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A philosophical and practical approach to an inclusive community chorus

ABSTRACT

This holistic study explores the inclusive community chorus 'Singing Songbirds' in Millbrook, Dutchess County, New York. The chorus is part of the Institute for Music and Health's (IMH) programming. This article investigates the important philosophical approach and its practical application. Underpinning all the work of the IMH is the Diamond Method. This method is based on the work of John Diamond, MD, which includes the Outreach Principle. The choir's weekly rehearsals, the repertoire and a performance are discussed. The specific accommodations and support for each member, non-disabled and those with disabilities, are also described. Questions posed include the following: in what way is this choir different from other community choruses? Are the various accommodations for members successful? What are the attitudes of the non-disabled choir members to the members with disabilities? The author was a participant/observer during the development of the chorus over four seasons of the choir's history.

KEYWORDS

altruism
chorus
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disability
inclusion
singing

INTRODUCTION

Choruses and choirs have existed for their social, musical, political and religious contributions to communities throughout history (Ahlquist 2006). In recent years, health professionals and music scholars have explored the healing power

1. In her paper, she has extensively researched the topic. Out of the 31 references, many are articles on inclusion in school music classes, school choirs and bands, not specifically community choirs.
2. Garber is the former name of the author.

and benefits of choral singing. Clift and Hancox (2001) explore the social, emotional, physical and spiritual benefits to choir members. Kreutz et al. (2004) explore the health benefits of singing to the immune system: the active involvement in singing was medically proven to be of far greater benefit than when the members of a choir were passive listeners. These studies, however, do not address the benefits of the singing on the community as a whole, including the audience.

Salvador (2013), in a review of applicable research and professional literature pertaining to inclusion of people with special needs and/or disabilities in choral settings, states that most community choirs include people with typical physical, cognitive and behavioural abilities. She also outlines that there is only a small quantity of literature related to inclusion and choirs.¹ Yet, students with special needs, including those with developmental disabilities and those on the autism spectrum, have been seen to benefit greatly from inclusive community music programmes (Garber 2001).²

The inclusive chorus 'Singing Songbirds' of the Institute for Music and Health (IMH) was formed to promote social, musical and personal development. The IMH states, 'The Singing Songbirds brings together seniors, people with disabilities, families, and just about anyone who loves to sing' (Institute for Music and Health 2014). The importance of enjoying singing (rather than any experience or technical expertise members may or may not have) is emphasized in their statement. The IMH president and chorus director continues, 'We teach our students to make music in a way that enhances their personal development, as well as creatively and aesthetically. The combination makes it different from either regular music teaching, or mainstream music therapy' (personal communication). This set of criteria is different from that of some community music programmes. Like them, the IMH's intention is to incorporate accessibility and enjoyment into their programmes, as well as to include personal development through altruistic music-making. These differences will be explored in the following pages.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

Before the conception of the 'Singing Songbirds', Peter Muir, Ph.D., director of the choir, ran two separate choirs – one the 'Silver Songbirds' for seniors at a local senior living facility and the other a music group for adults with developmental disabilities. He became dissatisfied with the senior choir, which needed new members, and the chorus made up of young people with developmental disabilities also needed a focus. The latter group allowed students to develop socially, but did not challenge them musically, the way that, for example, focusing on part singing might do. Creatively, Muir decided to combine the two groups. In 2010, the choir grew from a core group of twelve members to 23 members performing at the 2012 Holiday Concert and has since rapidly grown to over 40+ members as of the spring of 2014. Members include seniors; families including sons, daughters and grandchildren with special needs; adults with developmental disabilities; adults with mental health problems; children, teenagers, musicians; and other interested community members. One choir member commented on the inclusive and accepting nature of the chorus: 'I think that it shows we are all one community, one family, one group, and labels don't matter. We can all have a good time together, no matter what is going on inside' (Diamond and Knowles 2013). As a participant/observer, I reflected in my notes on the rehearsal the week of 12 September 2013 as to



Figure 1: Members of two families rehearsing together in the Singing Songbirds inclusive community chorus, Millbrook, New York.

how I felt uncomfortable categorizing the demographics and labelling members because all members were each contributing in their own way. I considered many my friends – some more off the bell curve than others.

THE IMH

The ‘Singing Songbirds’ chorus comes under the umbrella of the IMH. The IMH was founded in 1992 by John Diamond, MD, psychiatrist, world leader and pioneer in the field of arts and health. It was originally located in London, United Kingdom, and is now based in Verbank, 80 miles north of New York City. The IMH provides classes, programmes, individual lessons and outreaches for their students and members of the community who are interested in music and wellness. Students include adults and children, from professional musicians to beginners, including those with special needs. They are from the local tri-state area and from overseas, including the United Kingdom, South America and Australia.

CHOIR DIRECTOR

Muir has a unique musical background, training and philosophy that influences and permeates his approach to the choir and its purpose. For this reason, it is of importance to describe all three. Muir’s core belief is that the true purpose of music is to be therapeutic. Muir (who is also Director of the IMH) trained intensively with Diamond since 1990. He is also an internationally recognized pianist, composer, scholar and conductor and has been working in music pedagogy for over 25 years.

For over a decade, Muir has worked extensively with children and adults with special needs, both individually and in community programmes. He has developed innovative and individualized programmes for each student whom

- Haywood writes of the struggle of an individual to be accepted in a choir and the role of singing in a choir in her life. 'Conductors and teachers must overcome self doubt regarding their lack of training and ability with working with students with special needs' (2005).



Figure 2: Exuberant singing of the final theme song 'I could have sung all night' at the end of a rehearsal of the Singing Songbirds inclusive community chorus, Millbrook, New York.

he has worked with for many years. Many of these students who previously were unable to interact, focus or even communicate are now members of the 'Singing Songbirds' chorus.³

Muir's own musical career began at the age of eight as a chorister in London. His experience in a renowned Anglican choir school was traumatic. The intensive training required, along with day-in day-out performances, resulted in what Muir refers to as 'a climate of fear' (personal communication). For instance, if a particular chorister sang a wrong note, he or she had to indicate this by raising his or her hand. Muir described being in the choir as, in essence, child labour. As a result of these early experiences Muir lost his confidence and love of singing. He left the choir school intending never to sing again, and indeed for some years after he did not.

Muir suggested that the pernicious 'climate of fear' was less the result of particular choir directors – it was not just the unkindness of the choir directors and their assistants at the choir school that was at fault but the system that they and the choir were part of (West 2007). Overcoming his early childhood traumatic experience as a chorister through – as an adult – his in-depth analytical work with Diamond for over 25 years has allowed Muir to now teach and help others through their musical development in a positive/nurturing way, including setting up a very different atmosphere and criteria for the 'Singing Songbirds' chorus.

DR JOHN DIAMOND AND THE DIAMOND METHOD FOR MUSIC

The Institute's approach to all of its programmes and classes including 'Singing Songbirds' is based on the Diamond Method for Music, the life work of John Diamond, MD. Diamond has gathered a body of research over

50 years through a long-standing much respected clinical practice.⁴ The Diamond Method has been shown to help with stage fright, professional burnout, as well as with developing creativity. It can be combined with and complement other traditional pedagogies of music. This has been clearly demonstrated for over fifteen years in the work of the Music Engagement Program at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Diamond is also a widely recognized best-selling author of over thirty books, including numerous books on music and healing, including a series entitled 'The Life Energy in Music' in which he describes the philosophy of his method. In *Life Energy in Music Volume I*, Diamond writes succinctly of his beliefs. In the chapter entitled 'The healing power of music' he begins, 'I honor music as a true and great therapy that activates the life energy in each individual' (Diamond 1981: 5). He continues in the chapter 'Life energy and performance': 'The basic purpose of music is to be therapeutic, to raise the life energy [...] This simple but profound truth seems to have been forgotten in this era which acclaims technical virtuosity and sophisticated musicology' (Diamond 1981: 7). Muir does not generally use the term 'life energy', but these concepts underpin all of his work.

The method does not discriminate with regard to age or perceived musical ability: 'Everyone, regardless of their apparent level of musical talent, is capable of using music to enhance their lives and the lives of those around them' (Institute for Music and Health 2014). This simple statement describes the values and priorities of the 'Songbirds'. The intention is that the music, the singing and the shared music-making are used to enhance the lives of the members, their families, and the audiences who listen to them.

THE OUTREACH PRINCIPLE

The Outreach Principle, part of the Diamond Method for Music, provides the foundation for all the activities of the IMH and the 'Singing Songbirds'. It is therefore also important to describe this principle, which is unique to this particular chorus. The Outreach Principle is literally reaching out through music for the benefit of others. 'It combines two natural human impulses: the making of music and the innate human quality of altruism [...] music-making is at its most healing when it is made with the explicit purpose of benefitting another' (Institute for Music and Health 2014). The basic criteria and the simple idea behind the Outreach Principle are to make music for the benefit of others, to uplift their spirits or, to put it in other words, to enhance their well-being. Muir describes the principle with a simple and eloquent analogy:

Take a song you know and sing it in your regular way. Now sing the song again, this time consciously directing your energy to another person and with the intention of making them feel better about life. Engaging with them physically helps, e.g., by making eye contact if you can. Did you notice the difference between the two performances? When you really give out your musical energy to someone, the music suddenly acquires a depth, focus, and presence it didn't before. [...] The first time it was like a bottle of medicine sitting on the shelf in the bathroom cabinet; the second it was as though the medicine was actually being administered to help someone. The comparison is apt. Music is indeed a form of healing, perhaps one of the most powerful we have.

4. Diamond is a Foundation Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and American Holistic Medical Association, a Diplomate of the International College of Applied Kinesiology and is a Fellow and past President of the International Academy of Preventive Medicine. For more information on the work of Diamond, refer to <http://www.johndiamond.com>.

5. The poem is formatted by Diamond to further its life-enhancing properties.

But, like any healing, its potential is only realized when it is administered altruistically.

(Institute for Music and Health 2014)

In the situation of the 'Singing Songbirds', Muir's focus is on the intention behind the music. It does not matter if a member sings a wrong note. It is of no importance and is not mentioned or noticed. Pike (2012) suggests that the enjoyment and engagement in music making is more important than simplistic ideas of 'quality'. She states that music using this type of outreach approach has a 'potential use in redefining our views of excellence in music'. The climate and culture of the chorus is one of acceptance, of enjoying singing and of thinking of others. The intention behind the singing – of benefitting another – and the altruistic intent are the most important elements, not the accuracy of singing. As Diamond succinctly expresses in a poem,⁵

What
matters the pitch
when the song
is love?

(2001: 15)

PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS

The chorus meets once a week for a twelve- to fifteen-week season with a culminating concert at the end of each season. Members are all given a CD with their specific parts on it: soprano, alto, tenor or bass. Members are also given the choice of reading music or lyrics only. There are no auditions, and at each concert the audience is enthusiastically invited to join the next season, and it is pointed out that many of the members of the chorus have not sung or certainly have not sung in public before. For some choirs musical technique and proficiency is a priority and auditions are important to ascertain the level of technical proficiency, sight-reading ability, etc. Muir does not audition, although in many instances he does invite students with special needs when he feels they are ready to be included. His intention is to make the 'Singing Songbirds' friendly, accepting, supportive and enjoyable. The IMH advertisement for the choir emphasizes that the choir is 'Suitable for anyone who likes to sing, regardless of ability or experience. Chorus singing has never been as easy or so much fun!' Comments from one of the choir members support the choir's philosophy and intention:

My troubles melt away once I am in my spot among the sopranos. It is only an hour each week, but it is one of the most pleasurable and relaxing things I have done for myself in years. I have always wanted to try singing and this group is accepting of all levels of skill so it is perfect for me. There is a terrific mix of songs that we get to work on and I am finding out what I can do with my voice. The leaders share their expertise with humour, compassion and dedication. The result is a community of spirit and engaging, joyful music.

(Institute for Music and Health 2014)

Mark, another member, reiterates these thoughts: 'Singing Songbirds is accepting and friendly. Everyone is accepted whatever their social, musical

and developmental ability. There is an easy atmosphere, there is no pressure' (personal communication). This safe environment that is created in the rehearsals and performances allows members to develop at their own pace. The atmosphere is non-threatening and non-judgemental, allowing for beginners to professional musicians to feel welcome and included. Interestingly, West (2007), Artistic Director of the Music Engagement Program, who has spent over 30 years working in music pedagogy, states that within a non-judgemental prosocial musical environment, musicality and technique naturally improve.

6. If the opening theme song is for some reason omitted, some members on the autism spectrum will be 'put out' and will remind Muir that it has not been sung and insist that it is.

REHEARSALS/PROCESS

The choir rehearsals begin with deceptively simple warm-up exercises together with the 'Songbirds' theme song. The warm-ups are selected in part for their life energy enhancing properties. The songs are directed to and sung to other members – for example, 'You are My Sunshine' is sung to another member. This sets the tone of the rehearsal – of members relating to each other as well as to the director of the choir. The song is then sung quietly using vowels in a meditative manner. Another important warm-up and tradition at the beginning of each rehearsal is for the chorus to sing its theme song, 'Take Me Out to the Songbirds', to the melody of 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' with revised lyrics.⁶

Take me out to the songbirds
 Take me out to the crowd
 Play me some music and I'll sing along
 I don't care if the notes are all wrong
 For I like to sing all the fast songs and all the slower ones too
 But I like it most of all when I sing for you!

During the fourth line, 'I don't care if the notes are all wrong', members are given permission to sing the wrong note and delight in doing so. On the word 'wrong', the note should be E when sung in the key of C Major, but each member chooses a different off-key note to sing. In this situation, everyone relishes the opportunity to deliberately sing the wrong note, which is liberating and always causes smiles and laughter.

The importance of this simple exercise cannot be underestimated. Professional musicians and amateurs alike are frightened of singing a wrong note or of being off-key. Children have more often than not come across the judgement of a well-meaning music teacher, relative or friend who has told them they are off-key. Many have been told they 'can't keep a tune'. Out of this climate of judgement, many children grow into adulthood believing they are 'not musical' and 'can't sing' (Carpenter 2011). However, multiple studies and research show that only a very small minority of people have amusia (West 2009a). Mark, a chorus member, commented on the 'I don't care if the notes are all wrong' line: 'As long as I sing with heart it does not matter' (personal communication).

The last line of the theme song, 'But I like it most of all when I sing for you', is again simple but important and poignant. The song and the specific line 'when I sing for you' are directed out to another member (or, during the concert, to the audience) with members gesturing to each other. This creates a friendly and altruistic intent in the choir. Members are therefore relating laterally to each other, as well as to the choir director and beyond. The altruistic intent within the choir is, as mentioned earlier, the basis of the Outreach

7. The holiday concert in December 2013 displayed a typical season's wide-ranging repertoire: the opening theme song ('Take Me Out to the Songbirds'); 'Some Enchanted Evening' (Rodgers/Hammerstein); 'O Nata Lux' (Muir); 'Here Comes the Sun' (Harrison); 'Rejoice' (Handel); 'From Rags to Ritz' (Berlin); 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child' (traditional, arr. Burleigh); 'Shine on Harvest Moon' (Bayes/Norworth); 'From "The Sprig of Thyme"' (Rutter); 'Down by the Sally Gardens'; 'Can Ye Sew Cushions' and 'The Bold Grenadier' (traditional); 'Winter Wonderland' (Bernard); 'The Christmas Song' (Torme/Wells); 'All You Need Is Love' (Lennon/McCartney); and the closing theme song 'I Could Have Sung All Night'.
8. He also mentioned that when the strongest bass member was absent he decided to 'go for it' during the rehearsal, and from then on his confidence grew.

Principle. Mark again commented, 'Altruism is the equalizer; we are all altruistic and therefore all equal'. Again, the specific altruistic intent is unique to this choir. There is therefore a different yardstick to what is considered 'good' – there is a different criterion.

The last closing theme song that is sung at the end of rehearsals and concerts is 'I Could Have Sung All Night' (to the tune of 'I Could Have Danced All Night'). At this point, chorus members again sing to each other and/or to the audience affirming that, because 'you began to sing with me', they could have indeed enjoyed singing 'all night'. The last note of the song is held by all, with sopranos singing and relishing an exuberant high note of their choice (see Figure 2).

REPERTOIRE

The repertoire chosen is eclectic. Each season there are approximately eight songs: typically one from the Tin Pan Alley genre, a folk song, a Beatles or pop song, one early music piece, a classical piece, one musical theatre piece and one operatic piece.⁷ During rehearsal, each part is worked on, and the choir is given detailed instructions and pointers regarding, for example, sustained notes, the pronunciation of Latin or old English lyrics, dynamics, phrasing, meaning of lyrics and so forth. Complex musical terminology is also used for those interested. The level of musicianship is developed and progress is made for each individual person. There is no judgement in the usual sense, and it could be said that the quality of the singing is enthusiastic, focused, bold, therapeutic and, in conventional terms, of a good standard.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Recordings

At the beginning of the season each member is given a CD with their part (bass, tenor, alto or soprano) of each song to listen to and learn. Learning therefore occurs aurally. This approach is validated by Hammel (2004), who suggests that alternate notation can be one way of accommodating different learning styles. Moss (2009) wrote of students who were blind learning their parts by recordings and Braille music. This appears to be very useful to many members. One member, who knows the melodies of numerous songs, commented that when in his high school choir he had 'felt lost' and that he felt much 'trepidation' at the thought of singing a part (personal communication). However, his 'confidence grew' once he received a CD of his part and an individual lesson to focus on particular sections that were not the melody.⁸ He also indicated that over two seasons his musical ability and confidence had improved and that he was now able to follow and sing the bass part 80 per cent of the time.

Notation

Members are welcome and included in the chorus whether they are able to read music or not. There is a choice as to whether to read the lyrics with musical notation or the lyrics only. Lind (2001) suggested that it was beneficial for students with learning disabilities to highlight their part and/or to block out the other parts so as to simplify and reduce chaos. Some choir members use the highlighting technique, but many simply use the lyric sheets. Some members of 'Songbirds' are given alternative notation – for example, a member who has perfect pitch but is unable to read regular notation is given

lyrics with the notes written in script underneath the words. Other members, many with developmental disabilities, memorize the lyrics and thus become role models to other members. It could, however, be said that most choir members rely heavily on the lyrics and/or lyrics and notation. In contrast, for the Intergenerational Singing Chorus in Canberra, Australia, based in part on the same philosophy, community choir members are asked to sing without words or notation within the first rehearsal. The members of Christchurch University Canterbury Gospel Choir in the United Kingdom do not use notation, to allow for inclusivity and for members to move and dance.

Support

A support system is in place whereby stronger singers are placed strategically within a section. Members who need some support are seated next to someone who is assigned to help them. This assistance may include making sure the sheet music or lyric sheets are in the right order or reassuring them if there is a change in routine or wording. Non-disabled members also give rides to and from rehearsals – so informal buddies are also formed through this interaction. Sharrock (2007) states that choral directors and special needs teachers could use ‘peer partners’ or ‘peer tutors’, similar to this buddy system, although with goals that are more educational rather than social. Haywood (2005) confirms that a buddy system and building relationships are key factors in successful inclusive choirs. VanWeelden (2001) suggested assigning specific seats to members for both behavioural and physical reasons. Salvador (2007) reiterated the need for specific accommodations so that learning is not disrupted. Any ‘disruptions’ within the ‘Songbirds’ activities are handled with humour, patience and tolerance. No behaviour modifications are needed or used. Members are participating by choice, and any minor disruptions are circumnavigated with humour, rather than by a punishment and rewards system. It is of interest to note that one member who once needed close supervision now no longer has a specific buddy seated next to him.

In a general way the members of ‘Songbirds’ are supportive of each other and look out for each other. Participants with special needs are welcomed and accepted; however, it should be noted that they are the ones who often initiate a greeting or welcome (West and Garber 2005). Certainly the director’s wife, Judith Muir, oversees the choir to make sure everyone is comfortable and at ease. In the director’s absence she leads the rehearsals.

One observation is that, as in many other situations, some of the caregivers bringing consumers from group homes to the rehearsals are not fully involved and do not participate – a missed opportunity for them to engage with the consumers in a joint activity. Howard in her dissertation ‘Including individuals with special needs in choirs: Implications for creating inclusive environments’ suggests that advocacy is key to including members with special needs in choirs (2005). Advocacy is not something that the choir does per se, but by its very existence and its performances in the community one could say that this is an indirect advocacy.

Seating

The typical seating arrangement of parts for a choir – basses at the back, sopranos at the front and so forth – is not adhered to. The seating arrangement is often changed and experimented with.

In more recent seasons, a specific seat is allocated to each member. The sections are (from left to right) altos, basses, tenors and sopranos. This helps with members being able to keep to their parts more easily; for example, the altos are sitting away from the sopranos who are singing the melody. It also improves the overall quality of the sound in the particular auditorium used.

Solos

There are also solos within the concerts, given primarily by students with special needs who often exhibit little if any stage fright. The director works on the solos with the individual students during their lessons. Unlike other choirs, usually the families are committed to bringing students with special needs to individual lessons so that the members with special needs can develop socially and musically to their full potential. It is not a requirement; however, most families readily and willingly involve themselves in the various programmes and lessons the IMH offers. As previously mentioned, there are no auditions. Muir has a pool of students: when he feels a student is ready and can benefit from being in the choir, he invites them to join. Tooker supports this model and claims that a small group and individualized instruction are key to inclusion (1995). The ongoing personal and individualized work with students has allowed Muir to work towards very successfully integrating students into the choir.

Summary

Muir uses multiple accommodations and adaptations: specific seating, a buddy system, alternative notation, aural learning, one-on-one tutoring, and so forth. However, just as universal design benefits the whole community, so too do the adaptations and accommodations made in the choir. They are of equal value to the music historian singing a part for the first time and to the young man with autism. As the choir director, Muir's affect and empathy towards the chorus members, including those with special needs, influences and permeates the choir as a whole. He is in essence a role model to all members of the choir.

Performances

Before a concert, the members warm up in an adjacent room. Muir asks, 'What are we singing for?' Members jokingly suggest that they are singing for fame, everybody laughs, and then Muir reminds the chorus of their motivation: 'We are here to help the audience have a good time'. Muir writes,

It is important to see the difference between music made with the outreach approach and regular music-making, for instance in a concert situation. In a concert, the emphasis is the performer displaying his/her musical talents to the audience. And while the performer may simultaneously be connecting with his audience, the focus is nevertheless on the quality of the music-making, not on that of the connection. In a music outreach-type situation it is the other way round: the focus is on the quality of the connection itself, not on that of the music-making. Focusing on the connection in this way transforms the act of music-making, giving it an extra dimension, a meaning it would otherwise lack.

(Institute for Music and Health 2014)

In essence the music, the singing and the concert are used as a vehicle for communication and connectivity. The focus on connectivity is key to the rehearsals and the performances of the 'Singing Songbirds'.

The concert

Audience members, family members and choir members were interviewed after the summer 2013 concert (Diamond and Knowles). Their comments included the following: 'It was excellent – it brought a tear to my eye. I had to pull out a tissue a couple of times – very touching'. Another audience member commented 'Everybody put so much into it'. Another responded:

I was also a special education teacher myself, so when I saw that there were singers with disabilities singing with senior citizens and everybody all mixed together, I was very touched. That's why I started crying watching everybody come together, like there are no differences.

Different priorities

For many community choir directors there is pressure and expectancy for the choirs to perform to a high standard, to be competitive – indeed, to compete. Muir, however, has a different set of priorities – that of 'Is the music helping the audience? Is the music uplifting and of benefit to others? Are the choir members relaxed and enjoying themselves? Does it make others want to sing?' (personal communication). As Roma states, writing in the context of the incarcerated, music can be 'transformative, developing a sense of kinship, emotional development, fostering artistic expression and healing' (2010). Songbird members have repeatedly stated how important the chorus is in their lives. The social, inclusive and musical aspects are of equal importance.

This inclusive model contrasts with the status quo as described by Lubet in his comments on the ubiquitous nature of competition within western music: 'Western classical music canon and its pedagogical regime of "talent", ranking, and competition (pervasive in both the West and much of East Asia) serve more to deprive students of music than provide it' (2009). Haywood (2005) complements Muir's outlook and puts forward the idea of choirs developing a philosophy of process not product, of inclusivity not exclusivity. She is also concerned, however, with conductors 'taking a risk regarding the temporary or permanent effects on the sound of the group'. The concerns and findings of Mazingo (1997) were that students with learning disabilities were less able to match pitch in comparison with their non-disabled peers. Salvador (2013) emphasizes that assumptions cannot be made about the suitability of a person for a choir solely on the label they have been given regarding their disability.⁹ Howard (2005) advocates for an open-door policy and suggests that the very process of making music helps create change in the individuals with special needs, the inclusive choir and the conductor. Muir is interested in change, in personal development. However, in Muir's case, he does not consider he is 'taking a risk' – rather, he is offering a unique opportunity to the local community. He is not concerned with the label a person has been given; he is also not concerned with the technical aspects of the singing, although the choir has a 'good' sound. With this in mind, conductors, teachers and peers generally have low expectations from students with disabilities (Cassidy and Sims 1991). Muir, however, has high expectations and standards, does not

9. Salvador also points out that it is potentially discriminatory to exclude students within a school context from participation in a choir.

patronize and expects all members to focus and participate fully. His expectations are rewarded.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

My own involvement in the chorus was, in the beginning, to support and help with the inclusive music initiative, as this was an area that I was involved within my own teaching work. I was also to observe and study the choir from an academic standpoint. Over time, however, I became increasingly involved in the choir. I began to look forward to the rehearsals. My singing and ability to sing the alto part improved and my stage fright lessened. I also took individual lessons to improve my ear and ability to sing a part. My partner also joined the choir and our involvement and mutual music-making enhanced our lives greatly.

CONCLUSION

The choir, following the director's example, is in essence tolerant and accepting of each member's different learning styles and developmental, social and musical abilities. Members with special needs and those without bring positive attributes and attitudes to the table. Both benefit and contribute equally but in different ways (West and Garber 2005). Those members without special needs bring an open mind, tolerance and a willingness both to learn and to contribute to the choir. Those members with special needs bring their enthusiasm, lack of self-consciousness, in some cases exceptional musical skill and musicality, friendliness and, for the most part, lack of stage fright. Most importantly, the choir director sets up the climate and goals of the choir with the overall intention of helping others through music. It is for these reasons that this truly inclusive and unique choir is successful, popular and rapidly growing.

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