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Harmony in Discord: Unveiling Auditioned Practices in Chilean Community Choirs Through Facilitator Perspectives Maria-Rosario Bravo Collado

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Abstract

This article examines the role of auditions in Chilean community choirs through an ethnographic lens, exploring their relationship with the cultural rights of individuals and groups to make music on their own terms. Drawing on interviews with four choral directors and an analysis of choir social media content, the study investigates why these choirs maintain audition processes despite advocating for inclusivity and universal creative spaces. In this context, auditions emerge as a means of selecting members whose values and aspirations align with the choir's objectives, identity, and interests. This selection process not only respects the artistic agency of participants but also supports the choir's longevity and coherence over time.

Keywords: community choir, Chilean music, auditions, cultural democracy

Introduction

On October 19, 2019, hundreds of Chilean students jumped over the turnstiles of the Santiago subway in protest against the increase in public transportation fares. High school students had been on strike for weeks over the poor conditions of public education, and the announcement of the fare increase was the final straw in a wave of citizen discontent. The discontent quickly spread to other areas, resulting in "the biggest social outbreak that the country has confronted since the return of democracy" (Navarrete et al. 2021: 7). The mass marches were characterized by creative posters in which participants demanded improvements in public policies. Many called for better healthcare and education, while others called for profound changes in the pension system and a new constitution drafted in a democratic process, since the current constitution in Chile was created in 1980 during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

One of the songs that characterized the social protests of 2019 is "El baile de los que sobran" (Fuentealba 2021), an emblematic song of Chilean popular music from the 1980s (Biblioteca Nacional de Chile n.d.). Composed in 1986 by Jorge González, the leader and vocalist of the Chilean rock group Los Prisioneros, the song's lyrics bitterly convey the deepest inequalities in Chile. The protesters jumped and shouted the lyrics, expressing the collective frustration.

Oías los consejos, los ojos en el profesor

Había tanto sol sobre las cabezas

Y no fue tan verdad, porque esos juegos, al final

Terminaron para otros con laureles y futuros

Y dejaron a mis amigos pateando piedras

You heard the advice, had your eyes on the teacher There was so much sun over the heads And it wasn't entirely true because those games, in the end, Ended to others with laurels and futures And left my friends kicking rocks⁽¹⁾

Los Prisioneros´ song remained powerfully relevant, as the promise of a better future was never fulfilled. Frustrated by corruption and elite abuses, Chileans were unafraid to voice their discontent. Similarly, this eruption of public discontent revealed a strong desire among those outside the elite to reclaim their right to engage with art and culture on their own terms, challenging the roles and practices of arts and cultural organizations. Signs of this artistic drive had already surfaced with the rise of participatory art projects, and the phenomenon of citizen choirs was gaining momentum, adding a fresh and innovative layer to the cultural landscape.

In 2021, I began my doctoral journey in Santiago, Chile, with a clear focus on the new choirs that had emerged in the last decade during the cultural turn that Chilean society had experienced. These choirs were led by directors who proposed something different from the traditional amateur choirs that proliferated in Chile during the mid-twentieth century, which were influenced by the democratic ideals of a European bourgeoisie that promoted the transformation of choral singing into a mass phenomenon (Minoletti 2000) while retaining the European aesthetic and the elitist approach.

Propelled by a transformative vision, the facilitators are the driving force behind these new choral scenes. During interviews, many facilitators revealed that they had endured discrimination in past choral experiences on the grounds of their sexual orientation or their appearance. For this reason, they have chosen a new path that prioritizes the creation of safe and welcoming spaces. These spaces encourage collaborative music-making while still maintaining a focus on musical practice. Some choirs have emerged as sanctuaries for different modes of making music, while others serve as platforms for experimenting with sound and timbre, depending on the participant's interests. This study marks the first academic research on Chilean community choirs, providing a unique and original approach to Chilean choral studies. My ethnographic research involved two years of fieldwork in central Chile, focusing on Santiago, San Antonio, and El Quisco. The four choirs highlighted in this paper were selected from a larger group of fifteen that are part of my doctoral research project. All four are based in Santiago, the capital city of Chile, and are relatively new, with the oldest being founded in 2019.

The Coro Ciudadano San Borja was established in 2022 as part of *Artifica tu barrio* (Artify your neighborhood), a university extension program to bring arts and culture closer to diverse audiences through community participation programs. This initiative targeted residents near the university's main campus. Similarly, the Coro Ciudadano Ochagavia was created in 2022 through a collaboration between a private company and a team of professional musicians as part of an action plan to foster more inclusive and sustainable urban spaces.

The Coro Queer Chile was also founded in 2022 through the initiative of two friends who sought to create a choir exclusively for members of the LGBTQ+ community. They entrusted the choir's direction to singer and conductor Axel Holm. The Murga La Villana is the oldest choir, formed in 2019 after its members met at a workshop on *murga uruguaya*, a genre from Montevideo's carnival tradition.

Everyone mentioned in this article consented to be identified.

Drawing boundaries for community choirs

During 2017 and 2018, I had the opportunity to do a master's degree at the University of Manchester, which allowed me to explore how some community choirs worked. My way of thinking was influenced by the UK-based Natural Voice Network (NVN) and the study of Caroline Bithell (2014) regarding natural voice choirs and World Music. From this foundation, I approached Chilean choirs with a fixed version of what a community choir should be like.

In Manchester, I was able to observe how community musicians "intentionally set out spaces for inclusive and participatory musical doing" (Higgins and Willingham 2017: 3) and how they committed to "lifelong learning and access for all" (Veblen 2008: 6). Similarly, in Chile, I encountered the facilitator's concern "of making and creating musical opportunities for people of all ages and abilities" (Bartleet and Higgins 2018: 8) and yet it was rather unexpected to find that, with few exceptions, Chilean choirs hold auditions. Is it simply because they are repeating patterns they have been taught, or are there other reasons?

While there is no universally accepted definition of community choirs or community music, certain principles help to identify community music practices. One essential guideline is that community music prioritises inclusion (Yerichuk and Krar 2019). However, inclusion inherently implies some degree of exclusion- an idea I will explore later in this article. Acknowledging the exclusion that comes with the formation of any specific groups, I focused on the formation processes of Chilean choirs and the reasoning behind their decisions. Chilean choirs often form organically, with individuals coming together to make music without a specific initial direction. The group

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collectively determines the repertoire, methods, and social dynamics and carefully selects new members based on these decisions to maintain alignment with the choir's evolving objectives.

Auditions and community choirs

Since the dawn of the community music movement in the late 1960s in the United Kingdom, community artists have been convinced that "art is vital to human flourishing, that everyone has the capacity to create and define it, and that full, free and equal participation in cultural life is both a human right and a path towards a more just and democratic society" (Matarasso 2019: 19). These groups pride themselves on offering open access opportunities, eliminating auditions for entry. This stance is explicitly supported by the UK Professional Association for Community Musicians, Sound Sense, who maintain that "community music is about co-creating a great experience, where everyone's input is valued and everyone is included" (<u>https://www.soundsense.org/</u>). Similarly, the NVN advocates singing as a fundamental birthright, and maintains that vocalisation, creativity, and singing should be accessible to all, regardless of previous musical ability or experience (<u>https://www.naturalvoice.net/</u>).

However, the elimination of auditions and the cultural rights of participants are not the only concerns of community musicians, as we will see from the examples of Chilean community choirs.

Dual objectives of singing

Inclusivity has been highlighted as one of the fundamental principles of community music (Balsnes 2016; Chadwick 2011; Yerichuk and Krar 2019), as it aims to welcome everyone, regardless of their musical abilities or knowledge (Bithell 2014). This inclusive approach, often expressed as an "open door policy", primarily involves the absence of auditions for participation in musical practice, operating on the premise that everyone deserves the opportunity to make music (Veblen and Olsson 2002). Willingham (2021) explains that since its inception, community music has been characterised by its inclusive principles, where openness and welcoming are at its core, inviting everyone to engage in music.

While the open door policy represents a significant step toward increasing accessibility to musical practice, it does not ensure everyone can fully participate. For instance, Henley and Higgins (2020) note that if a choir seeks participants from a specific demographic, such as only women or immigrants, it inherently excludes others. Though not inherently harmful, this selectivity demonstrates that music accessibility is a complex issue that cannot be addressed solely through entry policies.

Additionally, although community music participants seem content with the possibility of participating in choral singing, Joyce (2003) suggests that some participants seek more than just the joy of singing with others. They also aspire to achieve musical excellence. This desire aligns with the findings of a study conducted by choir director Rachel Rensink-Hoff (2009), which examined the benefits experienced by community choir participants in Canada. The study reveals that in terms of aesthetic benefits, participants highly valued exposure to quality repertoire, diverse musical styles, the enjoyment of challenging pieces, the desire to enhance the sense of discipline, and a greater appreciation and understanding of the art.

These dual objectives of singing for pleasure and pursuing musical excellence create internal tensions within community choirs. Historically, these goals have been viewed as mutually exclusive (Joyce 2003; Rensink-Hoff 2009), but these objectives may be interconnected. Redman (2016) posits that a significant factor driving the pursuit of musical excellence is the quest for self-efficacy, particularly among participants previously marginalized from musical performance. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to organise and execute actions to achieve desired results in a given situation, strongly influences how individuals approach tasks or goals (Bandura and Cervone 1983).

New practices in the Chilean choral scene

Aware of the participants' quest for musical excellence, in Chile, most community choirs establish musical requirements that, while less stringent than traditional ones, still present a barrier that may exclude some individuals interested in collective singing. However, the emergence of Chilean community choirs over the past decade has significantly increased and diversified participation in choral practice, as evidenced by the variety of musical genres these groups embrace. Through the examples of four Chilean choirs, I will explore the opportunities for participation they offer, as well as the role of auditions in recruiting new participants and shaping the identity and mission of each choir.

Coro Ciudadano San Borja

The primary reasons for holding auditions are often related to the desire and necessity for choirs to perform publicly, with the choir's value associated with its performance in these settings. However, the pressures to perform in public not only come from the participants' desire but also respond to external pressures from the funding bodies of choral projects. Matías Luna, facilitator of the <u>Coro</u> <u>Ciudadano San Borja</u>, explains that although the choir's goal is to provide singing opportunities for the neighbours of the university campus, he implemented the requirement of being able to tune a note due to the need to prepare a substantial repertoire in a limited timeframe, which precluded

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dedicating time to more complex interpretive aspects such as tuning (Kenny 2011). Luna recounts that he had to prepare a Christmas choral repertoire with people who had never sung in a choir in just three months. The success of that first concert was crucial in determining whether he would continue to receive sponsorship for the following year, leading him to prioritize musical results over the participation of all applicants.

Coro Ciudadano Ochagavía

A similar scenario faces the <u>Coro Ciudadano Ochagavía</u>, which decided to hold auditions due to the high number of annual applications, far exceeding the available spots. To manage this, they implemented a virtual audition process, where applicants submitted a self-recorded video of themselves singing a song of their choice. Daniela Guzmán, one of the choir facilitators, explained in an interview (May 2023) that auditions are necessary because the choir has limited rehearsal times and is financed by a private company that expects a quality musical product at the end of each choir cycle. Guzmán (personal interview, May 2023) states, "We conducted a semi-audition because, given the time constraints, people at least needed to be able to tune in, nothing more. Developing a musical ear is also possible, but it is a slower process that we wouldn't achieve in four months".

Coro Queer Chile

In the case of the <u>Coro Queer Chile</u> (referred to as Coro Queer from now on), the requirements to participate have evolved over time. According to its musical director, Axel Holm, they initially wanted to hold auditions to form the choir and, once established, to issue an open call. For Axel, the most important thing was that the choir was a safe space for people from the LGBTQ+ community where they could make music in the way they determined, without prejudice, expressing their identity through repertoire and performance. To achieve this, it was crucial for them to achieve an excellent musical level, as they aspired to perform on stages with a large audience reach to provide visibility to the LGBTQ+ community.

The desire to include and deliver the best possible musical product has led the choir to change the conditions for being able to participate in it. As shown in *Figure 1*, in a first call, auditions were aimed at people from the community, with requirements for experience in singing and reading sheet music. However, a new audition cycle was announced just a month later, this time open to people who do not know how to read music. In September 2023, the call focused on extra-musical aspects, requesting the participants' responsibility, commitment, respect, and perseverance. These criteria were maintained in the 2024 call, in addition to adding the requirement of punctuality.



Figure 1: Posts published by the Coro Queer on their Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/coro.queer.chile/).

The changes in the calls for participation in the Coro Queer reflect that the selection process is under constant re-evaluation. This indicates that the choir is in a construction phase and is searching for identity, which generates certain contradictions. This process not only characterises the Coro Queer but is also common in most community choirs in Chile. There are several choirs in a similar stage, since many of them are relatively new, the first having emerged around 2014. Therefore, many are still evaluating the best way to select participants, the repertoire, the work methodology and other aspects.

Under those circumstances, each choir responds to the needs of a specific community. Facilitators have identified groups of people excluded from choral practice or who, being part of it, had been mistreated and made invisible. One of these cases is that of the LGBTQ+ community, who, although they were an essential part of the choral tradition in Chile, could not express themselves on their terms. This is because in traditional choirs, "the choral conductor tells performers not only how to perform the music, but how to stand, breathe, and talk; the conductor's administration extends to very personal areas of their self-expression" (Attinello 2006: 322).

Axel Holm, conductor of the Coro Queer, mentioned that members of the LGBTQ+ community have faced personal attacks and insults while participating in other choirs, with no action taken by the directors. As a result, they felt unsafe during rehearsals and concerts, leading the founders of the Coro Queer to establish an artistic space that prioritises collective singing and celebrates the identity

of its members. On the other hand, their musical excellence has allowed them to participate in meaningful events for their community, such as a vigil commemorating those who have died from HIV and the release of a video clip by a queer musician.

The multiple objectives proposed by the Coro Queer are not exclusive to this project but have been observed previously in other LGBTQ+ choirs, which recognise that musical creation contributes to the formation of identity and memory, as well as providing a platform to make collective concerns visible. In research focusing on a choir in New Zealand for LGBTQ+ identified people, findings suggest that "members use the choir for different purposes: to sing together; establish intergenerational, cross-gender friendships and community; affirm their identities in an LGBTQI space; and educate by representing diversity during a period of greater political equity and social assimilation" (Bird 2017: 93). This variety of objectives reflects how complex it can be to make decisions that represent the interests of the members of a community, which is increased by the fact that the Coro Queer was the first in Chile aimed exclusively at the LGBTQ+ community.

Murga La Villana

Like the Coro Queer, <u>La Villana</u> has had dynamic audition processes, which have changed depending on the stage they are collectively going through. The choir from the *murga* La Villana followed different methods for selecting its participants, mainly because it is not a traditional choir but a Uruguayan-style *murga*. A m*urga* is a "Uruguayan genre of carnival music, performed by a 13-voice choir accompanied by bass drum, snare drum, and cymbals" (Kirschstein 2007: xi). Like other *murgas*, La Villana creates their show with original music and staging with "ironic and satirical *contrafacta* based on popular songs" (Fornaro 2018: 136), so the participants must have other skills, such as a good memory, body expression and good humour.

The initial formation of La Villana took place after a *murga* workshop conducted by two members of the Zamba y Canuta *murga*, which did not require an audition. At the end of the workshop, the attendees decided to form a permanent group. Later, they called for auditions to fill the available places and evaluate whether the applicants could sing polyphonically. The audition included two songs for a female three-part *murga* on that occasion. Since the whole group of applicants reached the artistic standards, the director and the current participants decided to accept all the applicants. From then on, those who wanted to join the *murga* had to speak directly to the director, who asked them to learn a song to sing with the rest of the group in a rehearsal.

I attended that audition as an applicant, and I remember being surprised by how relaxed the atmosphere was. In hindsight, I realize the audition served far more purposes than just assessing the applicants' musical abilities. It became an opportunity to welcome new participants, showcase the

endless possibilities within the *murga* format, and create a space to get to know each other celebrating every individual's unique qualities and differences.

Discussion

Although the Coro Ciudadano San Borja, Coro Ciudadano Ochagavía, Coro Queer, and La Villana continue to hold auditions, they remain faithful to finding ways of making collective singing that meet the expectations of the group of people that compose the choir. This coincides with Steven Hadley's (2021) vision of cultural democracy, in which individuals and groups define and participate in cultural activities specific to their interests (p. 34). In other words, cultural democracy shares the values of equality and fairness with community music, which community musicians have defended since the 1970s (Braden 1978; Kelly 1984).

All things considered, Chilean community choirs could be understood as a type of community art, which, according to Francois Matarasso (2019), "is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, co-operating as equals, for purposes and to standards they set together, and whose processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance" (p. 51). This definition acknowledges the artistic agency of participants and their role in creating something new on their own terms, advancing the construction of a model of cultural democracy. In this context, auditions can be viewed as part of a democratic process, ensuring that each group can define and engage in cultural practices based on their own interests and motivations. Furthermore, the emergence of community choirs in Chile since 2014 has expanded opportunities for choral participation, allowing participants the freedom to shape and value their own experiences (Gross & Wilson 2020).

Final thoughts

After observing and meeting different choirs and facilitators, it becomes clear that there is no absolute model of a community choir that is entirely inclusive, egalitarian and accessible. 'Good' facilitators do their best with the tools at their disposal, trying to channel the musical and extramusical concerns of the participants in a choir or community. Although practices and methodologies that seek to facilitate the choral participation of a wide variety of people are recognised, it is observed that holding auditions is rooted in Chilean choral culture and is challenging to eradicate. This phenomenon is mainly due to the presentational focus of choirs, which is driven by the artistic expectations of both participants and facilitators and external pressures from collaborating or sponsoring institutions.

In a context where most facilitators conduct a community choir for the first time in their careers, holding auditions provides a sense of control over the situation. However, based on my findings

from the ethnographic work with these four Chilean choirs, the requirements to participate in choirs are flexible, as facilitators are open to considering exceptional cases. This indicates that auditions are an evolving and, therefore, dynamic process. It is also a complex process, implying a decolonising cultural turn. It requires removing a musical model imposed for centuries in which the musical product is considered the most valuable part of art. This demands constant effort on the part of facilitators and participants, who must continually evaluate the relevance of their decisions. At the same time, community choir facilitators need more tools to work with non-professional musicians, more training spaces in community music, and local references from whom they can learn. It is essential to remember that a group of people without choral experience or the ability to tune a note requires more time to sing collectively and polyphonically. If the necessary resources are unavailable, there is a risk that the group will end up singing in unison, and the initial objective of carrying out choral practice will be lost.

Finally, one of the main obstacles to the full practice of community music is fear by both facilitators and participants. In Chile, we have learned to fear the difference, to fear raising our voices, and to fear expressing ourselves differently. As facilitators, we are afraid of the unknown, of being judged as mediocre musicians, of losing the funds the community worked so hard to obtain. In contrast, during the 2019 citizen outburst, we were not afraid to go out into the streets and reclaim what was rightfully ours, even if that meant being brutally repressed by the police (Araujo 2021). I stopped being afraid not only because people went out into the streets but because I encountered community choirs that make beautiful music while staying true to their principles and values. That was one of the main reasons to conduct this research. It is crucial to know of successful cases of open access Latin American choirs that can serve as a reference for facilitators interested in advancing work with groups of non-professional singers. There is also potential to build on the experiences gained in collective singing workshops, which are held without auditions, and seek new ways of thinking about choirs based on the idea of welcome offered by these spaces and embrace the experience of 'safety without safety' (Higgins 2009: 394).

Fear is said to be the main enemy of creativity, so it should be addressed head-on in artistic projects not only because it prevents us from being creative but also because it prevents us from being honest with ourselves and with our fellow choir members, which in turn makes it difficult to establish clear objectives and methodologies. This inability to be honest with what we want and seek from a choir can be seen in the contradictions that some choirs fall into. It would potentially be more beneficial to establish dual objectives as priorities and look for strategies to find a balance between them, inspired by the choirs that have managed to do so successfully. Nevertheless, this is

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a path that each choir and facilitator arguably must travel for themselves, as what works well for one choir may not be the best option for another.

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Endnote

(1) Author's translation

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