

# Drop Everything and Sing the Music: Choristers' Perceptions of the Value of Participating in a Multicultural South African University Choir

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## Abstract

This case study explored the perceptions of choristers singing in a multicultural university choir in South Africa and the personal value they associate with their choir participation. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and a four-month period of observations of choir rehearsals and performances. This research highlights the multidimensional experiences of choral singing which can be fulfilling, abundant, as well as demanding at times. Emergent themes include music as a key indicator leading to personal-, resilience-, and social values. Findings indicate the significance of collective music making and the ways in which it influences the lives of participants, such as enjoyment, health benefits, achievement, commitment, accountability, a sense of belonging, and camaraderie. Choristers experience the choir environment as safe and conducive to forming important relationships. Although cultural integration takes place to a large extent, there are still barriers due to a variety of languages within a diverse group of choristers. Participants' reflections reveal that choir participation is an ideal vehicle whereby social cohesion can be enhanced. Finally, the study highlights the importance of choral conductors and educators employing strategies that allow choirs within a multicultural environment to successfully transform in order to remain relevant to the needs of the singers within a diverse setting.

**Keywords:** choir singing; value of music participation; multicultural university choir; cultural integration; cross-cultural communication

## Introduction

Amateur university choirs are an important part of social life at South African universities, as indicated during a recent local television show which involved twelve

tertiary institutions (Cronjé 2016). One of the participating university choirs has been in existence for nearly half a century and has adapted a wide cultural diversity over the past two decades. Therefore, it was a viable research focus to explore what choristers perceive as values attributed to their participation in this choir.

Ponder the following scenario: It is late afternoon, the sun is setting, and a group of energetic young people gather outside the rehearsal room on campus, waiting for choir practice to commence. The mood is jovial as students from all walks of life share stories about their lives, conversing in several languages. Their diverse backgrounds include a variety of cultures, races, languages, socio-economic communities and study fields. Laughter, bickering, hugging, and boisterousness fill the air, and people passing by cannot help noticing the vociferous atmosphere surrounding this group. Then the students enter the rehearsal room to partake in a special, joint venture of two hours taking place twice a week. They are not merely there to make music as a group, but to socialise and be part of something special. Their participation is voluntary and includes rehearsals, performances, administrative and social responsibilities spanning a full calendar year.

In South Africa, choirs play a pivotal role in generating cultural and social tapestries within society (Veblen and Olsson 2002, 731), and across this “rainbow nation” (Evans 2010, 309) choirs from churches, schools, townships and community halls are engaging in similar choral activities on a daily basis. Regardless of the setting, whether formal or informal, at a university or around a campfire, in a concert hall or in the streets during a campus protest, the act of communal singing in South Africa is important to many people (Barrett 2007; Blacking 1973; Van As 2014) as it provides participants the opportunity and means to express themselves so that they may be heard. The main research question which guided this study is: What are the perceived values that participants attribute to their participation in a multicultural university choir?

## Literature Overview

The importance of participating in music ensembles has been well documented by researchers in various contexts (Adderley, Kennedy and Berz 2003; Bartolome 2013; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011; Schmidt 2005). The value of involvement within a music community differs from group to group. Culture, age, musical ability, social environment, and the type of music ensemble—amongst numerous other influences—all contribute to the benefits an individual may attribute to being part of any given music community (Barrett 2007; Creech et al. 2013; Major 2013).

Unlike instrumental music ensembles, choral singing has the advantage that participation is not dependent on prior musical expertise, since most members of voluntary community choirs “have limited music training” (Bailey and Davidson 2003, 19). Research illustrates a multitude of reasons for singers of all ages participating in choral

activities (Barrett 2017; Bartolome 2010, 2018; Brown 2012; Demorest 2000; Durrant 2005; Jacob, Guptill and Sumsion 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2015; Kennedy 2002; Phillips 2004; Pitts 2005; Smith and Sataloff 2013; Sweet 2010). Bartolome's (2010, 414–15) study provides confirmation of a “rich and varied” range of advantages linked to choir participation, while further studies reveal positive aspects of choir participation including enhanced self-expression, self-confidence, and social skills (Parker 2011), health benefits, emotional support and continuous learning (Varvarigou, Creech, Hallam and McQueen 2012), and social connectedness (Joseph and Southcott 2014).

Research related to the benefits of university choir participation focus on social aspects (Sichivitsa 2003), health aspects including spiritual and emotional health (Clift and Hancox 2001; Pitts 2005), as well as the general well-being of singers (Sichivitsa 2003). In a South African context, research regarding the value of music participation in choirs is sparse. There is widespread investigation regarding the value of music performance practices in South Africa from a variety of cultures (Fredericks 2008; Grant and Portera 2010; Joseph 2012; Woodward 2007) and using choirs as tools for transformation (Akrofi, Smit and Thorsén 2007; Van As 2014; Van Aswegen and Potgieter 2010). Bartolome's (2018, 265) research provides an in-depth perspective of choral activities in the east of Pretoria—the executive and administrative capital of South Africa—as well as the “perceived values and benefits” of these choral activities. Apart from Bartolome's research, there are few studies regarding the value of participating in choirs in a country that is essentially a singing nation. In order to address this lacuna in the literature, this case study specifically focuses on a multicultural South African choir concerning the benefits of participation as expressed by singers within this unique context.

## The Context

The University of Pretoria hosts approximately 50,000 students, where the first author is the conductor of the Camerata choir, and the second author is a lecturer. The seventy-eight full-time students who form the university choir reflect the diversity of the current South African environment. Auditions are open to students of all study fields, cultural groups, and nationalities. They draw from mother tongues in nine languages including Afrikaans,<sup>1</sup> English, German, isiNdebele, siSwati, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana and Tshivenda. A mere fifteen choristers speak English as a first language, although English is understood and spoken by all members. Study fields of the choristers include teaching, engineering, medicine, accounting, tourism, veterinary sciences, economics, languages, theology, and law, amongst others. Only eight choir members study music. The demographics of the choir members are provided in Table 1 and Table 2 under the Method section.

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1 Afrikaans is a local South African language which developed from Dutch, Malay and the Khoekhoe (Khoikhoi) African language (Anthonissen 2015, 29).

Prior choral experience, be it in a church, school or community choir, is beneficial when auditioning for the group; all members were part of vocal ensembles before joining this university choir. Choristers are selected based on their aural perception skills as well as their ability to replicate and memorise music. A wide range of repertoire is included, ranging from traditional African songs to Western choral music. Annual choir fees are payable by all members, but no student is turned away based on financial standing. To accommodate broad representation of the current South African socio-economic fabric, the choir provides funds to subsidise students in need of financial assistance.

## Method

A qualitative case study was adopted to explore choristers’ perceptions regarding the value they attribute to their voluntary participation in a university choir. Case study research involves an in-depth study of a particular “program, event, [...] or process” (Creswell 2013, 13), which is bounded by “time and activity.” In this instance, the “case” was the university choir conducted by the first author. The case study design permitted rich data to be collected over a four-month period through participant observation as well as through interviews and focus groups (Creswell 2013), allowing new insight and perspectives to emerge. The data that inform this article were derived from research conducted for the first author’s doctoral thesis, and all requirements and ethical protocols were adhered to in order to ensure confidentiality of the participants. As conductor of the choir, the first author acted as participant observer (Creswell 2013) during weekly rehearsals, as well as at several choir performances, when extensive field notes were made.

In addition, all choristers in the choir were invited to participate on a voluntary basis to be observed as well as to be interviewed, either individually or in a focus group.<sup>2</sup> Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell 2013; Leedy and Ormrod 2010), 20 choristers were selected for individual interviews to represent diversity regarding culture, language and gender as illustrated in Table 1. Individual interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each.

**Table 1:** Participants in the semi-structured individual interviews

Participant (chosen pseudonym)	Sex	Language group	Current year in the choir	Interview duration
Alice	Female	English (Coloured)	4th year	25 minutes
Aria	Female	English	4th year	27 minutes

<sup>2</sup> All choristers in the choir volunteered to participate in the study.

<b>Participant (chosen pseudonym)</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Language group</b>	<b>Current year in the choir</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
Azania	Female	isiXhosa	2nd year	18 minutes
Beukes	Male	Afrikaans	4th year	22 minutes
Blommie	Male	Afrikaans	5th year	22 minutes
Breyten	Male	Afrikaans	4th year	26 minutes
Brillianto	Male	Afrikaans	4th year	39 minutes
Catherine	Female	Afrikaans	3rd year	28 minutes
Emma	Female	English	2nd year	19 minutes
Fred	Male	Setswana	2nd year	17 minutes
Jeremy	Male	Sesotho	3rd year	18 minutes
John Fleck	Male	Afrikaans	2nd year	20 minutes
M2	Female	Afrikaans (Coloured)	4th year	29 minutes
Nkululeko	Male	isiZulu	3rd year	25 minutes
Nozipho	Female	isiSwati	3rd year	17 minutes
Regina	Female	Afrikaans	4th year	29 minutes
Shepard	Male	English	3rd year	23 minutes
Troy	Male	Setswana	4th year	24 minutes
Zack	Male	English	3rd year	18 minutes
Ziggy	Female	isiZulu	2nd year	25 minutes

The remaining choristers took part in focus-group discussions lasting 45–60 minutes, each group consisting of between five and eight participants. Table 2 provides details of the nine focus groups. Each participant was requested to create a unique pseudonym<sup>3</sup> so that their responses would remain confidential.

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3 Choristers were not required to link their pseudonyms to their ethnicity, language, culture or nationality.

**Table 2:** Participants in the focus group interviews

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Participants (chosen pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Language group</b>	<b>Current year in the choir</b>	<b>Interview duration</b>
1. Afrikaans speakers	Emma B Gerhard Gert Henry Ilse Jane Jone Katya	Female Male Male Male Female Female Female Female	Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans	1st year 1st year 2nd year 3rd year 1st year 2nd year 1st year 2nd year	52 minutes
2. Committee members	Ella Jan Nancy	Female Male Female	Afrikaans Afrikaans English	3rd year 5th year 2nd year	26 minutes
3. English speakers	Alice Friday Jess May Tango	Female Female Female Female Male	English English English English English	1st year 1st year 2nd year 2nd year 1st year	42 minutes
4. Female singers	Alice B Ana Ariel Aurora Belle Elsa Merida	Female Female Female Female Female Female Female	Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans	1st year 2nd year 3rd year 1st year 1st year 2nd year 1st year	58 minutes
5. Foreigners	Amare Frikkie Jasmine Lowkey Pink Tiger	Female Male Female Male Female Male	German German Indian isiNdebele isiNdebele isiNdebele	1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 2nd year	37 minutes
6. Male singers	Hardus Johnny Ricardo Tergum Willem	Male Male Male Male Male	Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans English Afrikaans	1st year 1st year 3rd year 1st year 1st year	42 minutes

Groups	Participants (chosen pseudonyms)	Sex	Language group	Current year in the choir	Interview duration
7. New members	Andy Betsie Elani Elizabeth Lara Maria Melissa Ria	Female Female Female Female Female Female Female Female	Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans	1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year	50 minutes
8. Openly gay students	Fanie George Jannie John Koos Nataniel	Male Male Male Male Male Male	Afrikaans English English Afrikaans Afrikaans Afrikaans	2nd year 1st year 2nd year 4th year 2nd year 1st year	56 minutes
9. Indigenous African-language speakers	Ashley Jane John Tucker Qaqamba Wilson	Female Female Male Male Female	Northern Ndebele Shona Setswana Shona isiXhosa	1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year 1st year	36 minutes

Questions for individual interviews and focus group sessions were informed by the literature so as to explore choristers' perceived values of participation. Topics during interviews and focus group sessions included reasons for joining the choir; expectations and experiences of being a choir member; feelings during and after rehearsals and performances; socialisation related to choir activities; and personal value afforded to being a choir member. To avoid the potential of conflicting power relationships between the researchers and the choristers, and in accordance with the university's ethical stipulations, a substitute interviewer was selected so that participants were allowed to speak more freely and honestly without the fear of prejudice (Check and Schutt 2012). This independent interviewer is a conductor of a multicultural South African choir and has an in-depth understanding of choirs within a South African context. To enhance the relevance of the data, the independent interviewer was extensively trained by the first author within a pilot study setting prior to the commencement of data collection (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpoort 2011). All interviews, taking place in a boardroom on campus, were audio-recorded, totalling 165 hours of data. After verbatim transcriptions, member-checking was done by the choristers to confirm that their views had been faithfully represented (Creswell 2013; Holloway and Wheeler 2010). Additionally,

the independent interviewer observed the audio-visual recordings of rehearsals and performances along with the authors' analysis and interpretations of these activities to verify findings. This practice assisted in minimising subjectivity and bias on the part of the researchers (De Vos et al. 2011).

Themes started to emerge during data collection, and the transcribed data were organised and collated during a process of "open coding" (Creswell 2013, 86). Codes were then sorted according to broader themes, greatly assisting the authors in understanding the choristers' responses (Creswell 2013). To ensure trustworthiness of the research, the authors applied a prolonged period of engagement, a variety of data collection strategies, and member-checking procedures (Bogdan and Biklen 2006; Creswell 2013; Leedy and Ormrod 2010; O'Donoghue and Punch 2003). Because of the complexity of a real-life choir setting, disconfirming evidence was sought as an additional strategy to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell 2013).

## Limitations

The current study focuses on a single case only, therefore findings are not applicable to choirs from different contexts. We acknowledge that personal interaction with participants as well as being employees at the university result in some subjective perspectives offered in the findings (Stake 2010). However, extensive data from various data collection techniques allowed findings to be compared and validated.

## Findings and Discussion

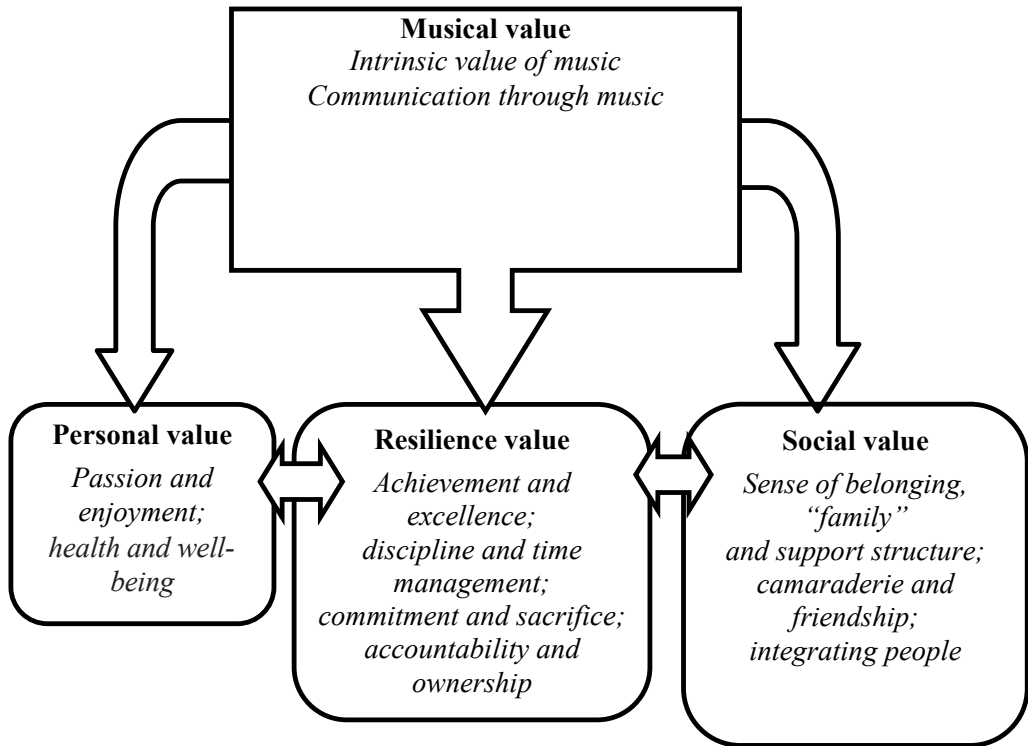
Four main themes related to the perceived value of choir participation emerged: namely, musical value; personal value; resilience value; and social value, which were broken down into several sub-themes. Table 3 outlines the four main themes and their related sub-themes.



**Table 3:** Main themes and sub-themes related to choir participation

Musical value	Personal value	Resilience value	Social value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic value of music making</li> <li>• Message bearing and communication through music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passion and enjoyment</li> <li>• Health and well-being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement and excellence</li> <li>• Discipline and time management</li> <li>• Commitment and sacrifice</li> <li>• Accountability and ownership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of belonging, “family” and support structure</li> <li>• Camaraderie and friendship</li> <li>• Integrating people               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Choir as a diverse environment</li> <li>○ Cultural barriers within the choir</li> <li>○ Choir as a tool for cross-cultural communication and social integration</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Through intensive perusal and analysis of the data, a deeper level of interpretation and understanding emerged. We noticed that deep connections and passion regarding the value of music and singing were intertwined with the choristers’ perceptions of all aspects of their choir participation. Additionally, the common goal of making music collaboratively influences and strengthens each of the other values on a personal, resilience and social level. Figure 1 illustrates the permeation of music through all other aspects: music is the “glue” that holds the choir together and which infuses all the other values.



**Figure 1:** Music as key indicator of values attributed to choir singing

*Music = key indicator*

The themes discussed in the following sections are supported by verbatim quotes from the respondents, indicated by their chosen pseudonyms.

## Musical Value

Without music as an incentive, the choir would not exist. A multitude of responses from the participants was related to their love for music and communal music making. Two sub-themes emerged: firstly, a deep-rooted love for music as indicator of the intrinsic incentive to participate in choir activities; and secondly, their view of being “message bearers” and communicators through music, a finding also identified by Bartolome (2018).

### Intrinsic Value of Music Making

Participants greatly value the intrinsic benefits associated with music making and singing in a choir. Their love for music itself motivates them to sing in the choir. This

often manifests through continuation from previous choral experiences or through an enthusiasm and inner motivation. All interview data were infused with references to an inner drive and enthusiasm regarding the value of singing and making music together in the choir.

I think we are all here because we want to be, and the music makes us happy. [...] Meeting twice a week to sing is our “moment of Zen”; a place where we just drop everything and sing the music. (Emma)

This view was corroborated during observations made at rehearsals and performances, where choristers were visibly moved by the music.

I have seen how choristers have cried in performances. There are moments in the music that drives [us] to tears and goose bumps. (Brillianto)

The current study confirms literature related to the importance of participation in a musical endeavour (Adderley et al. 2003; Bartolome 2010, 2018; Brown 2012; Demorest 2000; Durrant 2005; Jacob et al. 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Kennedy 2002; Phillips 2004; Pitts 2005; Schmidt 2005; Smith and Sataloff 2013; Sweet 2010). Kokotsaki and Hallam (2011) refer to the intrinsic motivation of choristers to participate in choral activities, which corresponds with the current study, as many students revealed their inner passion and love for music as strong motivations for singing in the choir.

## Message Bearing and Communication through Music

Concert performances are highly valued as participants can communicate the meaning of the music to the community or a specific audience. Several choristers used the metaphor of “being message bearers”—touching the lives of audience members, educating and inspiring communities about music and life through song, sharing their talent, and acting as instruments to convey important messages and emotions. A common thread infusing participants’ comments was the choir’s ability to obtain an emotional reaction from the audience and from within their own ranks. The pure satisfaction of seeing the audience smile, cry or moved by the music adds great personal value to the choral experience for many choristers.

[We] need to bear a message to the audience, and during the performances, we experience a feeling of satisfaction and humility that [we] were an instrument that moved people. (Brillianto)

Some participants shared strong opinions about their responsibility to change for the better the lives of those who experience a performance. Their role as choristers is for a greater purpose than singing the notes. In a country still in the midst of transformation and turmoil, they offered philosophical beliefs about the importance of spreading messages of love, hope, humanity, and compassion through music.

I am an instrument of peace and responsible for sending a message to the audience and those around me. (Azania)

Participants expressed deep feelings of inspiration related to their role as communicators to audience members. All the long hours of practising and sacrifice are worthwhile once they experience the joy they bring to audiences. Choristers are motivated to share the gift of music, thereby adding meaning to audience members' lives. This confirms research conducted by Welch (2005, 1), indicating the ability of the voice to "communicate increasingly complex meanings, aesthetic values and group membership" through singing.

## Personal Value

From the personal value of choir participation for choristers, two sub-themes emerged: passion and enjoyment and health and well-being.

### Passion and Enjoyment

Reflections of the majority of choristers indicated a deeply rooted passion for singing as well as intense enjoyment while doing so. Several choristers mentioned that their lives would be unfulfilled without participating in the university choir. Alice believes that the "choir contributes to [her] happiness" and remarks that choristers would not participate if they "did not enjoy it," while John remarks that he "could not live without choir." Being part of the entire choral experience of music making, social interaction, and an energetic and vibrant atmosphere, all contribute to choristers feeling better about life in general. The following response typifies the feeling of enjoyment and love for music associated with choir participation:

Singing in [this choir] brings a lot of joy to my life. I can come to rehearsals every Tuesday and Thursday in a bad mood and go home feeling lighter and feel like I can take on the world again. (Friday)

Data analysis revealed contrasting responses regarding the levels of enjoyment during weekly rehearsals compared to enjoyment during concert performances. Some choristers experience heightened levels of enjoyment during rehearsals where there is a stress-free atmosphere and more time to interact and socialise. Observation data supported this finding, indicating that the act of making music collaboratively during rehearsals is more important to the majority of members than taking part in concert performances. Choristers were visibly more relaxed and jovial at rehearsals.

In contrast, a small number of choristers love the adrenalin and excitement of stage performances. Catherine's spontaneous reaction is that she "loves to perform" and that it gives her a "sense of pride." Correspondingly, Azania adds that she "feels great after a

performance” because she is doing something “that [she] loves.” Explaining this contrast in responses relates to the notion that live concerts require far more focus, concentration and endurance from performers. Most choristers prefer the “work and play” atmosphere, the humour and spontaneity, and the feeling of connectedness between choristers during regular weekly practices.

In the participants’ views, choir participation uplifts their mood, provides enjoyment, and makes them happier people. This finding correlates with similar studies and is a well-documented reason for choristers to continue with choir participation (Bartolome 2013; Durrant 2003; Jacob et al. 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Kennedy 2002; Sichivitsa 2003). However, we noted that enjoyment features more prominently for choristers during rehearsals than during performances. This contrasts with numerous studies that specifically outline the importance of concert performance as perceived by its members (Adderley et al. 2003; Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Parker 2011). Very few studies indicate that choristers perceive the rehearsal process as more meaningful and enjoyable than performances. Since data analysis revealed that performance anxiety is not present during rehearsals, this finding is unique to the current study and is therefore a noteworthy addition to the existing knowledge of this phenomenon. Another unexpected finding of this study is that a small group of choristers experience intense pleasure and exhilaration during performances and thrive in an atmosphere which most choristers experience as highly stressful.

## Health and Well-Being

Choristers experience their choir participation as beneficial to their health as it relieves stress and serves as an emotional outlet.

If it was not for the choir, I would probably have a nervous breakdown. To have rehearsals on Tuesdays and Thursdays and to be able to break away from everything, from an exceptionally difficult day, and to come to choir and sing, has really “saved” me on numerous occasions. (Katya)

Several choristers shared the belief that breathing, stretching and posture exercises which form part of choral warm-ups have a positive effect on their physical health. These expressions underline the choristers’ views of choir as a stress relief activity as well as an activity that improves their overall mood. During stressful times of tests and examinations on campus, the positive effect of music was best observed. At the start of the rehearsal, students were distracted and ill focused within a quiet and subdued atmosphere. As the rehearsal progressed, singers started to relax, and the entire mood changed. This led to comments from choristers such as having renewed energy, motivating them to return to their academic studies.

Wide-ranging research over the past two decades indicates that singing, performed as a soloist or collectively in a choir, is extensively linked to human health and well-being (Bailey and Davidson 2002; Clift et al. 2010; Clift and Hancox 2010; Gick, 2010; Grape, Sandgren, Hansson, Ericson, and Theorell, 2003; Jacob et al. 2009; Sanal and Gorsev 2014; Valentine and Evans 2010). Bittman et al.'s (2004) research identifies music participation as leading to stress relief, relaxation and improved mood, especially in the lives of university students. Similarly, Jacob et al. (2009, 190) identify "stress relief" through choir singing as a significant theme as gained from the perceptions of choir members, while Unwin, Kenny and Davis (2002) document the improved moods of people who participated in singing for as little as half an hour a day. The results from the current study correspond and strengthen findings within the existing literature.

## Negative Aspects of Choir Participation in Relation to Health and Well-Being

A counter aspect related to health benefits is that many choristers show visible signs of performance anxiety during performances, indicating that choir participation may lead to stress and tension. Due to the high performance standard required of all members, choristers expressed feelings of intense pressure during stage concerts, especially when demanding or difficult music is being performed. Because the performance takes place in front of an audience, all parts of the music should be executed "perfectly" the first time it is performed; there is no "second take." The following interview response provides some insight:

It is very stressful because there are all these people [other choristers] that are amazingly good and then there is you. If you make a mistake, you disappoint the entire choir. (Alice)

The demands and pressure required from all choristers during performances adds mental and emotional stress, corresponding with the findings of several studies (Livesey, Morrison, Clift and Camic 2012; Ryan and Andrews 2009; Sanal and Gorsev 2014). Another form of anxiety and tension in the South African context is academic performance; students need to excel academically in order to be accepted into tertiary institutions (Marshall and Case 2010; Motala 2011). Therefore, students' choir participation may be at risk when they experience academic strain. Furthermore, choir membership fees involve a substantial financial commitment which adds more apprehension and pressure, aspects which may deter some students from auditioning.

## Resilience Value

This theme emerged as a noteworthy indicator of commitment and dedication. Reflecting on the commitment, time and effort required to participate in the choir, participants invariably referred to positive aspects of resilience which add valuable real-life skills to

their lives. Sub-themes related to this main theme include achievement and excellence, discipline and time-management, commitment and sacrifice, and lastly, accountability and ownership.

## Achievement and Excellence

Choristers see the choir as a place where excellence and accomplishment are developed. Since the choir repertoire is often challenging, choristers experience an inner urge and drive to perfect their renditions of the music. After numerous practice sessions they come to know the music by heart. Choir rehearsals therefore offer opportunities for choristers to strive for excellence, a life skill that may enhance and enrich other aspects of their future lives. Just to be able to sing through a difficult song for the first time is regarded as a great achievement. Several choristers commented on their state of elation when achieving this goal during rehearsals:

Every now and then, especially between songs, you get that feeling of accomplishment and “wow, I just did that!” [...] So, every single thing that we do is a sense of accomplishment for myself. (Fred)

The shared sense of pride and accomplishment is a motivating factor which adds personal value to the choral experience. Achieving overall success in the choir requires a strong work ethic and dedication from all choristers. This resonates throughout participants’ responses and filters into their daily routines:

Experiencing the work ethic [in the choir] is amazing, it’s insane. The work ethic inspires me every single day. It’s like an international level and you just work, work, work and I love the fact that mediocrity is not accepted—only perfectionism. (John Fleck)

Achievement as a personal benefit of participation within a group musical activity corroborates the findings of several studies (Bartolome 2013; Creech et al. 2013; Jacob et al. 2009; Kennedy 2002; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011; Pitts 2005). Although the desire to achieve excellence is a significant finding in our overall study, it emerged that this desire creates performance anxiety and stress amongst choristers.

## Discipline and Time Management

Many participants shared their perceptions that the discipline instilled in them through the choir is a benefit that infuses every activity of their lives. Several students believe that they are more disciplined in their academic studies and personal lives as a result of their choir participation.

I think you learn great discipline and integrity in the choir [...] and this fosters in my life: to be on time, to look after myself, to be well mannered and to study the music by myself. (Ilse)

Time management as a vital skill resonated throughout participants' responses as the choir's busy schedule forces them to plan and manage their lives efficiently. Some students commented that their academic work improves as a result of enhanced self-discipline and time management which is honed within the choir context: important benefits to their professional development and future careers. This finding correlates with other studies, including Adderley et al. 2003; Bartolome 2013; Chorus America 2009; and Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011.

## Commitment and Sacrifice

The majority of choristers mentioned that their choir participation involves a significant commitment, requiring them to sacrifice a great deal of personal time. They experience choir time as mostly well spent and that it renews their energy, motivating them to apply themselves diligently to their studies.

It takes a lot of work and commitment to build yourself up as a choral singer and to be in a choir of this calibre. So, if there is one thing I have learnt, it looks easy when we perform on stage, but it takes a tremendous amount of work. (Troy)

Data analysis revealed that commitment, as an inherent part of choir participation, involves both positive and negative aspects. Choristers often have to sacrifice special social occasions—such as the wedding or birthday of a close friend—in order to attend choir rehearsals or performances. The atmosphere during choir rehearsals when students were involved in tests or examinations was visibly different, and social time after such events would be limited as choristers rushed home to study. Several authors report on the commitment associated with choir membership as a benefit (Bartolome 2013, 2018; Chorus America 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011). Due to high levels of academic responsibilities at the university, choristers would often arrive at rehearsals tired and stressed, and unable to concentrate. However, observational data indicated that the choristers' commitment and sacrifice paid off; the music would transform the tense atmosphere, engaging choristers emotionally and providing upliftment and enjoyment.

## Accountability and Ownership

Choristers perceive the choir as being successful and they take ownership of this success on various levels. Their self-applied responsibilities involve the music, the performances, and the overall administration of the choir. To adequately prepare and study a large volume of music for rehearsals—often during holidays or in their free time—is mainly so that they do not disappoint their fellow singers, and, in this way, they hold themselves accountable. Several choristers commented on feeling negative when a concert did not



go well, taking personal blame for the performance being mediocre. Participants were vocal about their desire to always improve as is evident in the following response:

I personally wish to improve myself every day [so that when] I step foot onto stage I will not accept anything less [from myself] than being phenomenal! (Nkululeko)

Choir members taking ownership and accountability for their musical progress concur with Bartolome's study (2013), which indicates that the choristers were empowered to take control of the learning process during rehearsals. Goodrich (2007) reports that students in a high school jazz band perform better as a whole because they are accountable and responsible towards the group. Similarly, choir members in the current study feel accountable for the quality of the choir's performances and have pride in their "ownership" of this responsibility.

## Social Value

Singing in a choir is a collective activity, and it is not surprising that participants place great emphasis on the social value of singing in this group. Several sub-themes related to social value are described in the following sections.

### Sense of Belonging, "Family" and Fellowship

For many choristers, participation in the choir gives them a sense of belonging, a distinct attribute especially in a large university environment. Similar to the way in which a family provides a strong support structure, the singers feel that the choir environment embodies an open atmosphere of fellowship, togetherness and connectivity, allowing spontaneity without fear of prejudice or judgment. Participants regard the choir as an extension of their personal families where they fit in and feel at home. As much as we disagree, we still care about each other. That sense of family is never lost, and we pass down this philosophy to new members. (Nkululeko)

During difficult times—such as student protests, challenging academic cycles, or personal traumas—participants strongly emphasised the support from fellow choristers. They all avail themselves to listen, comfort and encourage their singing companions.

Although several participants mentioned that they do not necessarily like or get along with all members in the choir, they believe the choir emulates a typical family environment where disagreements and conflicts are common, even though they care about one another:

You like some [members] and you don't like others. The relationships between members are different and unusual. It is [just like] a family. (Fanie)

Such differences and disagreements were perceived as acceptable because they happened in a democratic atmosphere within a close-knit community of people who respect each other's views.

Although there are studies which identify the notion of choir as a “family” (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Bartolome 2010, 2013; Clift et al. 2010; Jacob et al. 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011; Livesey et al. 2012; Tonnejck, Kinebanian and Josephsson 2008), the results in the current study appear to be more significant. A large volume of choristers referred to the metaphor of the choir as being their “family,” which provides them with a sense of fellowship and belonging. In the South African context, students often feel alienated or isolated on university campuses, being surrounded by contrasting and diverse cultures and languages. Within the choir setting, a feeling of connectedness is experienced through the common goal of making music, giving choristers a strong support structure and sense of belonging.

## Camaraderie and Friendship

Due to the inherent social nature of choir as a collective music making activity, the data pertaining to choir friendships was saturated early in the research process. For choristers, the choir room is a hub for creating new friendships with other singers, a space allowing them to get to know each other on a personal level. These social interactions often have great impact on participants' personal lives and may be the sole reason why they remain in the choir. Several participants join the choir because they struggle to make friends at the university. Because the choir, with its 78 members, is small and intimate enough for choristers to get to know each other on a personal level, most of the friendship circles consist of choristers; several participants mentioned their “best friends” being choir members. Jess explained that the “friendships and trust” generated are a result of the “huge camaraderie” within the choir. These times of shared friendships become some of the most meaningful and valuable memories of students' lives.

I have been singing my entire life and am now in my fourth year in this choir. I continue to sing because I have had some of the best times in my life in this choir, all thanks to my friends. (John)

Choir friendships go beyond choir activities and include a variety of social events. Participants often regard choir friendships to last for a lifetime. One chorister's parents met in the choir 30 years ago, got married and have remained friends with other choristers from their student days.

The aspect of friendships forming as a by-product of singing in a choir as established in this study is supported extensively in literature (Bailey and Davidson 2002, 2005; Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Bartolome 2010, 2013; Chorus America 2009; Clift and Hancox 2001; Jacob et al. 2009; Joseph and Southcott 2014; Kokotsaki and Hallam 2011; Langston and Barrett 2008; Livesey et al. 2012; Pitts 2005; Silber 2005).

## Integrating People

This sub-theme indicated several sub-categories: namely, the choir as a diverse environment; cultural barriers within the choir; and choir as a tool for cross-cultural communication and social integration. Each of these will be briefly discussed in relation to extant literature.

### *Choir as a Diverse Environment*

The multicultural nature of the choir is a true reflection of the rainbow of cultures represented by students on the university campus. Diversity in the choir is evident in several ways, such as that there are students from many cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual preferences, races, languages, and study disciplines. The choir environment is unique because it differs from choristers' upbringing or what they have been accustomed to before joining the choir. Several students explained that joining the choir required them to adapt, demanding an intensive learning curve, as they had preconceptions of cultures different to their own and were not exposed to such a multicultural and socially varied environment during their school days.

I was in an environment that I was accustomed to. The choir pushed me into a diverse environment. (Brillianto)

Others mentioned that the choir is a richly varied group, which is not always the case in their residencies or study classes on the university campus. The choir is perceived to be a "forced" environment; a space that requires individual choristers to interact with a diverse group of people, and as a result they get to know people who are different from themselves. Several participants remarked that they connect with others and build friendships across cultural boundaries as a result of their membership in the choir, an aspect that would have been unlikely without their choir participation.

I have met the most amazing people from different cultures, study fields, backgrounds and nationalities. We also have different social values and speak several different languages. (Zack)

In the literature, diversity as a benefit of participation within a choral community does not feature significantly and it may not be perceived as a necessary benefit in all countries. Extensive searches have not revealed any study investigating the benefits of diversity within a university choir on such a large scale as the current research. Although Bartolome (2013) discusses diversity within the Seattle Girls' Choir, she admits that the majority of singers come from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and that diversity is mainly found within the greater community. Van As (2014) discusses the challenges of diversity within a competition setting amongst corporate choirs in South Africa, while Adderley et al. (2003) briefly mention diversity as a marginal benefit of participation in a music activity. Strayhorn's research (2011, 146) highlights how black students in a predominantly white American university struggled to adjust to college life

because they felt marginalised and socially isolated, and that singing in a gospel choir relieved these tensions. Walker (2005) argues that students at South African universities choose to associate themselves with others due to their “social and economic conditions” (52), advocating that the ideology of apartheid—although subdued—is not “entirely defeated” (53).

### *Cultural Barriers within the Choir*

A unique phenomenon within the South African context is the variety of cultures found on a single university campus. Many of the choristers mention barriers which prevent the choir from integrating completely, as explained by the following two participants:

You are forced to be in a space with people of different cultures, whether you like it or not. (Nancy)

People generalise a great deal and have an idea about a certain cultural group and then you come to choir and you meet people of different cultural groups and it is a contradiction to what you have been exposed too. (Elani)

In a country with eleven official languages, one of the main barriers which causes factions within the choir is the wide variety of languages spoken. A large number of mother tongue Afrikaans choristers commented how ill at ease they feel when conversing in English since they have difficulty in relaying their thoughts and ideas fluently. Moreover, this makes them feel incompetent and shy. On the other hand, students who cannot speak Afrikaans tend to avoid forming friendships with the Afrikaans choristers as there is a language and communication barrier which inhibits cohesion and understanding. Ariel commented that she “only speaks Afrikaans” (her mother tongue) as it is “difficult for [her] to speak English the entire time.” Aurora agreed that the “language barrier is ‘big’ in the choir,” while Elizabeth remarked that people tend to mingle with their own “language groups.” Breyten noted that there are “cliques that form” due to the variety of languages spoken by the choristers.

Although a practical arrangement in the choir is that all communication is done in English for the benefit of the entire group, it is evident that in social settings, the students select the languages that they are most confident and relaxed speaking in. One participant expressed strong views against English being the only language of communication as it results in the choristers adopting an English culture and losing their own identity. From the observations, it was evident that the Afrikaans students tend to form their own social groups, largely because they share a language and many of these students find it difficult to express their feelings or to communicate with ease using English. In comparison, the students in the choir who speak English, regardless of their race or cultural background, form better ties with students from other language groups.

Findings in this study indicate that language is a significant barrier for social cohesion and that choristers tend to mingle with their own language group. This may be because mother tongue conversations do not require a concerted effort, flowing spontaneously and effortlessly. Similarly, Li and Southcott (2012, 74) establish that communication in a language other than one's mother tongue creates a barrier which inhibits spontaneous conversation, often leading to "social isolation" within a community.

There is evidence of a racial divide within the choir as the white and black students tend to segregate during social events. Data from the interviews and from observations clearly illustrate that integration between the various racial groups—although present—is not the norm. During breaks, before and after rehearsals as well as during social occasions, white and black students tend to group separately.

During our rehearsal breaks, there is still a lot of segregation between the racial groups. The Afrikaans people make a group and the blacks make their own groups. (Belle)

Several participants representing a variety of racial groups in the choir feel that this divide is normal and do not see it as a problem. One singer believes that the black students form a group as they are the minority in the choir, while another comments on how excluded members feel when joining a group that is not of their own race or culture. Findings reveal that choristers are aware of a concerted effort being made to offer cultural links and integration during choir activities, despite the cultural differences. Both black and white students commented that this choir sets an example of integration taking place, noting that the university hostels and academic classes could learn from what the choir has achieved. Choristers admitted that more needs to be done to fully integrate the singers, but that a great deal is already happening in comparison to other organisations and societies on the university campus.

Owing to the unseen barriers on the university campus of the current study, it is probable that black students join the choir—similar to the students in Strayhorn's (2011) research—because the choir offers them a less marginalised or isolated environment. Some choristers perceived the choir community as an "artificial space" which required them to interact with culturally different people. This "forced" collaboration within a choir context may—to some extent—assist in eliminating cultural barriers, but more research is required to further explore this notion.

### *Choir Singing as a Tool for Cross-Cultural Communication and Social Integration*

The participants in the choir believe that communication between singers from different cultures takes place through the music and through social interaction. Troy reflected positively about the "beauty of choral music [which] transcends a lot of barriers to bring people together." The repertoire of the choir is so diverse, and several singers noted that they learn a great deal by singing music from a variety of cultures.

Music is a universal language, so whether you are a Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans or English student, music speaks to people the same way, regardless of the cultural background you come from. I believe that we learn from different cultural backgrounds by singing different kinds of music, be it African, Afrikaans or Latin. (Ziggy)

Several choristers feel that interaction through music leads to understanding and respect for different cultural practices. Singing a traditional African song allows students speaking Afrikaans, English or German to learn more about a culture that is largely foreign to them. The students in the choir that speak one of the indigenous African languages, and who are accustomed to traditional African performance practices, offer valuable advice and assistance to those that may not be familiar with indigenous African music. In similar fashion, Afrikaans students assist with the pronunciation of songs in their mother tongue, while international German students would do the same if the choir was to sing a German song.

Many of the choristers applaud the choir for creating an environment that allows students from different cultural backgrounds to integrate on a social level. Several of the participants mentioned the warped views or stigmas that are attached to cultural groups other than their own, mostly due to ignorance, and how these have been diminished through their interactions with choristers who are different to them.

Some participants offered personal accounts of how they needed to adapt their beliefs and attitudes to be more accepting and understanding of those that shared different cultural views to their own. Jess expressed that choir teaches her “to interact with different people,” especially those “outside of [her] cultural and language group.” Jan mentioned that choir taught him to “respect other cultural [groups], their backgrounds and traditions” adding that it is important “not to think one culture is [...] better than the other.” The following two responses indicate the personal transformation the participants underwent regarding social integration through choral singing:

The choir pushed me into a diverse environment, one which was different and to which I had to adapt. Just being exposed to this diversity made me change a great deal in how I think and approach things, and it made my feelings regarding certain cultures, different. (Brillianto)

I have learnt to just love people and that you can't judge them because you do not agree to what they believe or think about life. I want to know more about people, their cultures and beliefs. (John Fleck)

Data analysis provides clear evidence of friendships forming across cultural groups as a result of the choir, something which many participants believe would not have been without the fellowship, collaboration and social integration within the choir. Even the seating arrangement during rehearsals is important, as choristers in close proximity to each other tend to be the ones forming the strongest and most intimate relationships.

Participants believe that the collaborative music making activity of the choir is a powerful means to lead to social integration. In their view music has the ability to unite choristers through a shared common goal and passion for music.

We are all brought [together] by the same love of music and we all come from different places. The music doesn't choose between black and white [singers] because the love for music is just there. (Nozipho)

Some choristers expressed the notion that the music allows them to see each other in a different light, namely as people and music makers, rather than groups of people defined by the colour of their skin or the language they speak. Although the majority of choristers believe that cultural integration is taking place within the choir, a healthy number of them agree that true unity is needed in the choir and that cultural integration occurs very slowly.

However, the responses of the choristers reveal that, due to communal singing, they overcome their preconceived ideas and form strong bonds with choristers from all cultures.

The diversity of the choir mimics the cultural fabric of South Africa as a whole and therefore provides an environment where positive experiences can emanate through communal music making. In her research, Van As (2014, 228) finds that singing music from various cultural groups within South Africa generated “cultural empathy” amongst the choristers, while Zhu (2011, 117) believes that this “cultural empathy” is the understanding of another culture’s values; seeing the world through the eyes of another person. In a South African context, the findings of the current study may provide crucial understanding of music making through choir participation as a tool to enhance and develop social cohesion.

## Conclusion

This study provides rich evidence of the values attributed to choir participation as perceived by members of a South African university choir. By interpreting the findings, the unmistakable strength of music, as an intrinsic human need to make music collectively, becomes evident. This aspect permeated and embraced the other themes, namely that music making through choir singing provides an opportunity to communicate to others and that this communal activity adds resilience, personal value and social value to the lives of choristers. Music is the “glue” that holds the choir together.

Relating existing literature to the findings of the current study reveals that singing in a choir is a multidimensional activity, and that experiences for choristers are fulfilling, abundant and even demanding at times. Members partaking in this study believe that singing in the choir has a positive effect on their health and well-being, and that friendships are fostered in a safe and accepting environment as a result of their



participation. Improved discipline and better time management skills are attributes that are spontaneously adopted by choristers within the choir setting, whereby they gain resilience as a life skill. High levels of intercultural understanding are fostered as a result of singing in the choir, and the potential for integration between the various cultural groups is both evident and occurring. Being a chorister in this choir gives its participants an opportunity to fulfil an essential human need namely to make music collectively.

Negative aspects of choir participation include the long hours required for choir rehearsals and concert performances, adding to heightened stress levels, especially with regard to students' academic programmes. Furthermore, cultural and language barriers within the choir can prevent full integration between groups. Such barriers create cultural divides which ultimately lead to the formation of exclusive friendship circles instead of fostering intercultural collaboration and communication. This notion needs further exploration and understanding in order to rectify such situations.

Regardless of these challenges, members of the choir voluntarily sacrifice a great deal of time and take on financial obligations to sing in the choir. Interpreting this aspect leads to the understanding that the advantages of choir participation are far greater than the occasional trials which choristers need to endure. This university choir is an active music making community offering the students an "anchorage to life" (Borglin, Edberg and Hallberg 2005, 205), and an example of an institution that supports the well-being of the individual, while providing opportunities for the singers to share their culture and heritage within a diverse environment. The ability of South African multicultural choirs to remain relevant will largely depend on the strategies employed by choral conductors and educators to serve and respond to the needs of diverse groups of choristers in addition to such choirs' resilience and innovation to transform.

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