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From Participation to Performance: The impact arts management can have on an inclusive community choir's identity

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Abstract: *It is widely acknowledged that choral singing can provide a rewarding experience for participants. However, an important aspect to choral practice is performing to an audience, who may have preconceived impressions of the choir. This can influence the manner in which marginalised choral singers perceive themselves. The findings in this article are based on ethnographic research with the Open Arts community choir from Belfast, which comprises some members with disabilities. The research draws upon 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) and the performance theories of academics such as Victor Turner (1969). I demonstrate the complexity of the interactions that occur between the choir and the producers of two television shows, and also how the singers sometimes expressed that there were discrepancies between their perceptions of the choir and the manner in which they were presented by the shows' producers. At times, this difference between perception and representation caused members to feel misrepresented and unable to enjoy performing. As a result, the aim of the article is to consider how those in arts management can better support inclusive musical groups in effectively presenting their desired image to audiences.*

Keywords: Inclusive choirs, event management, performance

Introduction

Figure 1: OACC, March 2015 at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, Belfast City Hall. (Anonymous photographer, used with permission).

In 2013, I attended the *Derry International Choral Festival*, a competition comprising choirs from the North and South of Ireland and Great Britain. The Open Arts Community choir (OACC) performed in the mixed voice category along with seven other competitors. Two pre-

ISSN 2009-6208

senters introduced choirs, who were adjudicated by a panel of international judges. OACC was introduced as *inclusive*, made up of members with and without disabilities, and as being positive ambassadors for Northern Ireland. I had previously read about them and was interested in their cross-community ethos. However, I was unprepared for my personal reaction when I first saw them perform. They were the last choir to sing, and, whilst previous choirs entered the stage very quickly, in this case there was a long pause whilst the stage was prepared according to the groups' requirements. A row of chairs was placed on the stage with one chair arranged in front of them. When the choir entered, guide dogs were leading some singers, whilst fellow choir members supported others. They moved slowly. Other choirs in the competition adopted a standing formation, but the first row of this choir was seated on chairs. In contrast to previous conductors who stood in front of their choirs, the conductor used crutches to reach her seat. She took some time to arrange musical scores on a stand. When the choir was ready, I observed a group wearing purple tops and black trousers, some people in wheelchairs, some visually impaired members, and two guide dogs sitting on stage. Immediately my expectation of a uniform-looking choral group was challenged, and I thought, 'this is different'. OACC performed *Shift* composed by Ian Wilson, an Irish contemporary Western art music composer, and the popular song *Lullaby (Goodnight my Angel)* by Billy Joel. They were placed second in the competition.

This opening narrative reflects my personal response to an inclusive choir as a non-disabled audience member. My initial focus was on the differences between this group and the other choirs participating in the festival. I had formed a visual impression of a disabled group of singers, regardless of the choir being presented as inclusive and positive ambassadors. This impression underscores the key research question of this article: how to present inclusive choirs in such a way that audience member's focus on the ability of the group, rather than on their disability. Drawing illustrations from experiences of the OACC with two broadcasting companies, I argue that the manner in which a group is presented is vital to their feeling of empowerment and successful connection with the audience. Those in positions of control of performance spaces - arts management, event managers, producers - need to present choirs in such a way that they are empowering the group, rather than presenting them in a stereotypical manner. Investigating the importance of communication between performers and those controlling the performance space links considerations of communities of practice with performance theory (Turner, 1969; Wenger, 1998). These academic theories are valuable for informing social inclusion policies, especially in regard to the importance of contextualising community arts practices.

Ethnomusicology is the study of 'music in its social and cultural context' (Seeger, 2018, np). Research is often presented through ethnographies, highlighting the importance of contextualising research, acknowledging the position of the researcher within the research, and emphasising the importance of understanding the lived experience of a community. Ellis and Bochner (1996, p. 26) argue that

> ethnography should broaden our horizons, awaken our capacity to care about people different from us, help us know how to convene with them, feel connected.

This approach is essential when researching marginalised individuals and groups, because it can help readers from other backgrounds relate to situations through the experience of the researcher, thus enabling them to better empathise with and understand the experiences of communities that are different to them. From an ethical perspective, this approach focuses

ISSN 2009-6208

on the relationship between researcher and participant, encouraging collaborative research and ensuring participants are constantly aware of, and able to contribute to, not only the research process, but also the dissemination of findings.

As part of this ethnographic research, I participated as a member of the choir. I joined in September 2014 and sang regularly with them for one year, experiencing the hard work that went into memorising music by rote, the elation when performances felt successful and the frustrations when they were not. I gained insight into my own misunderstandings of disability through workshops led by various members of the choir.

Following a review of the literature and a background to the OACC is an analysis of the choir's contrasting experience of performing with the BBC production *Last Choir Standing* in 2008 and RTÉ's *An Cor* in 2010, both of which occurred prior to my membership. These experiences were frequently referred to during my fieldwork, making them fundamental to the choir's conception of their identity as an inclusive rather than disabled choir (1). I then discuss the impact that terminology, such as disabled, has on marginalised performers . In conclusion, I discuss the implications of these findings for those engaged in arts management.

Literature Review

The editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Community Music* consider community music as 'becoming a force for social change around the world' (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018, p. 6). Whilst the focus in community music is largely on interventions between the facilitator and participants (Higgins, 2012, p. 21), one must also consider what happens when a community music group performs. Academics argue that performing has a vital role in empowering marginalised individuals (Bailey and Davidson 2005; Ansdell, 2010; Elefant, 2010; Bithell 2014). Performing can provide a setting where marginalised members of society can present themselves in a positive light, which puts them in the position of giving rather than receiving, and of doing rather than being 'done to'. (Bithell, 2014, p. 295)

For example, in Bailey and Davidson's (2005) research, some members of the homeless community studied felt that performing in a choir reconnected them to the broader community. When reflecting on social projects that incorporate music, Ansdell (2010, p.162) notes that

> most of these musical-social projects revolve around performances, with the implicit recognition that performing helps with the social, psychological, cultural and political issues these projects address.

Fundamental to these arguments is the notion that performing results in feelings of empowerment, suggesting that performers experience a shift in their understanding of themselves as a result of participating in a performance. The performance theories of Turner (1969) support this understanding. He considered social interaction to be a dramatic process including moments of separation from everyday life, which he refers to as 'liminality' where the manner in which people relate to each other changes. It is within 'liminality' that 'communitas', an 'essential and generic human bond' is established (Turner, 1969, p. 97). Whilst Turner focused on 'communitas' within rituals, Schechner (2003) developed and adapted the theory to the theatrical context. He emphasizes how one cannot consider the performer in isolation from the audience to whom they are performing, nor in abstraction of how they have been situated within the context of where they are performing; an argument supported by aca-

ISSN 2009-6208

demics such as Hytönen-Ng (2013) and Ansdell (2010). Ansdell (2010, p.184) writes the performance event, at best, is something that is lived-through together, leading to a sense of completion and fulfillment.

Elefant (2010, p. 77) argues that a successful inclusive experience 'should be actively and thoroughly pursued by everyone involved'. Similarly, Levy, Robb and Jindal-Snape (2017, p. 13) suggest that an inclusive and accessible space also includes a 'relational space' meaning a space where there is effective communication and supportive relationships between professionals and service users. This is similar to the 'community of practice' model, whereby people learn though social engagement with one another (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998, p. 73) identifies three dimensions to a community of practice: a 'joint enterprise', 'mutual engagement', and a 'shared repertoire'. A community of practice collectively negotiate the manner in which they will reach their goal - their joint enterprise - through mutual engagement. They develop a shared repertoire comprising resources, patterns of behaviour and terminology as they engage with one another. In a choral context, the joint enterprise is typically considered to be a musical performance.

However, I propose considering a performance as an extension of the community of practice, with the addition of new participants: the manager of the event. If the manager attempts to present a choir without engaging in the dimensions of a community of practice, it can prevent the achievement of 'communitas' with the audience. Lawthom and Chataika (2012, p. 249) argue that whilst 'communities of practice' is relatively new to disability studies, it 'engages directly with processes of inclusion and exclusion and how disability is conceptualised', as demonstrated in the work of Durrer (2008). The social model of disability relates to how disability is conceptualised, referring to the 'physical and attitudinal barriers in society… that disable people, rather than an individual's impairment' (Lisicki,no date, np). Goodley, Hughes and Davis (2012, p. 4) emphasise how this model can 'enhance our awareness of inequality and, wherever possible, permit new ways of thinking affirmatively about disability' enabling a change in perception from the impairments a disabled person may have to the manner in which an 'ableist' society is exclusionary. They argue,

> disability is therefore not a stigmatising embodiment of an individual but a social portal that leads to an investigation of exclusionary practices in society at large (2012, p. 4).

The research of Lubet (2011) and of Baker and Green (2018) suggest that the concept of a disabled musical group is being informed and controlled, not by the people with the impairment, but by the perspective of an 'able-bodied' person. Similarly, Morris (2001) highlights the discrepancy between the concerns of socially excluded teenagers and the issues that social policies aim to address. She questions the validity of policies that do not address the actual concerns of the people who are the intended subjects of the policy. Correspondingly, in their analysis of arts policy and practice in the East Midlands, Newsinger and Green (2016, p. 370) argue that practitioners should inform policy, particularly with regard to the relationship between 'disability arts' and arts and cultural policy, because practitioners are 'ahead' in understanding the successful implementation of projects. This is also noted by Durrer (2008) who highlights the importance of involving participants in inclusive arts programmes when negotiating important decision making for the group. Even more importantly, she notes how participants studied were identifying and presenting themselves as 'artists' rather than 'disabled'. She argues that it is crucial to understand the context of social inclu-

ISSN 2009-6208

sion projects and the meaning and practice of individuals involved. Scholars of inclusive arts have thus emphasized the importance of contextualising practice as well as the importance of providing agency to people with disabilities. By focusing on communities of practice in performance contexts we see how concerns about empowerment and agency are complicated with the addition of event managers.

As I will demonstrate in the following case studies, a successful performance is based on achieving in a feeling of 'communitas' between performer and audience. The people who are in control of the performance arena mediate this interaction. It is thus vital that there is mutual engagement between the choir and the event manager to ensure that they share a similar vision for how the group will be presented, particularly when some members of a choir may represent a marginalised identity.

The Open Arts Community Choir.

The OACC, operating since 2000, welcomes anyone over the age of sixteen and is funded through Open Arts, recruiting members with and without physical disabilities, aligning with the organisation's aims (Open Arts, no date). Most of the Open Arts programmes focus exclusively on people with disabilities, but the choir and Gamelan performance group are inclusive (capartscentre.com, 2018). In a recent interview, Eileen Branagh, CEO, states,

> we want the work that people produce to be of good quality and the exhibitions, the work of the choir and the dance group shows that to be the case (Community Arts Partnership, 2018, np).

For example, in 2017 the OACC performed at the European choir games where they were awarded two gold medals and a gold diploma.

In 2008, the OACC competed in the BBC television series, *Last Choir Standing*. This 'knock-out' style competition involved choirs singing in front of a studio audience and a panel of judges. The panel eliminated one choir per week until six choirs remained, at which point the public voted for their favourite group. OACC were eliminated just prior to the public vote. The decision to participate in the competition resulted in a change in the structure of the choir. OACC needed singers who could learn music quickly in order to keep up with the weekly competition requirements so they created two singing groups: the 'Concert choir' and the 'Big choir'. The Concert choir is the auditioned group who performed in *Last Choir Standing* and continue to sing at most of the choir's performances. The 'Big Choir' is non-auditioned and performs in a few events per year, usually with the Concert choir. This article focuses on the Concert choir.

Performing with the BBC and RTÉ

> We had to work very hard not to say the wrong kinds of things. The amount of time we spent singing was so small compared to doing the 'vox pops' things outside. They would spend maybe an hour looking for our reaction – looking for the 'right' kind of reaction. In those kinds of circumstances you have so little control over how you are represented. Bev was very strong, saying, 'look we're not victims here, we're not going to go down that road. We're not going to be representing ourselves in that way.' That was what we had decided as a choir. This was clearly what they [the BBC] were looking for, victims because of

ISSN 2009-6208

> disability. Nobody, wanted that to come across, that 'oh poor us', 'feeling sorry for yourself' (Choir member interview, May 2016).

Video clip: https://youtu.be/T8ZgfaoyJLQ
(OACC performing on 'Last Choir Standing'. Video edited by Anne McCambridge. Used with permission)

When watching clips from the show, one can understand to what this choir member is referring. In one clip, a member of the choir with a physical disability is interviewed. She says, The disability aspect of the choir is something that we feel is a very small part of the choir.

> All that Beverley asks is that each person has a love of singing and that's the one thing we all have in common (McCambridge, 2010b).

The production team then interview a support worker who also sings in the choir:

> It's not about 'God love them', sort of thing. It's more the sound is really good and we just want to do really, really well (McCambridge, 2010b).

OACC wanted to be presented as a musically talented consort. Yet, it appeared that the image the producers were attempting to present was not one that would encourage viewers to focus on the choir's ability, rather, they were focusing on the disabled membership in the group. The interview segment for the show is two minutes long, focusing on three members: the conductor, a disabled member, and a support worker. Each person interviewed references disability, not inclusivity. Whilst there are quick clips of non-disabled members, longer visuals are of support workers pushing wheelchairs, or helping visually impaired members during rehearsals. It therefore appeared to some choir members, as the opening interview reflects, that there was an attempt to focus on disability and its role within the choir. Because of this perception, the choir referenced their singing ability when answering interview questions. They also behaved in a manner reflecting a positive image of themselves, as opposed to a group struggling with disability. In an interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* from the time, Beverley McGeown (Bev), the choir's conductor, reiterates this point by stating, 'we are an inclusive choir, but we want people to focus on the ability of our members, not the disability' (McWilliams, 2008).

In his research, Elefant (2010) noted how the disabled choir, *Renamin* began to feel their performances were successful only after they had been given more agency. He (2010, p. 209) concludes:

> A performance, when it takes into consideration contextual concerns, can motivate and benefit a group of severely disabled people who want to be heard and seen in a different manner than merely as wheelchair bound individuals.

Providing performance platforms may not result in a successful experience if choir members feel they have no control of the situation. In this ethnographic example, the issue was about the context in which the choir was being presented. As the first interviewee notes, more time was spent with the group not singing, but being recorded and interviewed, clearly identifying that producers wanted the audience to be provided with footage of the group 'behind the scenes', underlining the importance of contextualising performance referred to earlier by

ISSN 2009-6208

Schechner (2003). Some choir members were concerned that the context being presented was not going to be a true reflection of the group, thus impacting their ability to experience 'communitas'. Had OACC and the producers engaged and negotiated in a community of practice this problem may have been avoided.

Although choir members acknowledge the benefit of performing in the BBC as it made them more widely recognised and also forced them to improve their singing practice, some do not recall it as an enjoyable experience. This experience is in contrast to their experience performing with RTÉ in the Irish language competition *An Cor* in 2010. One choir member elaborates:

> The way we were represented we felt was really much more lovely. We loved how the choir was portrayed in that (Choir member interview, May 2016).
>
> (Video clip: https://youtu.be/_twL7GGZWio
> (OACC performing on *An Cor*. Video edited by Anne McCambridge.
> Used with permission.)

RTÉ focused on two members of the choir, an elderly man whom they interviewed at home with his wife, and a woman who uses a wheelchair. She was interviewed at her place of work. The man talked about the first choir he sang in and then about his marriage. His wife then talked about how he rehearsed at home. The young woman was identified as a computer programmer. She told the interviewer:

> When I was a little girl I always loved music. My mum and dad always took me and my sister to the opera house every year. I've been in school choir all my life. You've got the camaraderie of people all around and their support as well so you're not out there alone. Also I love the buzz of performing. It's really good when you're out there singing and the audience really appreciates it (McCambridge, 2010a).

It is evident from both interviews that the focus of the questions is on why they sing in choirs rather than about living with disabilities, closely aligning with the choir's image of themselves. Interviewing a young woman with a disability and an elderly man drew attention to the inclusive nature of the group. In this situation, the choir felt that the image of the group was one with which they wanted their audience members to connect: a musically talented group of individuals with and without disabilities. Through this production process they were able to achieve 'communitas'.

The image of the choir being presented in each instance was different and impacted the choirs' views on the successful achievement of 'communitas'. In both these situations it was how the producers presented the 'back story' that affected choir member's assessment of the success of the production. BBC focused on the issues surrounding disability within the group, whilst RTÉ considered the choir's focus on musical ability. These contrasting images affect how the audience perceives, and ultimately connects, with the group.

ISSN 2009-6208

Terminology and its impact audience connection.

Hytönen-Ng (2013, p. 103) emphasises the importance of connecting to an audience, arguing

> It is the presence of and the connection to the audience that creates the meaningfulness of the performance. The interaction is created and maintained through visual, auditory, emotional and physical means.

'Disabled' is a label easily applied to the group because audience members see the differences in the group's physical appearance, as described in opening ethnographic example and relating to the social model of disability. This requires sensitive management by event organisers so that groups like OACC can present themselves as inclusive, especially when audiences may take cues from physical appearance. Producers, event managers and policy makers are key to challenging that perception and drawing attention to the musical ability of the choir.

Another choir member, when reflecting on this period said,

> I got the feeling then, I don't get it as much now, sometimes people think, Oh well, it's a group of disabled people who get together for a sing song and it's not taken too seriously, but [our conductors] are talented musically and they want to do the best they can. We're not just a group getting together for light relief (Interview, November, 2016).

Bev expanded on this:

> We have in the past been referred to as a disabled choir and it's not representative of what we are. To call us an inclusive choir is a much more informed way of describing the choir and certainly for people who are non-disabled in the choir. Saying that we are inclusive is so much more outward thinking than saying disabled. Let's face it, the word disabled, with the 'dis' in it is quite a negative term. Which is why we use the term non-disabled rather than able bodied because, able-bodied is like able-bodied and not able-bodied – you're not able! So, it's semantics. It's not about saying we're embarrassed by the term 'disabled' choir; it's about getting the right term (Interview, June 2015).

Lubet (2011) focuses on disability in Western Art music and the notion that there is a perspective that being disabled implies one may be unable to perform music to a high standard. Through his observations of the *Al-Nour wal Amal* Orchestra of Cairo, a largely blind women's group, he concludes that this group have challenged the stance that one needs to be able-bodied in order to perform Western Art Music. This is also being challenged through community arts projects that provide inclusive and accessible spaces that enable people with disabilities to rise above their perceived abilities (Levy, Robb, and Snape, 2017). It is vital that the approach being used by community arts professionals is extended into places of performance. For example, Durrer (2008, p. 23) notes that users involved in the Bluecoat Arts Centre's exhibition programme in Liverpool felt that having their artwork displayed in a separate exhibition from non-disabled artists was 'seen to promote exclusion rather than inclusion'.

ISSN 2009-6208

Baker and Green (2018, p. 485) suggest that distinguishing between disabled and non-disabled artists may occur

> due to lack of understanding about visually impaired musicians' skills amongst the sighted; or simply ignorance and perhaps fear of their practical needs.

They found that some visually impaired musicians felt that

> promotion through visual impairment tends to come from sighted outsiders, such as promoters, website designers, and others, and thus is more to do with sighted people's expectations… than their personally-felt perspectives'. (2018, p. 488)

Some musicians felt that 'presenting music *through* disability is destructive to social inclusion because it accents *difference* far too emphatically and pollutes quality music-making' (2018, p. 492). Arts managers, therefore, need to reconsider why and how they promote such arts activities. Their influence over the audience perception of performers is derived from how they choose to frame, not only the performance, but also the promotional materials and has a serious impact on performer's self-image.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the identity of a choir is influenced by their interactions with the people who facilitate a performance space. In order to ensure that inclusive community choirs and other arts groups are represented accurately, I recommend the following actions:

1) Collaborate with the group: Re-imagine your role as someone who is becoming a part of a community of practice, with the purpose of supporting a shared joint enterprise with the choir through mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). Take time to ensure that you have negotiated, not only accessibility requirements with the group, but matters of perception and presentation, ensuring that the choirs' opinions are valued, heard and implemented.

2) Engage with principles of community music making, focusing on it as a vehicle for social change (Higgins, 2012; Bartleet and Higgins, 2018). Consider how you can help instigate social change with regard to perceptions of disability, particularly with use of terminology when advertising and promoting groups. Rather than using *disability* as a means for promoting the group, focus on *inclusivity* or *artistic merit* leading your audience in how to perceive the group in a manner that reflects their self-image. Organisations such as Shape-Art (shapearts.org.uk) offer courses to support arts management in this process. However, it is also likely that group members have their own resources and ideas that they would be willing to share with you, as I experienced with OACC.

Effective collaboration will result in a performance that empowers and affirms the goals and aims of the group, enabling 'communitas' with the audience and, potentially, transforming preconceived impressions of an inclusive community music group.

ISSN 2009-6208

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NOTES

1) For the purposes of this article I use 'disabled' in reference to people with disabilities and 'non-disabled' for people without physical impairments, as they are generally accepted terms in discourse on disability theory.

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