 2001, 2010; Clift et al., 2008, 2010; Grunwald Associates et al., 2019; Judd & Pooley, 2004; Liu & Stebbens, 2014; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2018; Saarikallio, 2012; Sanal & Gorsev, 2014; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016; Tonneijck et al., 2008). Although a few participants had performed as professional singers, they reported neither distress nor stress related to the competitive nature of such a vocation, nor impairment in their mental health, in contrast to existing research (Gembris, 2012; Ginsberg et al., 2012). The participants in the current study who had sung professionally had other careers or sources of income, which may have reduced the strain of making a living solely from professional singing.

Second, all participants reported social benefits from their secular choral singing, predominantly a sense of connection, collaboration, and relationship with other choral singers. These findings parallel the extant literature (Bullack et al., 2018; Busch & Gick, 2012; Clarke et al., 2010; Clift & Hancox, 2001, 2010; Clift et al., 2010; Grunwald Associates et al., 2019; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2018). The choir was indeed a source of community and support.

Third, each identified cognitive benefits of secular choral participation, asserting that their participation provided mental/intellectual stimulation and focus. Here, too, our findings mirror those in the extant literature (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clift & Hancox, 2010; Clift et al., 2008; Livesey et al., 2012; Moss et al., 2018).

Fourth, many reported spiritual benefits from their participation in secular choirs, describing it as an ethereal experience. Although such benefits have not been the focus of prior research, the creation of music, though not specifically secular choral music, has been described as a highly intense emotional experience that can lift people out of their ordinary world, transport them to an ethereal realm (Bailey & Davidson, 2002), and provide a sense of transcendence (Clift et al., 2008; Moss et al., 2018). Even when describing secular choral engagement, then, participants may have powerful experiences of a transcendent or spiritual nature.

Fifth, participants frequently noted physical benefits of choral singing, describing it as good exercise, a physical release that gives energy and releases endorphins. Other researchers have noted such effects on singers' energy and endorphins (Clift et al., 2008; Judd & Pooley, 2014). Although the extant literature does report less salutary physical effects, again for professional musicians (Gembris, 2012; Ginsberg, 2012), no such effects emerged here, perhaps because the livelihood of those participants who had sung professionally did not rest solely on their singing career (i.e., they had another source of income).

The benefits of participants' singing in secular choirs extended to their friends and family, as well. They enjoyed attending participants' concerts, and per participants' reports, experienced stronger relationships with participants that they tied to their choral singing. Such findings speak to the social

reciprocity between choir and audience (Bailey & Davidson, 2005), and perhaps also to participants' contribution to the wider community (Clift et al., 2008).

9.3. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected participants' secular choral experiences. In-person choral activities abruptly ended, and with that cessation came a loss of community and a loss of the many benefits participants reaped from their choral singing. Although several engaged in virtual choir activities, doing so was an insufficient replacement for in-person choir and was quite challenging technologically. A few, however, wrested some benefit from their virtual choral experiences. The experience of in-person choral singing, the most popular form of participation in the performing arts (Liu & Stebbins, 2014), was thus dramatically altered by the constraints made necessary by the pandemic, alterations that led to equally dramatic losses for participants in such groups.

9.4. Limitations

Our sample consisted primarily of White female participants from the US, several of whom had extensive musical or choral training. As such, the results may not reflect the perspectives of racially diverse or male choristers, nor those with less musical/choral training. As is customary in CQR, all participants received the interview protocol in advance so they could reflect on their secular choir experiences; those who received the protocol but elected not to participate may have had different experiences. Finally, interviews were conducted via phone, which may have shaped the information shared (participant comfort with phone vs. in-person interview format).

9.5. Implications

In contrast to much of the existing research, our sample consisted of a general (not those with specific medical diagnoses or the elderly), US-based population (not from UK or Europe) who spoke of their experiences singing in secular (not religious) choirs. As such, the findings offer several new insights to our understanding of this phenomenon.

First, the benefits of secular choral singing to singers are numerous... emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual, physical... with positive effects also reported for others in singers' lives. These multidimensional salutary effects speak to the appropriateness, perhaps even the prudence, of encouraging people to engage in secular choral singing to support their health and wellbeing. Although several participants had robust musical or choral training, many did not, and the benefits were experienced across the entire sample. Thus, those who direct secular choirs may find it useful, when engaging potential new members or maintaining current members' commitment, to attend to the numerous benefits of choral singing. Likewise, medical and mental health providers should consider suggesting secular choral singing to patients/clients who may be struggling with physical or psychological concerns, for we have evidence that such activities may be helpful for ameliorating those difficulties.

Second, this study documents the stark effects of a sudden deprivation of choral singing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The profound losses related to the cessation of choral singing were evident in our findings, losses not only with regard to the act of choral singing itself, but also to the benefits thereof. While the pandemic has devastated the world in very public ways, both individually and collectively, we must also remember the more subtle, but no less traumatic, toll it has taken on the everyday activities in which we would normally engage. As soon as is safe to do so, we urge a return to secular choral singing so that its many benefits to health and well-being may be restored to participants.

Finally, we encourage those who direct secular choirs to ask their members why they joined. The answers to such a question may provide vital information so that directors can, to the extent possible,

shape the choral experiences to meet members' goals. Similarly, ask singers what difficulties they encounter related to singing in a secular choir. Our findings indicate that such challenges are both practical and interpersonal, and as noted above, having such knowledge may enable directors to address or accommodate such challenges, likely for the benefit of all.

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Table 1. Effects of Secular Choral Singing on Singers

<u>Domain/Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Choral/Vocal Experiences Prior to Adulthood	
<i>Participated in school music programs</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Participated in music programs outside of school</i>	VARIANT
<i>Family influenced/supported musical experiences</i>	VARIANT
Formal Choral/Vocal Training	
<i>Took private voice lessons</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Received training via participation in academic choirs (precollege/college)</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Received choral/vocal training outside academic setting (workshops, camps)</i>	VARIANT
Choral Groups w/which Participant has Sung as an Adult	
Types of groups	
<i>Community-based groups</i>	GENERAL
<i>University-based groups</i>	TYPICAL
Reason for joining these groups	
<i>Sought challenging/high quality musical experience</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Wanted to build sense of community/friends</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Wanted outlet to sing/Singing important part of life</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Liked/Sought specific repertoire</i>	VARIANT
<i>Convenience/Availability (location, rehearsal time)</i>	VARIANT
<i>Academically required to join</i>	RARE
Challenges to participating in these groups	
<i>Time/Scheduling</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Interpersonal struggles with other members/group dynamics</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Strain of singing</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Physical</i>	VARIANT
<i>Feelings of musical insecurity</i>	VARIANT
<i>Mental health struggles</i>	VARIANT
<i>Demands from work</i>	VARIANT
<i>Tension with director</i>	VARIANT
<i>Demands of practicing</i>	VARIANT
<i>Challenging musical content/repertoire</i>	VARIANT
<i>Size of choir</i>	RARE
What participants did to meet/overcome these challenges	
<i>Became more selective about the groups in which participated</i>	VARIANT
<i>Stepped back from certain groups</i>	VARIANT
<i>More selective about which groups joined</i>	VARIANT
<i>Let go of previous sources of frustration</i>	VARIANT
<i>Recommitted to practice</i>	VARIANT
<i>Sought external support</i>	VARIANT
<i>Took care of self/voice</i>	VARIANT
<i>Altered schedule</i>	RARE
Benefits of singing in these groups	
<u>Benefits to participants</u>	
<u>Emotional</u>	GENERAL
<i>Facilitated well-being</i>	GENERAL
<i>Mitigated negative emotions/mental health struggles, positive for mental health</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Escape from life</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Provided a sense of calm/stress relief</i>	VARIANT
<i>Ability to make a contribution had positive impact on participant or others</i>	VARIANT

<i>Provided skills participant applied to other parts of life</i>	VARIANT
<i>Part of participant's identity/essential to participant's life</i>	VARIANT
<i>Positive affective experiences</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Joy/Excitement</i>	VARIANT
<i>Gratitude for choir participation</i>	VARIANT
<i>Emotional release/expression</i>	VARIANT
Social	GENERAL
<i>Sense of connection/collaboration/relationships w/others</i>	GENERAL
<i>Powerful/Meaningful to create music with others</i>	VARIANT
<i>Choir was something to talk about with non-choir members</i>	RARE
Cognitive	GENERAL
<i>Mental/intellectual stimulation, focus</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Enjoyed being part of creative process</i>	VARIANT
Spiritual	TYPICAL
<i>Ethereal/Spiritual experience</i>	TYPICAL
Physical	TYPICAL
<i>Physical benefits</i>	TYPICAL
<u>Benefits to others in participants' lives</u>	
<i>Family/Friends enjoyed attending concerts</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Positively influenced family/friend/work relationships</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Benefits to children when adults participate in choir</i>	VARIANT
<i>Choir was a shared connection/experience with family</i>	RARE
<i>Participant's choir contribution benefitted other choir members</i>	RARE
How COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Experience of Singing in Choirs	
<i>In-person rehearsals/performances reduced/cancelled</i>	GENERAL
<i>Loss of community/missing in-person choir</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Lost benefits of singing</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Challenges of virtual choirs</i>	TYPICAL
<i>Virtual choir not a sufficient replacement</i>	VARIANT
<i>Difficulty managing technology</i>	VARIANT
<i>Hard to practice/perform alone</i>	VARIANT
<i>Discovered benefits of virtual singing</i>	VARIANT
<i>Some benefits from singing from home</i>	RARE
<i>Chance to reflect</i>	RARE

Note: General = 15-16 cases; Typical = 9-14 cases; Variant = 4-8 cases; Rare = 2-3 cases

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for your interest in this study of the mental health benefits experienced by adults who sing in secular/secular (i.e., not religiously affiliated) choirs. I am grateful for your contribution to this project. As a reminder, to participate in this study, you must a) be at least 20 years old, b) have sung as an adult in a secular/secular choir for at least 2 years.

The interview will be based on the questions below. I will first ask about the overall context of your choral experiences. I will then ask specific questions about the mental health benefits you have experienced through your singing in a secular/secular choir as an adult. Finally, I will close with a few additional questions about your experience of the interview.

Contextual Questions

1. Please briefly describe the types of adult experiences (i.e., after you turned 18 years old) you have had singing in secular/secular choirs (types/sizes/numbers/locations of choirs, length of participation in such choirs, type of music performed by such choirs, rehearsal frequency/length, role you had in such choirs, number of performances per year, etc.)?
2. What, if any, choral training did you have prior to joining a secular/secular choir?
3. What, if any, other musical training did you have prior to joining a secular/secular choir?

Specific Questions

4. Thinking across your experiences as an adult singing in a secular/secular choir, why did you decide to sing with this/these choirs?
5. What, if any, challenges did you encounter related to your participation in such choirs?
 - a. What did you do to meet/overcome such challenges?
6. Broadly speaking, what benefits do/did you reap/experience from your singing in a secular/secular choir [will ask open-ended question first and pursue participant responses]?
7. What specific *mental health benefits* (short- and/or long-term) do/did you reap/experience from your singing in a secular/secular choir?
 - a. How does your participation in/experience of being in a secular/secular choir *specifically contribute to these mental health benefits*?
8. How does your singing in a secular/secular choir benefit other parts of your life?
9. How does your singing in a secular/secular choir benefit other people in your life?
10. Is there anything you wish were different with regard to your experiences singing in a secular/secular choir?
11. How, if at all, has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your experiences singing in a secular/secular choir?
 - a. How, if at all, has the pandemic affected the benefits you reap/experience from singing in a secular/secular choir?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experiences singing in a secular/secular choir?

Closing Questions

13. Why did you choose to participate in this study?
14. How was it to talk about these experiences?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of singing in a secular/secular choir?
16. Do you know of anyone else who might be interested in sharing their experience of singing in a secular/secular choir?