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Group singing in a time of lockdown: Examining the experience of a choir singing online during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the experience of the Lismorahaun Singers choir singing online during the national lockdown in Ireland, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although there were a number of limitations to the online delivery it did have some positive outcomes, such as feelings of connection, musical sustenance, and fulfilment. Seeing familiar faces and singing familiar songs maintained several of the group's norms, engaged the participants' neuroception and created social capital even with the online challenges. Members who did not attend online singing sessions shared their alternatives to choir and how the online singing experience did not offer them the musical uplift of face-to-face singing sessions.

Key Words

Online group singing, Covid-19 pandemic, neuroception, social capital.

Introduction

This qualitative research case study explored the nuanced experience of the Lismorahaun Singers choir from North Clare, Ireland, singing online during the Covid-19 pandemic. When the national lockdown was imposed in Ireland in March 2020, all face-to-face rehearsals ceased. As a singing member of the choir and co-facilitator, I offered to facilitate online singing sessions for the group, of which twenty out of fifty choir members attended. This research looks at the perspectives of members who participated in online singing sessions and members who did not. Questions I posed included what influenced their decision making to attend/or not, would they have attended a non-music related gathering together online and what were the alternatives to choir for those who did not partake online? The study looked at positive and negative outcomes and possible similarities and differences experienced by online attendees and non-attendees.

This research will inform future considerations for the choir such as: membership, delivery of the sessions, repertoire, and social aspects for the group. My personal motivation for this primary research is to inform my practice, particularly as it relates to the facilitation of group singing with the Lismorahaun Singers. The aim of this research is to discover, from the choir members' perspective, how this experience impacted the group and consider how its findings might be used to inform our understanding of the group singing experience when re-engaging in singing face-to-face post-lockdown.

Methodology

I employed a qualitative research methodology by developing a case study on the experience of the Lismorahaun Singers choir. Both the perspectives of online attendees and non-attendees were equally valid to the outcomes of this research, as exploring the different experiences of members will inform future facilitation and practice sessions for the choir. I forwarded a Qualtrics anonymized survey with multiple choice and open-ended questions to all choir members. I chose this method as I felt it offered participants more scope to share their views frankly without feeling exposed, particularly those members who had chosen not to partake online. The data gathering had limitations, as the research was part of my M.A. assessments which factored into its scale and timeframe.

I acknowledge my positionality in the project as multi-faceted: I am a researcher, facilitator of the online singing sessions, co-facilitator of face-to-face choir sessions and a singing

member of the choir. I chose not to engage a gatekeeper with the interviewees as having been part of the online sessions with participants provided me with a nuanced understanding of this experience. The opportunity to engage in the interviews was offered to all participants of the online sessions. Mary O'Flaherty, an alto singer in the choir, who partook online volunteered for a 30-minute interview. Damien Dyar, a previous member of the choir, who now lives in England and partook online, also volunteered to be interviewed. Archie Simpson, the founding director of the choir and Martin Meyler, former chairperson of the Lismorahaun Singers were asked directly to engage as interviewees. They had championed the idea of doing the online sessions but decided not to partake and I felt their perspectives, given their positive support of the online experience, would be insightful. All interviewees were offered the option of using pseudonyms but gave informed consent for the use of their own names in the research.[1]

I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to the data. IPA's aim 'is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world' (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 53). This type of analysis has the potential to bring about a deeper awareness and understanding (Saldaña, 2011) of what the choir members experienced during this lockdown timeframe. I felt it necessary to include my positionality in the construction of this interpretation, as there are 'ethical considerations of power inherent in being both participant and observer' (Eyben, as cited in Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 61). Needing to navigate the "known" relationships of the choir and to being open to hearing, interpreting, and honouring their experience was critical for me. Reflexive research practice has shown me that my bias cannot be excluded from the interpretation of the research data. Knowing the choir both in face-to-face interactions and online I was drawn to compare the two experiences. It did serve to put a "spotlight" on the online experience but also on my interpretation of what this event meant from the group members perspective.

For IPA I engaged in numerous re-readings of the data and then organised the themes which arose into main themes and sub-themes (Smith & Shinebourne 2012; Smith et.al., 1999). Once these themes were reviewed, I focused on the individual's perspectives of their interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences, whilst continuing to observe my 'own situatedness within the research' (Berger, 1993, cited in Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 63). The main themes are descriptive words used by the participants that, in the discussion section

of this paper, I have interwoven with readings from a literature review to distinctly place this case study in the context of the wider field of community music research.

Findings

There were 24 Qualtrics survey responses out of a potential 46 respondents. 12 respondents attended online singing sessions and 12 did not partake online. After analysing the data, I combined the results of both the survey and the interviews in a table (Figure 1. Table of initial themes).

Figure 1. Table of initial themes

REPERTOIRE	CONNECTION
ONE VOICE/SOUND WEIRD	DIDN'T CUT IT FOR ME (ONLINE SINGING)
FULLFILLMENT/SUSTAINING	RETIRE FROM CHOIR
SUPPORT WHILE SINGING	MECHANICS - TECHNIQUE
RENEWAL	COCOON
LIVE EXPERIENCE	FAMILIAR FACES/ PIECES
LIBERATING	TECHNICAL ISSUES
FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out)	GAP FILLER
BETTER THAN NOTHING	IMPERSONAL / DISCONNECTED
CHOIR STILL ALIVE	OWNERSHIP
ZOOM FATIGUE	LOYALTY TO THE CHOIR
MENTAL HEALTH	INTERNET CONNECTIVITY
MISSING CHOIR	LEADERSHIP
INTENSELY MUSICAL EXPERIENCE	MUSICAL SUSTENANCE
ACOUSTIC EXPERIENCE	LACKING COHESION
SOCIAL	SATISFACTION
INSPIRATION	SPACE TO REASSESS
INTERPERSONAL ENTERPRISE	OPPORTUNITY
INTIMACY	COMMUNICATION
BONDING	PLANNING, ORGANISED
ARTISTIC DIRECTION	SELF EXPRESSION
GAINING CONFIDENCE	SOCIAL ENERGY, MUSIC ENERGY
SOMATIC	VIRTUAL WORLD
FRUSTRATION	ENRICHING EXPERIENCE
HYBRID: ONLINE IN PERSON LEARNING	WASN'T THE REAL THING
RECONNECTION	COLLABORATION
REIGNITED THE CONNECTION	BELOVED MUSIC
PREPARATION	FACILITATOR FLEXIBILITY
CONTINUITY	THE CAMARADERIE
SHY PREFER A BIG GROUP	NOTE BASHING
SELF CARE	REINFORCING WRONG NOTES
FELT I WAS LETTING THE CHOIR DOWN	TAKE MORE RISKS ON ZOOM, NOT AFRAID OF MAKING MISTAKES

I colour coded the sub themes under the overarching themes: 'Connection', 'Renewal' and 'Musical Sustenance', which were descriptive words used by the research participants (Figure 2. Higher order themes).

'CONNECTION'	'RENEWAL'	'MUSICAL SUSTENANCE'
Mono singing-muted singing experience,	Inspiration, space to reassess	repertoire, beloved music
Missing the choir, Isolation, Cocooning	Self-care, mental health	Musical support while singing -not there
Familiarity, Continuity, uplifting	Absence of uplifting feeling from choir	Absence of acoustic experience, intensely musical experience
Connectivity: technology	Fulfilment, sustaining, satisfaction	Better than nothing, wasn't the real thing, gap filler
Social Energy: collaboration, bonding, communication	Self-expression, gaining confidence, liberating, take more risks	Fear of reinforcing wrong notes

Figure 2. Higher order themes

The themes are interconnected but there are distinct elements in each: 'Connection' highlights the interpersonal engagement for the participants and the social impact of the experience, 'Renewal' emphasized the intrapersonal response of the choir members to the experience, and 'Musical Sustenance' focused on the role of the music for participants within the experience.

Connection

The participants described staying in contact and seeing one another as 'Connection'. For many the opportunity to connect with other members of the group was sufficient to gain an overall positive experience from the online singing sessions. 'Familiarity' described a feeling of comfort and 'continuity' for the survey respondents. In contrast several choir members highlighted in their survey responses the feeling of disconnection: 'missing being part of the choir', 'isolation' and seeing the online experience as 'disconnected' and 'impersonal'. They also highlighted the sense of exclusion in the online space, expressing that it was not conducive to group singing. It lacked many of the physical, felt experiences of connection or 'entrainment' (Clayton, 2012, p. 49). 'Entrainment' is described as a process where

'independent rhythmical systems interact with each other […] resul[ting] in those systems synchronising' (Clayton, 2012, p. 49). Also, a non-musical social gathering online was not appealing to members as singing gave a context for the group to come together.

Mary explained in her interview that she felt comfortable in lockdown; however, she attended the online singing sessions to ensure she did not 'lose the connection' (M. O'Flaherty, personal communication, June 8, 2021), with others. She stated that, 'the classes provided that lifeline out into other people's worlds' (2021). Mary also explained she may not have returned to face-to-face choir practice had she not taken part online: 'I would have found it very difficult to go back to a live choir if I hadn't had that experience,' (2021).

Renewal

Renewal was a descriptive word used by Mary O'Flaherty in her interview and in the context of the choir responses the term describes a feeling of uplift, fulfilment and having a positive impact on one's wellbeing. Whilst 'there was an element of renewal in the virtual experience' (M. O'Flaherty, personal communication, June 8, 2021), it did not compare to the sound in the room which 'captures you and takes you away' (June 8, 2021). The feeling of being 'wrapped up in something much bigger than yourself' (2021) was not afforded the participants in an online experience; 'there's always that awareness of you as an individual' (2021) which would be 'subsumed into the larger group in a real choir experience' (2021). However, the online experience did have a different uplifting effect, as Mary describes; 'it was uplifting because it just took me out of that little cocoon' (2021).

For many the virtual space offered a liberating experience singing "on mute", having the freedom for self-expression in their own space, without being self-conscious of other members hearing: 'from the point of view of expressing oneself musically it was brilliant' (D. Dyar, personal communication, June 7, 2021). Members who did not partake online still expressed an interest in renewing musical skills during the pandemic. For example, Archie Simpson, spoke about his alternative musical activity: he returned to studying piano again with a mentor online and found that this was 'very fulfilling - I wouldn't get that from online singing' (personal communication, June 9, 2021).

For some choir members the online singing sessions were directly meeting intrapersonal needs, whilst for others, being away from choir offered them time to re-evaluate what

activities were uplifting and fulfilling for them personally. Martin Meyler, who did not partake in the online singing sessions, explained how he had been doing a 'complete mental contortion' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021) between singing 'really gorgeous music' (June 9, 2021) but being opposed to the predominantly religious repertoire of the choir and the religious venues they sang in. The lockdowns have offered 'a pause in life for reflection' (Lam, 2020, p. 67) and for some members renewal has come from stepping back from the choir.

Musical Sustenance

Archie described playing piano during lockdown as his 'musical sustenance' (A. Simpson, personal communication, June 9, 2021). This theme highlights the role music played in personal fulfilment during the isolation of lockdown. This revival of Archie's musical practice echoed the choir's comfort in revisiting music they had studied in the past: 'keeping us singing and music we loved - was very, very powerful' (D. Dyar, personal communication, June 7, 2021). The 'beloved music' as a survey respondent commented, was chosen by the participants during online sessions. This connected the participants to their favourite songs as they sang along to choral YouTube videos.

The antithesis to this musical sustenance was felt by several participants as the absence of support from fellow harmony singers. Expressed in a survey response was the fear of 'reinforcing incorrect notes', as singers were not able to sing alongside their colleagues. Some choir members did not feel confident 'musically without the person by their physical side' (A. Simpson, personal communication, June 9, 2021). This was reiterated by Mary, who explained that 'you had the frustration of not hearing others around you and keeping the correct key' (M. O'Flaherty, personal communication, June 8, 2021). In conjunction with this, there was a real sense of the loss of the acoustic experience, and the role it plays in the performance of music:

> [The] joy of choral music was the acoustic experience of these voices being in under one acoustic roof, the thrill of what happens when the sounds of voices sort of mingle in the stratosphere [...] The magic isn't there because there is no intermingling of random harmonics creating an unexpected awe-inspiring sound.
>
> (A. Simpson, personal communication, June 9, 2021)

Discussion

As a researcher and facilitator of the online singing sessions I was interested to find out what the call-to-action was for choir members who participated online. I discovered that seeing one another and the familiar faces was very important for online members, as Hannah Arendt termed it: 'social "appearance" i.e. "showing up" for each other' (Camlin, 2019, p. 8). As revealed in their survey responses, the call-to-action for online attendees was choir continuity, connection, supporting the choir, a sense of wellbeing and 'loyalty', and these were echoed in the study by Daffern, Balmer and Brereton (2021, p. 8). The feeling of singing online being "better than nothing" (Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 12) was similarly expressed by the Lismorahaun Singers.

There were many challenges to the online experience, which other research studies have highlighted (Lam, 2020; Camlin & Lisboa, 2021; Daffern et.al., 2021): latency, poor internet connection and not being able to hear other singers at the same time. For the members who did not attend the online sessions it was visible in a survey response that 'mono-singing' reinforced the feeling of isolation and lack of singing together. It was evident that connectivity and technology factored into participants' decision to join or not, and 'zoom exhaustion' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021), 'zoom fatigue' (Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 6) was also a major deterrent to joining online.

In this discussion I will evaluate how the online sessions offered a type of "safety in the familiar" for the choir through 'neuroception' (Porges, 2018; Camlin, 2020; Camlin, Daffern, & Zeserson, 2020; Lam, 2020; Daffern et.al., 2021). The creation of social capital was also visible in the findings, through the performance of the choir relationships in the context of online group singing. The findings showed connection, renewal and musical sustenance were met online, in part, socially and musically in a different way to the face-to-face sessions. I reflected on Dave Camlin's concept of group singing as a complex continuum between the performance of the aesthetic work and the performance of relationships (Camlin, 2014; Camlin, 2020; Camlin & Lisboa, 2021) when examining the qualitative data.

Prior to the cessation of the group's practice, the Lismorahaun Singers focused on learning repertoire for concert performances, which I considered as engaging in 'presentational music' (Turino, 2008, as cited in Camlin, 2014, p. 103). This created a 'vacuum' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021) in terms of the social aspect of the group. Whilst the

Lismorahaun Singers had the element of social engagement, the face-to-face practice sessions prioritized the performance of the music, for example: no breaks for tea/coffee and fewer social occasions apart from post-performance gatherings. The face-to-face singing highlighted the need for entrainment 'to reinforce the interpersonal connections that music brings' (Camlin, cited in Higgins & Willingham, 2017, p. 133). The connection for the members came from the performance of their musical repertoire together. What happens when this 'synergy' (Murray & Lamont, 2012, p. 84) is no longer generated from singing together simultaneously because of 'the inability of any virtual model to allow singers to sing together and hear each other in real-time' (Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 6)? The choir disbanded, awaiting the lift of lockdown measures. I offered the online singing sessions after realising the return to singing face-to-face was going to take a considerable amount of time.

There was an increase in the social interaction of the group online as everyone was on the same screen with no sectional divisions, apart from breakout rooms for part practice. The karaoke-style singing of known repertoire with audio of choral performances on YouTube brought a nostalgic performance of the works. The participants chose the songs each week and this offered a connection to the music and a sense of context for the practices. The participant's neuroception could thus be engaged: 'the neuroception of familiar individuals […] and warm, expressive faces frequently translates into a positive social interaction, promoting a sense of safety' (Porges, 2018, p. 58). The physical space was not shared by singing online and yet by being able to see each other on screen and aurally hearing a familiar choral sound through the YouTube videos, a "cue" of safety was provided for the choir members. 'Polyvagal Theory emphasizes how listening is a portal to the social engagement system'[2] (Porges, 2018, p. 63) and this has the ability to engage one of the 'cues of safety'(Porges, 2018, p. 61), through neuroception: 'it is a psychological safety [...] where people are afforded the opportunity to experience the healing potential of feeling connected with others' (von Lob et al., 2010, cited in Camlin et.al., 2020, p. 11). There was the sense from the online experience that this safety in the familiar was a positive outcome for participants.

The Lismorahaun Singers highlighted the importance of maintaining the norms of the group. These norms included the familiar repertoire, the sessions occurring at the same time and on the same day, the same format of warm-up exercises followed by singing songs. A survey response summarized a predominant sentiment from the online experience: 'I didn't want any

new challenges during such a challenging time - I just wanted the continuity and familiarity of singing with familiar people'.

While positive social experiences were happening online, singers were simultaneously struggling with the 'lack of support from stronger singers in the choir' (Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 9). Singers could not '"hide" behind other voices' (Daffern et al., 2021, p. 10) when needed. The online singing sessions highlighted and reinforced the absence of support, the isolation (Lam, 2020) and that felt social connectivity (Camlin 2019). 'Interpersonal coordination does not take place in a virtual choir, and therefore any potential for the experience of entrainment (Clayton, 2012), or mutual flow states (Keeler et al., 2015) is lost.' (cited in Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 13).

For the choir members the online singing sessions offered a different type of energy 'transfer' (Camlin, et.al., 2020, p. 11). It was not by 'entrainment' (Clayton, 2012; Camlin, 2020; Camlin, Daffern, & Zeserson, 2020; Lam, 2020; Daffern et.al., 2021), or Siegel's 'attunement': synchronizing 'various neurobiological processes' (cited in Camlin et.al., 2020, p. 3), but by maintaining a weekly connection with one another, choosing familiar songs from the choir's repertoire and singing karaoke-style. This helped create, as Schäfer and Eerola termed it, social surrogacy, 'providing a sense of belonging and comfort' (cited in Daffern et.al., 2021, p. 12).

The online experience did offer a way for the choir to continue meeting and this supported the creation of social capital for the group. Just like community music there is no singular definition (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018, p. 13) for social capital. Also, a decision has not been made unanimously on whether social capital is a process or product (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 65). Putnam describes social capital as 'the engagement of the individual in community, personal and formal social settings, and the development of trust and reciprocity with those networks' (Putnam, 1993, 2001, cited in Livesey et al. 2012, p. 11). The Lismorahaun Singers already shared 'common norms of action and values' (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 61) before the online singing sessions commenced, such as: fixed practice norms and singing predominantly classical European religious repertoire for performance in front of a live audience in a non-professional capacity. Due to the online barriers, performing the music became secondary to 'performing the relationships which underpin the music and give it its vibrancy' (Camlin, 2019, p. 9).

This research has illuminated that for the Lismorahaun Singers, 'the performance of relationship is so much a part of the musical "moment"' (Camlin, 2019, p. 9). This created a deep crisis with the removal of this felt connection when face-to-face sessions ceased. The online delivery did not allow for the intermingling of the musical and social relationships due to latency, yet there was a continued development of trust and reciprocity for the group in the online space. The connectedness remained in part, due to the felt sense of making music together though physically apart. Social capital is also described as the "glue" that holds communities together (Cox, 1995, cited in Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 29). In his interview, Martin spoke of the need for the leadership within the choir to promote interpersonal engagement, he described this as 'the glue of the choir. If you get that right, people really want to be with one another and sing' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021). He emphasized that only offering musically leadership is not enough; it 'does not drive a community enterprise' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021). Damien similarly highlighted that the leader or facilitator needs to take responsibility for 'bringing voices together both spiritually as well as physically' (D. Dyar, personal communication, June 7, 2021). It is the facilitator's responsibility to 'create and manage the social space within which citizens get deeply engaged' (Block, 2009, cited in Rowan, 2021, p. 186). This will be a consideration for the return to face-to-face sessions as the online delivery does not allow, at present, for the bringing together of voices and this deeper level of engagement. A 'bonding' social capital describes where a sense of 'unity' is created (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 27). This was visible in the online sessions and the connection that was fostered between the participants. Promoting this 'bonding social capital' can be a 'superglue' (2008, p. 26) for the group, but it can also be excluding and precluding others from joining. For the continued development of social capital there needs to be active social engagement between the members of the choir. A further consideration for when face-to-face sessions resume, is how to connect those who have, and have not, had the online experience and how to welcome new members into the choir and say goodbye appropriately to those who are not returning. Promotion of social capital through *bridging social capital* may serve the Lismorahaun Singers in this transitionary time.

Bridging social capital looks outward from the group, considering more intermingling and connections between, groups 'with significant differences' (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 27) The Lismorahaun Singers may need to look towards more community activities where this

type of 'bridging' or networking with a wider community can occur (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p. 231-232), particularly for the recruitment of new members and the maintaining of connection with retired members. The choir may include online singing or a hybrid group singing delivery in the future. It will be an important role of the facilitator to offer support; musically and through activities promoting *bridging* social capital (Langston & Barrett, 2008, p.27) to foster a welcoming, inclusive, reciprocal, holistic, community music endeavour.

Conclusion

For the Lismorahaun Singers choir, this experience has highlighted the need for supported singing for a musically fulfilling experience. It also demonstrated the need for the social connection of 'showing up' (Camlin, 2019, p.8) for one another, and the experience of personal renewal. This renewal or fulfilment may be through the uptake of musical practice, listening to music, or reigniting the connection with other choir members weekly to create that sense of the familiar and social capital. If online singing is to remain, Damien highlighted in his interview (D. Dyar, personal communication, June 7, 2021) the need for good planning, organization and more technological musical support in the online delivery for the learning of new repertoire. When speaking about the return to face-to-face singing Martin expressed the need for a working committee; 'if it's going to really be a community enterprise you have to have enough people who have ownership' (M. Meyler, personal communication, June 9, 2021).

The online delivery is not a replacement for face-to-face singing as this case study demonstrates, but it is an alternative that I feel we can use to our advantage going forward. Whilst singing online has felt limiting, it has also been an uplifting experience in a difficult time globally. It has given us time to reassess, evaluate and look at changes we may need to make, so the Lismorahuan Singers choir can share their joy of singing for years to come – whether that is online, face-to-face or both. Personally, this experience has given me time to reflect on my roles in the choir. From a research perspective, I now challenge myself to look deeper, for the intention and processes which bring about change in musical experiences I am involved in. There is a need: 'for community music facilitators to continue exploring the nexus between practice and theory whilst being mindful of how evaluation can best serve the development of practice' (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018, p. 8). Although it fell outside of the

scope of this paper, I would like to do further research into the post-lockdown return to face-to-face music making for choir members.

Acknowledgements

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[1] There were no known additional ethical considerations for this paper. All surveys were anonymized.

[2] The Polyvagal Theory: This theory is centred around the vagus nerve, and it's many functions – specifically as a conduit for the parasympathetic nervous system. This is responsible for stimulating the "rest and digest" part of the human body and 'is essential in calming the nervous system, especially after experiencing a stressor' (Tang, 2021). The three main premises of Porges' theory have been disputed by scientists, of which I acknowledge but I do continue to see value in the "cue of safety." It was visible in the qualitative data of my research that visually seeing familiar faces and listening to familiar music offered a comfort to online participants.