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Voices 21C: A Collaborative Choral Enterprise

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ABSTRACT

How can passion for choral music be turned into something that challenges the status quo? Over the course of four seasons, VOICES 21C has progressed from being a short-term, project choir to an established, high-level performing choral collaborative. Like many community music choral organizations, VOICES 21C is centered on social justice themes that are highly relevant in today's world. Unlike many choirs, VOICES 21C is concerned with the empowerment of singers; both individually and collectively. Social justice, in the context of VOICES 21C, is where the intersection of critical and historical thinking, sustained inquiry, concern for a more equitable social order and for "the marginalized other" take on significance. The group's critical, contemporary approach to choral singing evokes for the listener a thoughtful and provocative politicized perspective regarding the fears, hopes, and desires that characterize humankind. This article will address the philosophical, artistic and organizational processes that have evolved as the members of VOICES 21C have purposefully moved toward creating a more inclusive and collaborative, social justice-oriented choral enterprise.

Keywords: choral, collective, community music, performance, social justice

VOICES 21C: A Collaborative Choral Enterprise

I first saw VOICES 21C perform at Boston University in October 2016. The performance featured non-stop musical sequencing, which created the feeling of an interior monologue. The music made me feel as if multitudinous thoughts and feelings were passing through my mind. The movement suggested a visual tapestry, illuminating the singers' conscious reactions to the text. Aleatoric, improvisatory passages provided space for singers to express individual musical ideas juxtaposed among the tonal harmonies of traditional repertoire. The group's contemporary approach to choral singing evokes for the listener a unique and thoughtful perspective, regarding the fears, hopes, and desires that characterize humankind.

How can passion for choral music be turned into something that challenges the status quo? In 2015, founder, artistic director, and human rights activist, André de Quadros, began with a vision of bringing extraordinary singers together to form a project choir. The group's mission would be to facilitate social change and global understanding through choral music. The music-making was to be collaborative; using a dialogic approach. Since their inception, VOICES 21C has evolved into a Boston-based community-focused choir that uses music as a vehicle to explore the fears, hopes and desires facing humanity in an ever-tumultuous world. This is a choir that "does things a bit differently" (Broeker & Harris, 2017, p. 41). The choir's thought-provoking style can be challenging, risky, and at times, unnerving. This article will address the philosophical, artistic and organizational processes that have evolved as the members of VOICES 21C have purposefully moved toward creating a more inclusive and collaborative, social justice-oriented choral enterprise.

Choral music making has long been regarded as the most widespread form of participatory music making and has long been utilized as a locus for personal agency, community bonding and social change (Ahlquist, 2006; de Quadros, 2012, 2015). People who participate in choral singing often express feelings of enjoyment, togetherness, and a sense of belonging. Sam Brukhman, founder of the Dallas chamber-choir Verdigris, described the bonding that takes place in choral music as a communal feeling of working together in which singers make a piece of art that's never going to happen in the world, ever again, right now, in this moment (Bishop, 2018). More than just singing, choirs provide a diverse range of formal and informal opportunities for people to learn more about music, to foster social change, and to feel a sense of community.

Singing for a Cause

Community choirs encompass a broad range of characteristics; many are bonded culturally and socially around a specific set of circumstances. Drawing from his experience with a *kwaya* (choir) in Tanzania, Gregory Barz (2006) defined "community as a group of people that gathers for a *reason*: whether to remember and recall, to share, or to create new experiences" (p. 25). Viewed from a sociocultural lens, choirs may be considered small-scale social systems of humans who share a set of features, behaviors, norms, and standards.

Social systems, like choirs, are bound by a shared sense of purpose, however that may be expressed. Street choirs and protest choirs are examples of community choirs who lend their support to campaigns and political causes. The Liverpool Socialist Singers have become part of the radical fabric of their city. In the UK, more than 50 street choirs include anarchist, green, women's, and an increasing number of LGBTQ choirs (Remer & Mason, 2016). There are choirs of asylum seekers, choirs singing to raise awareness of human rights, and choirs that simply

forge joyful solidarity within their communities. Sometimes activist choirs collaborate to busk to raise money for campaigns and causes. The *Côr Cochion* (Cardiff's Red Choir) reported being shot at in Gaza while singing to support the oppressed peoples in that region.

The focus of a community choir may be based on musical as well as extramusical traits. For example, The Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus of New York City and The Fisk Jubilee Singers exemplify choirs whose memberships are predicated on ethnicity (Jacobson, 2016; Metzelaar, 2016). The High Hopes Community Choir of Dublin identifies with the hardships of homelessness. GALA is an international organization of choirs who support the LGBTQ+ choral movement (Strachan, 2016). Community choirs empower singers to communicate a broad range of social messages.

VOICES 21C may not be a protest choir but the ensemble espouses an overarching political perspective in their music. VOICES 21C is a high-level, creative, compassionate, and technically proficient CM choir comprised of activists, artists, composers, educators, social workers, software developers and students. The group identifies as an artist collective that is dedicated to humanist ideals of global understanding through choral music. During performances, the musicians co-create using artistic processes that include spoken word, creative movement and body imagery, traditional Western classical music, non-traditional world music, and improvisation. The group's critical, contemporary approach to choral singing evokes for the listener a thoughtful and provocative politicized perspective regarding the fears, hopes, and desires that characterize humankind.

Social Justice

Community Music (CM) focuses on community involvement, social interaction and bonding, friendship, social capital, happiness, and health and wellness (Silverman, 2012). Social justice, a common theme within CM, adds a component that holds all humans should have equal access to wealth, health, well-being and opportunity. Advocates of social justice are often at odds regarding specific politics and policies; however, proponents share a broad vision of an ideal world that is free from oppression.

Social justice, in the context of VOICES 21C, is where the intersection of critical and historical thinking, sustained inquiry, concern for a more equitable social order and for “the marginalized other” take on significance. As the plight of self and other become integrated into artistic processes, music making becomes enlightening and transformative. By confronting contemporary issues that marginalized, silenced, or disadvantaged people experience with excitement, fear, anger and hope, the members of VOICES 21C maintain a heightened sense of musical purpose and personal meaning. Being able to exemplify a particular perspective enhances the intersubjective cohesiveness among individual singers and provides a holistic sense of artistic justification during performances.

Artistic Vision

Like many CM choral organizations, VOICES 21C is centered on social justice themes that are relevant in today’s world. Unlike many choirs, VOICES 21C is concerned with the empowerment of singers; both individually and collectively. The mission states that the group is a welcoming space for LGBTQ+, committed to contemporary composers and focused upon improvisational, interdisciplinary modes of performance.

The choir is comprised of a collective of artists and contributors working together via an egalitarian consensus model. According to André de Quadros, “We are all co-creating—the

conductor does not dictate. Rehearsals are in a circle, and all are encouraged to experiment and engage in critique and feedback. The singers are talking about what is important to them in rehearsal” (Cruz, 2017, p. 16). For a majority of choirs in the United States, this is unimaginable.

In the paradigm of choral singing, it is the conductor who makes the musical and artistic decisions (Debrot, 2016). Singers are often treated as instruments for the purpose of realizing the conductor’s artistic vision and the dictums of the conductor supersede the musical needs and interests of the singers (O’Toole, 1994, 2005). “The suppression of individuality in most matters to do with the artistic enterprise is relatively unchallenged and largely uncontested in the music profession” (de Quadros, 2012, p. 502). Recently, this model of leadership has come under scrutiny. Seifter and Economy (2001) suggested that autocratic leadership styles not only stifle artistic freedom but may inhibit individual musical growth and satisfaction within an ensemble.

Contemporary musicians, in particular choral singers who want to be seen and respected as artists, feel a strong desire to be included beyond simply following a conductor’s directions (Wis, 2007). Artistic respect is evident in the musical and organizational practices of VOICES 21C where leadership is shared, and emphasis is placed on the musicality, creativity, and intelligence of individual singers. So, you might ask, how does this work?

Leadership

Leadership roles have evolved since the group’s inception. Members share in artistic and organizational decision-making. However, as in every ensemble, someone must lead rehearsals, monitor artistic decisions, and cue the ensemble at critical moments. Rather than direct, André de Quadros facilitates. André, as he prefers to be called, leads rehearsals by keeping singers on task and providing an overall rehearsal structure. Cheryl Engelhardt, who is an alto, author, composer, and part of the leadership team, describes André as a kind of:

Gandhi-meets-Dumbledore. He's calm and gentle, trusting, and brilliant.

He does important rehabilitation and peace work with jail inmates, international choirs, refugees, Israelis and Palestinians, while delicately balancing the life of teaching world class choral conducting seminars, traveling to direct global choral festivals, and working with us, a small project choir based in Boston.

And... he is a little crazy. Or a lot crazy. We're not actually sure (Engelhardt, 2017, p. 5).

André, who travels the world on a regular basis, has a history as a visionary in choral conducting and as a human rights activist. During rehearsals, André facilitates varied artistic exercises centered on a particular musical idea or theme, rather than focusing on delivering prescribed outcomes. He leads VOICES 21C through multi-sensory improvisatory activities designed to foster intersubjective understanding and creative interaction among the singers. During the creative process, André incorporates imagery and questioning to provoke artistic responses from the singers:

Go ahead. Try it. Whatever comes into your mind. Let it escape from your lips
As you say; 'Here I am,' [name], _____. How do you present yourself? Is it
biased, favorable, cynical, enlightening? (Genese, 2019)

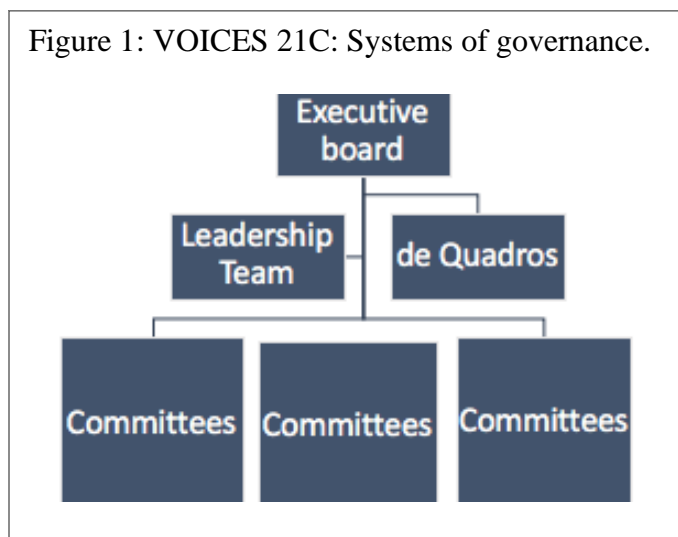
The singers are encouraged to contribute their own artistic ideas and provide feedback. The rehearsals are structured but have an open-ended quality regarding artistic and musical outcomes.

As leader, de Quadros brokers artistic ideas. Sometimes this means playing the role of the unpopular voice. The intent is to engage the group in intense philosophical, political, and musical discussions so that the group may eventually reach a consensus or an agreeable option.

Consensus means that sooner or later, through the tweaking of ideas, everyone ends up on board (Bryson, 2016). Facilitating entails working as visionary, artist, co-creator, and mediator.

Operations

Because leadership is approached collaboratively, the singers in VOICES 21C share both management and operations duties for the organization; during preparation, rehearsals, and at performances. Everyone—including André—is a volunteer. Each ensemble member must assume individual responsibility for managerial tasks by serving on committees. As a result, every singer plays an important and vital role in realizing the artistic and performance goals of the ensemble.



The system of governance has evolved based on the artistic and financial needs of the ensemble. The executive board is comprised of de Quadros, and three members—Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer—who do not perform with the group (See Figure 1). The board assumes responsibility for ethical governance, to help the group realize artistic goals, and for organizing financial matters. There is a leadership team comprised of singers who oversee day to day operations. The leadership team assumes responsibility for recruiting and auditioning members.

In addition to overseeing membership, operational tasks include long-term rehearsal planning, travel, performing schedules, social media and marketing, grants, and fundraising. Committees carry out most of the leg work (See Figure 1). Committee members assume tasks such as maintaining the VOICES 21C website, publishing a monthly newsletter, proposing repertoire, soliciting compositions, obtaining rehearsal venues, and developing social and educational programs.

Meeting Social and Artistic Goals

How does operating collectively help the group meet social and artistic goals? The leadership team is the “heart” of VOICES 21C. The team works to maintain philosophical alignment and to keep artistic goals at the forefront of the enterprise. In turn, individual singers, who know that the success of the group is dependent on their commitment, must accept shared responsibility for learning repertoire, being prepared, and being “present” during rehearsals in order to realize their artistic goals.

As in any performing ensemble, rehearsal time is precious. The group rehearses for one weekend per month in order to prepare for “Voices of Freedom,” at Vilnu Shul, an annual concert organized the Jewish cultural center in Boston, as well as a send-off concert and summer tour. Group members travel to Boston from as far away as California, so schedules must be sent out in advance. Music and recordings of individual voice parts are provided via the group’s web site. Singers, who have access to materials in advance, are expected to prepare and know the music when they arrive for rehearsals.

Repertoire is selected based on an overarching theme determined by André and VOICES 21C’s repertoire committee. They then work collaboratively to determine which literature will be most appropriate for the group. The group also solicits original works from contemporary

composers. This year, VOICES 21C will perform *she took his hands*, by Nicholas Cline, winner of the 2018 call for scores. Group members Cheryl Engelhardt and Michael Genese have written compositions for exclusive performance by the choir.

Perhaps the most innovative artistic aspect of VOICES 21C is that the group espouses an artistic approach centered on individual communication and creative interaction through choral music. The singers are asked to communicate complex intellectual ideas and emotions both physically and vocally. Moreover, during rehearsals there is an openness to new ideas among group members, André guides, rather than tells the singers what to do. Instead of focusing on mere notes, singers are asked to make critical decisions about their role within the music and in relation to each other. Engelhardt (2017) describes how de Quadros facilitates complex spoken/sung/aleatoric/improvised/physical interaction:

André puts interesting things into his choral performances: We make tableaux (poses motivated by what we are singing). We use each other as props and inspiration for movement while singing. Some of it gently choreographed, some of it left up to our own interpretation. (p. 5)

During rehearsals and performances, ensemble members contribute a wealth of singing proficiency and prowess mixed with intersubjective, intellectual ability. The effect may be described as; 21st Century post-modern sensibility meets the collective sensitivity of choral singing.

Benefits

Although there are few tangible benefits associated with membership in VOICES 21C, the singers are passionately engaged in the notion of collaborative choral artistry. Members navigate intellectual, musical and philosophical challenges during the music-making process.

They make defensible artistic decisions because they share responsibility for whether or not performances are successful. It is necessary for singers to take risks and make mistakes in order to connect with the music on a deeper, subconscious level. This is possible because they share a safe musical environment, devoid of egos. Each individual is integral to the development of the music and the ensemble.

Aside from a common interest in issues surrounding social justice, singers bring to the group a vast array of ancillary skills, interests and abilities. This is attractive for musicians who are looking for professional growth. Members who are choral music educators have the opportunity to learn about alternative, modern approaches to choral teaching and learning; in particular, aleatoric techniques, improvisation, and movement in the context of choral performance. Conductors have the opportunity to apprentice; at rehearsals and performances. Composers have a platform; for reading, recording and performing original works.

For the listener, it is a sense of human vulnerability and ongoing, continuous self-reflection that makes performances by VOICES 21C worthwhile. Their combination of intellectual prowess and singing excellence creates a spontaneous and viable spiritual life source. Each singer is committed to the group and to each other. The mutual respect for the “other” as an imperfect, historically situated human entity fosters a chemistry; as if the group is nurturing each other through music. This bond among the singers makes VOICES 21C a force to be reckoned with in contemporary choral music.

Challenges

VOICES 21C is not the sort of choir in which you just show up and sing. Members are often surprised when they get in to the group and experience the sort of commitment that is required. Responsibility is individual and members are expected to know their parts in advance

so that once-per-month rehearsals are spent developing relationships and working out aspects of performance. Personal involvement is requisite. Chad explained:

...You do your thing and then you go home and that's not the expectation with this group. There's an expectation that all of our voices are valued on every level and there's also an expectation that we contribute whenever we can.

(interview, July 23, 2017)

Performances, which are loosely scripted, require a kind of on-your-feet thinking. This can be challenging and exhilarating for singers. Megan shared:

I think that every time you go and do a new concert with André it's a completely different experience. You never do the same thing twice in exactly the same way which is great because a lot of times I'm not really happy with what I contributed, and I get another chance to contribute a different way. It's nice to have chances to mix it up every time, and you never get bored performing these concerts.

(interview, July 25, 2017)

It can take time for individual singers to become accustomed to being collaborative. Singers are challenged artistically and personally in order to address the needs of the ensemble. According to Chad, VOICES 21C has personal value that goes beyond just making music:

I've been in the process of kind of evaluating things [in my life] like what you know, what gives me joy. What takes me to things that I wouldn't otherwise get? And I think there are a couple of things really. I guess big picture-wise I see it [membership in VOICES21C] as: [the] mission, which is really clear, and [the] process, which is not clear... It's a very creative, collaborative process, which so aligns with the mission of the organization. Honoring all of these different voices,

which effects how we choose music and how we perform. The other thing is that this is a group that works at a pretty professional level but does not seek to be a professional organization. Rather it seeks to be a community.

(interview, July 23, 2017)

Balancing artistic excellence, creativity, and efficiency within a limited rehearsal structure and touring schedule remains a constant challenge. Because of these challenges, there has been some turnover in membership. Presently the roster is divided into two lists: There is an active roster, which contains the names of members who are singing with the group that year, and a resting roster, comprised of members of VOICES 21C who cannot participate due to time, travel, or life events. This turnover presents certain challenges with continuity and effects the overall sound of the group.

Long-term goals

André de Quadros freely admits that over time, there has been a shift in the groups' social and artistic objectives. For example, the ensemble was founded by André as a gigging, relatively low-commitment project choir under his direction, but it has morphed. VOICES21C has slowly moved toward an egalitarian model, which means decisions are made by everyone reaching consensus. The ensemble originated with students from Boston University, but it is now comprised of teachers, conductors, performers, composers. André sees no point in ignoring the individual expertise in the group. The conductors conduct, the composers compose. The singers sing. Everyone is valued.

One of primary challenges with long-term goal-setting is that there are few models to follow. And so, as the group moves forward, roles are continually negotiated and revised. What remains constant, however, is dedication toward the development of this unique model of choral

music performance. In addition, the group remains devoted to representing the voices of the silenced, the forgotten, and the marginalized.

Past Performances

Since the choir's debut project at the CHORALP Festival in Briançon France, they have received considerable acclaim. The 2017 season began with a performance of all-Muslim music at the Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture and culminated with a tour of Israel and Palestine, where they presented their controversial program, *Here I Am*, met with Combatants for Peace, collaborated with local community choirs, and participated in educational programs involving youth choirs on the West Bank. In 2018, VOICES 21C performed *Somehow this Madness Must Cease* in Mexico City and Cuernavaca, helped revive a massive cultural center in Cuernavaca, and gave choral workshops to adults and under-served children. Presently, the group is doing community outreach in Boston and preparing to return to France for *Les Choralies* festival, which tri-annually takes place in Vaison-la-Romaine. The leadership team has a call out for unaccompanied SATB choral works by contemporary composers. Future endeavors include community workshops, clinics, and a performance at the ACDA Eastern Division Conference in Rochester, New York in 2020.

Maturing Process

Over the course of four seasons, VOICES 21C has progressed from being a short-term, project choir to an established, high-level performing choral collaborative. Being relatively new, the leadership team continues to analyze, reflect and refine regarding the groups artistic mission and organizational structure. Wrestling with artistic challenges and experimenting with various ways of being gives meaning to the entire experience. Behind the scenes, members continue to work to push musical boundaries and each other in order to explore new avenues for

collaboration and choral performance. For audiences, VOICES 21C remains dedicated to critical engagement with regard to what it means to be human. And underlying all of this is a clear sense of delight and joy. The singers radiate camaraderie with each other and warm affection for the music they create.

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