Investigating amateur choirs in the United Kingdom as sites of musical learning and ambition

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The authors contributed equally to the analysis and writing up of this article.

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Abstract

Singing in an amateur choir is widely recognised as a source of enjoyment, social connection, and wellbeing. Choir membership in the United Kingdom, however, is at risk of decline through an ageing demographic and lack of diversity, and also through its relationship to historic music education practices, which encouraged singing and knowledge of choral repertoire in ways that are now less prevalent. In partnership with the [anonymous] music education charity, in 2022 we conducted an online survey to investigate factors affecting the development of musical learning and ambition within amateur choirs. In this article, we report on data from choir members (*n* = 362) and choir directors (*n* = 78), representing over 350 different choirs in the United Kingdom. We focus here on choir members' perceptions of musical learning and ambition, exploring three primary themes: namely, (i) the impact of audition policies on inclusion and belonging; (ii) the role of prior music education and training among members and directors; and (iii) ambition and affirmation through performing and competing. We compare the relationship between learning and ambition in the auditions, rehearsals, and performances of lower-voice, upper-voice, and mixed-voice choirs, and demonstrate how shared learning goals and styles contribute to success and satisfaction in choral singing..

Keywords: Amateur choirs, Singing, Leisure, Auditions, Rehearsals, Lifelong learning

Introduction

Membership of amateur choirs and singing groups requires no musical equipment and is accessible without prior musical training: the Natural Voice Network, for example, promote their activities with the belief 'that singing is everyone's birthright, regardless of musical experience or ability' (www.naturalvoice.net); while the Big Sing issues the invitation, 'you don't need to have a fantastic singing voice – just bring your enthusiasm' (www.big-sing.com/about). Negative music education experiences or 'wounding stories' from the past (Palkki, 2022, p. 482) can cause some adults to avoid recreational music-making, but given the right opportunities in their local communities, others will return to singing regardless of disappointing or limited music education when at school (Turton & Durrant, 2002). However, motivation to engage in amateur music-making – and specifically singing – is more often associated in current discourse with social, health, and wellbeing benefits than with opportunities to develop musical skills.

Research evidence for the benefits of leisure-time choral singing has grown rapidly over the past two decades. In particular, empirical studies have demonstrated that communal singing has many and varied positive effects upon health and wellbeing. Singing together has been shown to foster feelings of closeness and solidarity (Weinstein et al., 2016), improve mental health (Williams et al., 2018), and enhance quality of life for people with conditions such as dementia and Parkinson's disease (Davidson & Fedele, 2011; Tamplin et al., 2019). Other studies have explored the close relationship between individual choirs, their geographical localities, and members' sense of belonging (Gibson, 2016; Youngblood, 2013). However, few studies have focused on the role of recreational choral singing for music education, learning, and progression.

The overlooking of musical learning in accounts of recreational singing may stem from the perceived relationship between amateur musical participation and school music education. Music education researchers in diverse international contexts have suggested that teaching music in school fails to prepare pupils for the reality of participation in music-making after leaving school (Isbell & Stanley, 2011; Mantie & Tucker, 2008; Pitts & Robinson, 2016; Woody et al., 2019), in some cases because of its marginalisation, inaccessibility, or absence within the curriculum (Angel-Alvarado, Gárate-González & Quiroga-Fuentes, 2021; Lilliedahl, 2023; Mullen, 2019). Even when music is present in schools, the potentially paternalistic or didactic role of music teachers or directors can leave pupils with little musical agency and fail to prepare them for more informal ways of music-making once they leave school (Bull, 2016; Green, 2006). Furthermore, an overemphasis on learning, achievement, and excellence in the classroom can mean that amateur musicians are more interested in engaging in performance simply for the satisfaction of participation, rather than for the educational benefits (Mantie & Talbot, 2022). This may explain why some participants in amateur choirs prefer to sing under the direction of an experienced and qualified conductor (replicating their school experience), while others seek out contrasting opportunities that value sociality and wellbeing rather than learning and ambition.

Given the apparent tensions between school music-making and recreational music-making, there are some advantages to conceptualising and researching amateur practices as experiences of participation and wellbeing rather than of teaching and learning. As Roger Mantie (2012) has expressed, 'focusing on learning changes practice from a social activity to an individual one' (p. 225), and therefore may not fully capture amateurs' experiences of and motivations for music-making. However, research into flow states for individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and groups (Duncan & West, 2018) suggests that making music is often most absorbing and engaging when challenge and

skill are equally balanced, leading in turn to experiences of intense concentration and artistic control (Wrigley & Emmerson, 2013), and investment in ensemble goals and artistry (Freer, 2009). Paying greater attention to the learning aims of recreational choral singing could therefore increase those aspects of personal and social wellbeing that are currently highly valued, by bringing them into closer contact with an understanding of musical development and lifelong learning.

With this in mind, our overarching research question was as follows: to what extent are amateur choirs in the United Kingdom experienced as sites of musical learning by their members? We aimed to identify the factors that facilitated or inhibited musical learning in choirs, and to consider how reported experiences of learning through amateur participation intersect with current debates in music education.

Research methods

This study was carried out through a collaboration between [anonymous research centre] and [anonymous music charity]. As an active participant in the amateur choral scene in the United Kingdom, [anonymous music charity] initiated the project to investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by choirs as they moved into the post-pandemic era. An online survey was chosen by the researchers as the method best able to capture a large number of responses from a range of choirs distributed across the United Kingdom (Eichhorn, 2021; Toepoel, 2016). Three versions of the survey were designed: one for choir members, one for choir leaders and directors, and one for members of choir committees, who undertook additional roles such as treasurer and secretary. The questions covered all aspects of choir organisation, membership, and experience, including motivations to join and stay in the choir, perceived personal and social benefits of singing together, and experiences of rehearsing, performing, and (where applicable) competing.

The survey was distributed online through social media, via membership organisations such as Making Music (www.makingmusic.org.uk), and through direct contact with specific choirs. Questions were presented in varied formats including free-text responses, rating scales, and multiple-choice answers; both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to facilitate large-scale comparisons alongside more in-depth investigation of individual experiences. In line with the Ethics Review Procedure of [anonymous university], respondents began the survey by reading participant information about the purpose of the study and the anonymous use and storage of data. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of the researchers and were informed that they were able to miss out questions or withdraw from the survey should they wish.

Analysis

After cleaning the data to remove incomplete or duplicate responses, each survey response was allocated an identifying code: mixed-voice (XV), lower-voice (LV), or upper-voice (UV) choir;[1] member (M), director (D), or committee member (C); and a response number. For example, LV/M001 represented a member of a lower-voice choir, and UV/D001 a director of an upper-voice choir. Where relevant to the analysis, specific choirs were categorised and numbered, such as XV/CHOIR001 or LV/CHOIR100. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise and compare

[1] Although lower- and upper-voice choirs in the United Kingdom have traditionally been known as male- and female-voice choirs, we avoid this gendered terminology so as not to perpetuate cisgendered and heteronormative assumptions. Research into singers with changing voices (Ashley, 2009; Freer, 2016) and transgender singers (Palkki, 2020) suggests that such language can be perceived as discriminative and exclusionary.

participants' quantitative responses; qualitative data was analysed using multiple cycles of coding and categorisation (Saldaña, 2025) to identify salient themes relating to the research questions.

At the conclusion of data collection in 2022, a full report of the findings was produced for [anonymous music charity] and made freely available on their website.[2] In preparing the report, we noted that while the first phase of our analysis had generated ideas that in many cases aligned as expected with previous research on leisure-time music-making (e.g., Pitts, 2020), two previously neglected topics emerged and warranted further consideration. We have written elsewhere about (i) equality, diversity, and inclusivity in the United Kingdom choral scene (Authors, 2025), and here we examine (ii) the relationship between musical enjoyment and achievement and its implications for lifelong learning in music.

In the second phase of analysis for this article, we looked more closely at the prior training of choir members and directors, the self-evaluated skills and competencies of singers, and the implications of such factors for the activities and ambitions of the choirs surveyed. Where relevant, we divided the data into subsections, such as those choirs where singers rated their own skills highly, or those who regularly took part in competitions.

Participants

After data cleaning, a total of 907 responses from three different categories of choir remained, with participants from across the United Kingdom:

1. 330 participants from 184[3] different XV choirs: 206 members; 48 directors; 76 committee members.
2. 334 participants from 114 different LV choirs: 205 members; 40 directors; 88 committee members.
3. 243 participants from 94 different UV choirs: 157 members; 38 directors; 49 committee members.

Since our focus here is on teaching and learning rather than organisation and administration, we have omitted the responses of choir committee members from this phase of analysis, giving a total of 694 respondents: 568 members and 126 directors.

Demographics

Our sample was broadly representative of the typical profile of recreational music-making in the United Kingdom, being predominantly ageing, White, and well-educated (DCMS, 2024). Across XV, LV, and UV choirs, the modal age for choir members was 65 to 74 years. However, LV and UV choirs also had substantial membership aged 75 or over (LV: 32%; UV: 31%), whereas the majority of XV choir member respondents were aged between 50 and 74 years. In UV choirs, 16% of choir member respondents fell into the youngest age bracket (20 to 34 years), in comparison to just 3% in XV choirs and 2% in LV choirs.

In LV choirs, 98% of respondents identified as White British (*n* = 201); for UV choirs this figure was slightly lower at 93% (*n* = 146); and for XV choirs lower still at 89% (*n* = 184). For all three categories

[2] Link to be added after anonymous review process.

[3] Numbers of individual choirs represented by the data are approximate, since not all participants specified the identity of their choir.

of choirs, these figures were in marked contrast to the England and Wales census data that year (ONS, 2022), which reported that 74% of the population identified as White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British. Additionally, the majority of choir members identified as cisgender and heterosexual and, in some cases – as we have discussed elsewhere – were affronted to be asked demographic questions around gender and sexuality, feeling them to be irrelevant to their choir membership (Authors, 2025).

The choir directors in our sample were also majority White British (XV: 94%; LV: 95%; UV: 95%): though smaller numbers of participants made the percentages higher, there were only single instances of other nationalities including Greek Cypriot, Canadian, American, Australian, one who preferred not to say, and one who specified 'Cornish'. We found that choirs with predominantly female memberships were more likely to have female directors, and that men were less likely than women to direct a choir of the opposite gender: while 36% of LV choirs were directed by women, only 20% of UV choirs were directed by men.

Findings and discussion

Our thematic analysis identified three primary themes related to our research question of how choirs are experienced as sites of musical learning: namely, (i) the impact of auditions on inclusion and belonging; (ii) the role of prior music education and training among members and directors; and (iii) ambition and affirmation as pursued through performing and competing. In the discussion that follows, we highlight the similarities and differences between choirs, noting in particular that while UV choirs were the most likely to adopt an 'open-door' policy with a low-stakes attitude towards performance, LV and XV choirs often participated in numerous concerts and competitions throughout each year. Of all the choirs represented in our survey, it was XV choirs that were most likely to attract and retain singers with the highest levels of prior music education and training, perhaps because of the diverse styles, genres, and repertories available to them as mixed-voice ensembles.

1. Who is welcome? Auditions and inclusion

Audition processes can have a significant impact upon the diversity and inclusivity of a choir, and subsequently upon experiences of teaching and learning. Although auditions form an important mainstay of singing at professional or semi-professional standards (Einarsdóttir, 2022), in amateur choirs they can discourage or prevent the participation of singers who lack 'that personal self-confidence to sing alone' (Bell, 2008, p. 239). The first indication of whether a choir considers itself to be a developmental ensemble which is focussed on progression, or an 'all welcome' group prioritising sociality and solidarity, can therefore be seen in their audition policies (Gunther, 2022). Within our survey, choir directors reported fairly limited use of auditions: LV choirs (38% auditioning) were more likely than XV (27%) and UV choirs (16%) to hold auditions, and XV choirs had the clearest policies (73% 'we do not hold auditions'), with only one response of 'sometimes' and one reference to a four-week trial period. One UV choir disguised their audition process through the offer of 'a free singing lesson to help give new members confidence and assess voice part [and] secretly spot if more help/training is needed' (UV/D006).

Not needing to audition was attractive to many prospective choir members in reducing the barriers to joining, but some participants acknowledged the limitations of an 'all-comers' policy and the 'varied skill level' (XV/M032) that resulted:

> *It is non-audition choir with a short 'ear test' to ensure a basic ability to sing in tune. As with many such choirs, many members have limited ability to read music and to practise constructively.* (XV/M028)

Conversely, for choirs of a higher standard, such as those that performed alongside professional orchestras, the audition was a source of motivation and learning:

> *You audition and then have to do repeat annual auditions. If you can clear the bar each time there are no annual fees and the musical scores are free. If you fail, you need to go away and work on what you failed at and re-audition.* (XV/M194)

In both of the examples above, the audition process set the tone for the expectations of choir members, making clear whether vocal and musical learning needed to have happened before joining, or would be supported in rehearsals, as in these instances:

> *Many of our members want to sing but have not sung since leaving school. We do not audition. Many surprise themselves with their ability.* (XV/M201)

> *We are a non-auditioned choir and support those with less musical knowledge. We are very nurturing in our attitude*. (UV/M042)

Not auditioning could mean that 'the range of "talent" is quite marked!' (LV/M175), creating a challenge for choir directors in ensuring that less experienced singers were welcomed but not disruptive to the choir's overall aims. The phrase 'wide range of ability' recurred in the responses both from choir members and directors, with an awareness that this could cause frustrations for established members, when 'unfortunately some of the loudest members aren't the most accurate' (LV/D037).

Despite the potential drawbacks of slower-paced rehearsals, there was explicit support for the 'open-door' policy of non-auditioned choirs, expressed by some as a challenge to musical elitism:

> *So many people have been told by someone during their lives that they "can't sing". Our choir is about everyone enjoying singing, and cutting through that sort of elitism.* (UV/D001)

Nevertheless, since our survey was only completed by people who were currently members of choirs, it did not capture the responses of former members who might have joined without audition and then felt either intimidated by the musical standards or frustrated by the slow rate of progress. The welcoming of unauditioned singers brought with it an implicit agreement to help and encourage all who stayed, which was socially the responsibility of other choir members offering 'mutual friendship, respect, and support' (UV/M052), and musically the responsibility of choir directors recognising 'that some [members] take much longer to learn than others, while everyone has to be kept engaged' (LV/D007). There was less explicit acknowledgement that different levels of prior musical experience might also lead to different expectations of musical learning, which we consider in our next two themes.

2. What experience is required? Prior musical education and training

As befitted their role and remuneration, choir directors were, for the most part, more highly trained than choir members. We found that 63% of LV choir directors (*n* = 25), 58% of UV choir directors (*n* = 22), and 52% of XV choir directors (*n* = 25) had studied music at degree level or equivalent. Specific

training in choral conducting was less commonplace, particularly for UV choir directors. Among LV choir directors, 35% (*n* = 14) had studied choral music direction as part of a music degree or diploma, while this accounted for only 23% (*n* = 11) of XV and 6% (*n* = 2) of UV directors. This aligned with previous research by Michael Bonshor (2018), who observed that even where such training has been undertaken, the likelihood of courses focussing on directing amateur ensembles is very low (p. 141). Nevertheless, around a third of directors across all choir types had taken part in choral conducting workshops, such as those run by the Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD). Though these non-graduate training programmes would typically be less comprehensive than degree-level courses, they would likely have been more specific to amateur contexts. Other ways of learning included transferring skills from being a singer, pianist, or organist, being mentored by more experienced conductors, or undertaking private tuition. Routes into choral conducting therefore appeared to be varied and ad hoc, and very few of the musical directors considered their role to be their main job: either it was one among several freelance contracts, or an additional or voluntary role.

Choir members were also asked about their singing experience and music education background. Very few reported no prior singing or learning, and the older age of many choir members increased the likelihood of them having sung in a school choir (Cox, 2002; Pitts, 2000) – an association that is likely to be reduced for future generations given the reported decline in school singing (Ofsted, 2023). The figures for having taken school music qualifications at 16+ and 18+ years of age were lowest in LV choirs, where 7% (*n* = 14) had studied music at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), Ordinary Level (O-level), or equivalent (aged 16+), and only 2% (*n* = 5) had music at Advanced Level (A-level) (aged 18+). Both figures were higher in UV choirs, at 21% (*n* = 33) for GCSE and O-level, and 8% (*n* = 12) for A-level. However, the level of music education in XV choirs was the highest by some way, with 45% (*n* = 46) at GCSE or O-level, 20% (*n* = 21) at A-level, and 15% (*n* = 15) holding music degrees, including two postgraduate qualifications. This wider range of experience may in part be attributed to the larger sample of XV choirs (*n* = 102), in addition to the representation of a greater variety of singing opportunities – including some chamber choirs and choral societies performing complex repertoire. Nonetheless, the clear differences in educational background of members of XV, LV, and UV choirs suggests that routes into amateur choral singing are shaped by school music opportunities and experiences of singing in formative years. It was notable, for example, that members of UV choirs specifically mentioned UV choir arrangements being musically limiting: 'we are a female choir so only perform three parts' (UV/M032); 'it would be nice to have male voices in it' (UV/M095). This lack of varied and flexible repertoire may be one reason that more experienced musicians might seek participation in XV choirs.

The same educational trend was reflected in participants' experiences of extra-curricular music examinations provided by organisations such as the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM). Members of LV choirs were least likely to have taken instrumental examinations (20%; *n* = 10); followed by members of UV choirs (31%; *n* = 48); then members of XV choirs (36%; *n* = 74). A smaller number across all choirs had taken singing examinations (LV: 2%; UV: 9%; XV: 11%) or theory qualifications (LV: 5%; UV: 24%; XV: 27%). Such relatively low numbers suggest that secure knowledge of musical notation could not be assumed to be widespread, especially amongst LV choir members. This hypothesis was confirmed by members reporting a strong reliance on the choir director to demonstrate new voice parts in rehearsals: almost all respondents listed the choir leader as one of the strategies used to learn parts in rehearsals, sometimes alongside an accompanist, teach track, or members' sight-singing. For 45% of LV, 41% of UV, and 40% of XV choir members, the

choir leader's direction was the only stated method of learning. In a few cases, resistance to learning notation was reported, with 'academic' musical knowledge set in opposition to the practical activity of singing, and described as 'inverted intellectual snobbery [i.e.,] "I've sung for years without learning how to read music!"' (LV/M026).

Within our survey data there were clusters of responses from choirs with contrasting approaches and attitudes towards reading staff notation. At one extreme was XV/CHOIR060 (*n* = 9), where all but one of the participants reported 'reading the new parts' as the source of learning new repertoire. At the other end of the spectrum, all but one of the respondents from LV/CHOIR016 (*n* = 8) stated that the choir leader offered the main teaching and learning input. Despite such different starting points, these two choirs judged their priorities for development in very similar ways: 'development of vocal skills' was deemed to be of high importance by seven participants in each choir; 'musical literacy' was prioritised by four participants in XV/CHOIR060 and five participants in LV/CHOIR016; and 'expectations for musical self-development' were considered important by four participants in each choir. Given that the shared expectations and needs of choir members seemed here to be an important source of satisfaction and ambition in their rehearsals, these two examples perhaps imply that unified approaches to teaching and learning within choirs are of greater significance for supporting members' skill and ambition than individuals' prior music education in formal curricular or extra-curricular settings.

In contrast, for some choirs, members' prior music education precluded such unified approaches to teaching and learning. In these choirs, individuals' needs were more disparate: participants from LV/CHOIR023 (*n* = 7), for example, gave a mixed picture of how new repertoire was learned, including from the choir leader (*n* = 5), by reading the parts (*n* = 2), through listening to the parts (*n* = 2), or in sectional rehearsals (*n* = 1). Given that these choir members were reporting on the same rehearsals, it was evident that their personal experiences greatly affected their perception of the salient features of their rehearsal practices. As we discuss in the following section, such variation may in part be attributed to singers' diverse motivations and ambitions for participation, as summed up neatly by one UV choir participant:

> *You get out what you put in, but for some they like to just turn up and sing, so it is a case of finding the right "fit". I enjoy the challenge my choir provides and also the opportunity to perform – being a first soprano diva!* (UV/M036)

3. What counts as success? Ambition and affirmation

Amongst both members and directors, 'eagerness to learn' was frequently rated as more highly valued than volunteering involvement, vocal ability, music literacy, reliability, interpersonal skills, and length of service. Around half of members (50%; *n* = 284) and directors (48%; *n* = 60) judged this to be of greatest importance to their choirs, whilst highlighting inconsistencies across the membership:

> *I think we are split. Some want a challenge of preparing for a challenging repertoire, others are more interested in friendship and bonding experiences. Some want both!* (XV/M128)

> *Valued by whom? I value eagerness to learn, commitment, friendliness and musical ability, while others value musical ability and supportiveness.* (UV/D001)

Some choir directors pointed out the close interconnection between certain social and musical priorities, emphasising 'the cheerful community spirit of learning, singing and performing together' (XV/D047). But some felt that this had negative ramifications upon their choirs' commitment to teaching and learning, since it could lead to differences in the 'willingness of members to commit time to preparation outside rehearsals' (LV/M140), and subsequently 'varying levels of drive and determination, [which] tends to limit progress' (LV/D026).

Although members' motivations for participation in singing varied considerably, many choirs looked for affirmation of quality and progress from external sources, including concert audiences and competition judges. Almost all XV, LV, and UV choirs performed regular concerts throughout the year: members of UV choirs were most likely to indicate that their choirs performed between one and five concerts per year (*n* = 107), while members of XV (*n* = 143) and LV (*n* = 91) choirs were more likely to perform between six and ten times. Many LV members added that they were 'happy with the current amount' of concerts, and some even suggested that 'a bit more would be enjoyable, [because] COVID has affected some gigs' (LV/M116). In contrast, members of UV choirs were content with fewer performances, since this enabled 'a good balance of choir performances and family time' (UV/M114), and 'more would be difficult to manage with work commitments' (UV/M003).

Feedback from concert audiences was an important source of affirmation for many choir participants, and there were favourable accounts of audience responses to improvement: 'our recent concert was noticeably more upbeat and buzzing which the audience commented on' (XV/D040). Consistent with other research on the benefits of choral singing (Clift et al., 2016), participants reported the positive impact of the enjoyment of performing, but sense of progress and achievement in relation to musical learning was also identified as an often under-acknowledged source of musical satisfaction. Choir members aspired to achievable musical goals, seeking a workload that was 'enough to give us focus at rehearsals but not overwhelming' (XV/M130). Rehearsing sufficiently to perform well was important to choir members, with some noting that too many concerts 'can become stressful with rehearsals and finding time to practise' (UV/M039). There was a concern that standards could slip if demands increased: 'too many concerts makes it more difficult to learn new pieces to a good standard' (LV/M166).

For a number of LV choirs, extrinsic motivation and affirmation of achievement also came through engagement in the regional and national competitions that have historically been a prominent feature of the 'male voice choir' landscape (Skinner, 2013; Wiltshire, 1993). Of the 67 LV choirs represented by our survey respondents, 19% (*n* = 13) competed regularly (between one and five times a year), 31% (*n* = 21) occasionally (once every few years, or variable amounts) and 49% (*n* = 33) never, or not any more. The pandemic lockdowns of 2020–21 had reduced the availability of competitions and changed the habits of some choirs, such that in choirs with multiple member responses, there was often an inconsistent view of how strong the choir's competing or non-competing identity really was. Even amongst those choirs where who gave a consistent picture on frequency of competing, there were a range of views on its usefulness, as these responses from within one competing choir illustrate:

> *The experiences of competitions [have] been positive, even when not resulting in a prize. (Although the fact that we have won quite a few prizes undoubtedly helps with my opinion.)* (LV/M138)

> *The competitions themselves are fine but the build up is very stressful, intense and time consuming. I find it hard to put in the time necessary alongside a demanding full time job.* (LV/M143)

Competing appeared to have a strong effect on the culture of a LV choir, affecting the commitment required of members and narrowing the focus to 'too much time learning material we might not use again' (LV/D024). As one LV choir director put it, 'unless the culture of competing is embedded in the choir's culture it can be divisive, distracting and disruptive' (LV/D003). Where that culture was embedded, competition involvement was presented as a way of maintaining or improving standards: 'competitions give us something to aim for and ensure that the members do homework on at least two pieces each year!' (LV/D012). For less frequent competitors, these benefits were not felt to be worth 'the stress of competing' (LV/D007) and emphasis was placed instead on performances and fundraising for charities.

A much smaller proportion of UV and XV choirs took part in competitions, and the majority were content with this situation, with one XV singer who had previously participated in competing choirs expressing this ambivalence: 'I don't regard music as a competitive endeavour. We aim to please our audiences and ourselves, not judges' (XV/M159). In one of the few competitive XV choirs, one member noted the prohibitive costs which might prevent wider participation: '[Choir of the Year] was a long way to travel and expensive for a small choir when you take into account all the rehearsal time, accompaniment costs, music, travel etc.' (UV/M062). Competition judges were generally seen as having the authority to give 'feedback [on] strengths and areas to improve' (UV/M112), though some choir members attributed disappointing results to a mismatch of criteria: 'our style is at odds with the rest and with what the adjudicator seems to want' (UV/M063). Nonetheless, such feedback – alongside the culture and environment of competition – inevitably informed members' own evaluation of their performance:

> *Great to see other choirs and learn from them and it challenges us to step up and see how we compare with other choirs.* (UV/M110)

Some choir directors further highlighted how competitions were valuable learning opportunities, since they allowed repeated performance and refinement of set repertoire – an unusual practice for amateur choir (and other ensembles) outside the competition sphere:

> *I would like to explore ways to repeat programmes within a reasonable geographical area [to provide] opportunities to refine the work that is done in each concert sequence, leading to increasingly better performances.* (XV/D033)

This suggests that to make learning and development a more central part of choir activities, the familiar pattern of performing and competing activities might need to change. Returning full circle to the finding that audition processes set the tone for a choir, so too did the frequency, formality, and expectations of performances, resulting in choirs where 'improving singing and enjoyment go hand in hand' (LV/D003).

Conclusions and implications

Our analysis aimed to investigate the extent to which membership of an amateur choir is perceived to be a source of musical learning, and has illustrated the variety of intentions and ambitions that exist across the range of choral music settings in the United Kingdom. We conclude that choirs are

often experienced as valuable and influential places of learning and development, especially when members' and directors' aims and ambitions are consensual and consistent with a group's audition processes, rehearsal styles, and performance expectations. Regardless of individuals' prior experience of music education and associated competence in skills such as reading staff notation, teaching and learning within choirs was generally reported to be most successful when a group shared common goals and priorities, rather than feeling obliged to make ongoing compromises and accommodations.

Members of non-auditioned choirs had largely positive attitudes to encouraging all-comers and accommodating the need to teach voice parts through repetition. These attitudes were often aligned with a need for recreational singing to fit around other work and family commitments (especially among UV members) and a subsequent desire to perform less frequently. For some more musically experienced members of these choirs, however, this could lead to frustration with the slow progress of rehearsals. Across UV, LV, and XV choirs, members with greater prior music education experienced highest satisfaction when their enjoyment of rehearsals was balanced with confidence and success in performance, indicating that external validation from a concert audience or an adjudicating panel was an important source of musical achievement. This finding suggests that there are useful comparisons to be made between competitive choirs, who could easily tire of their repeated repertoire, and the typical pattern of choral societies, who sing their repertoire once in concert and then move on. Improving through repeated performances was acknowledged as a source of musical learning not often accessed by XV choirs, but which has potential to increase musical confidence and satisfaction.

There are many reasons to be in a choir other than musical learning and development, and these have tended to dominate research in recent years (Williams, Dingle & Clift, 2018) – perhaps at the expense of foregrounding the contribution of choral participation to lifelong musical learning. Our findings show that although learning and enjoyment are not incompatible – as all good school music teachers demonstrate – the non-formal setting of a choir rehearsal (Einarsdóttir, 2014) can fail to address these dual purposes explicitly, risking dissatisfaction for choir members and their directors. Just as effective school singing requires an inspiring leader working in a conducive context (Lamont, Daubney & Spruce, 2012), so too the aims and style of the choral director will be best achieved if they are a good fit to those of choir members. There was not scope within this research to investigate the processes of appointing musical directors, but our findings suggest that this would be a fruitful area of investigation. Likewise, we were not able to investigate in detail the opportunities that choir members had to learn from one another (Bonshor, 2018), which would require a case-study approach to gather a greater concentration of responses from within the same choirs (cf. Lamont et al., 2018). A deeper focus on fewer choirs would also give the opportunity to investigate the effect of conducting style and gesture, since the data we collected emphasised directors' words, attitudes, and rehearsal styles over the direct impact of their physical presence, eye contact, and demeanour, noted in other studies (Garnett, 2009).

Our study illustrates closer connections between musical participation, learning, and ambition than have previously been foregrounded in existing literature. Research on musical participation spans the subdisciplines of music psychology, community music, and music education, and we hope we have taken first steps in connecting these disciplinary approaches and illustrating the ways in which they contribute to a more holistic understanding of lifelong music-making.

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