Conference Report: The 2018 Symposium on Research in Choral Singing

Patrick K. Freer
Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

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The inaugural Symposium on Research in Choral Singing was held on September 14 and 15, 2018, on the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. An international group of more than sixty choral scholars presented and discussed their research in a range of formats. The primary goal of the Symposium was to define the current state of research in choral singing, and to identify and coordinate issues and methodologies for future efforts. Participants represented forty-five colleges and universities in the United States, two European universities (England and Hungary), and one public school district.

The Symposium was a project of the American Choral Directors Association, through its National Standing Committee on Research and Publications. Among the committee’s many initiatives has been the recent re-launch of the International Journal of Research in Choral Singing (Steven Demorest, Editor), and the Symposium was developed to generate a body of scholarship that might be published in the IJRCS. To that end, the abstracts from the Symposium will appear in a future issue of the journal, as will article versions of several Symposium presentations. The IJRCS is accessed online, free of charge, at www.acda.org/ijrcs.

Symposium Events and Presentations

Graham Welch (University College of London) framed the Symposium with an opening keynote presentation, “The Role of Singing in Effecting Change.” He addressed the need for cohesion between theory and research, with the latter necessary to substantiate the validity of the practices and rationales we hold for choral music’s education and performance, and for its potential societal impacts. Welch specifically highlighted the need for increased research involving neuroimaging techniques and other neurobiological measures to substantiate and/or clarify the field’s assumptions about the impact of choral conducting and singing.

The Symposium additional-ly consisted of twenty-five spoken presentations, a catered reception during a poster session with twenty presenters, several lengthy breaks for follow-up conversations, and a conference dinner. The fifty-five conference sessions explored issues of psychology and sociology; perception and cognition; teachers, conductors, and conducting; singing technique and pedagogy; and choirs and choral singers. For example, a random sampling of five Symposium presentation titles included:

- Meanings of participation in Eric Whitacre’s virtual choirs (Steven A. Paparo, University of Massachusetts Amherst)
- Evolving pedagogies: Teaching transgender students in a high school
choral program (Julie K. Hagen, University of Hartford’s The Hartt School)

• Effects of vibrato and pitch-varied vocal models on high school and undergraduate singers’ intonation, intensity, and use of vibrato (Sandy P. Hinkley, Sam Houston State University)

• The effects of a cappella and piano assisted vocal warm-up procedures on acoustical and perceptual measures of choral sound (Melissa L. Grady, The University of Kansas & Sheri Cook-Cunningham, The University of Central Arkansas)

• The nature of expertise: A case study of an acclaimed choral conductor (Katrina Cox & Amy Simmons, The University of Texas at Austin)

Resulting Discussions and Future Directions for Research

One unique element of the Symposium’s structure was that all participants attended all sessions. This directly facilitated the Symposium’s key feature: a structured discussion about the topics and methodologies presented, the needs for future research, and the coordination of research teams to address those issues in tandem. The discussion leaders for the Symposium included IJRCS editorial board members Janice Killian (Texas Tech University), Jeffrey Manternach (University of Iowa), Jessica Nápoles (University of North Texas), Elizabeth Parker (Temple University), and Bridget Sweet (University of Illinois). Highlights of the four group discussions included:

Development of Singing Skills, Vocal Pedagogy

Two topics were identified for further exploration. The first was audiation, with note that audiation seems to be widely valued and referenced in choral settings, yet there is very little research concerning its development or potential instructional approaches. This can be stated in the form of a research question: “What preparation is needed before a group can be asked to audiate effectively?” Other related research projects could include a comparison of regional requirements, perhaps within competitions and festivals, for sight-reading that might call for audiation skills; surveys of conductor-teachers about the audiation strategies they employ; collaboration with neuroscientists to explore what happens neurologically when one audiates; and exploration of the potential link between studies of mental practice in instrumental music settings and the practice of audiation in choral music settings.

The second topic was the need for both original and replication studies concerning singing across the lifespan. There is concern that much research focuses on college-aged singers, mostly because they are a readily accessible group for university researchers to study. More re-
search is needed about the extent to which singing is widespread among people at all ages throughout the lifespan, and the creation of studies crafted specifically for those populations. Such studies might look at unique age-specific factors of physiology and psychology, sociology, health, and well-being. One need is for a library of recorded voices from all ages and stages of development for use by teachers, conductors, and researchers.

Choral Culture and Group Identity

There appear to be some barriers to diversity in our choirs. This group focused on remedies that involve both immediate changes to practice and longer-term implications for research. In the arena of practice, there is a general need for professional development that is responsive to changing needs of children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. This might be accomplished by a more purposeful blend of research and practice sessions in regional and national ACDA conferences. One approach might be an ACDA conference where professional development is at the forefront, and where choral performances serve as examples (lecture-recitals) of pedagogical or leadership approaches specific to the needs of each particular choir and/or community setting. Research-type implications include the development of case studies of integrated choirs (of all types) focused on choir culture and group identity, and studies of the socio-economic characteristics of choirs appearing at ACDA conferences and/or participants in ACDA honor choirs.

Other topics explored by this group included: choral culture as a factor in addressing social justice issues; the positioning of choirs to transform society; the potential that choral music’s structural traditions (auditions, choral offerings, repertoire, etc.) might be used to perpetuate discrimination; the need to interrogate dominant perceptions of ideal choral tone and foundational choral repertoire; the lack of qualitative narratives of elementary-aged children about their perceptions of choral singing; and the need to accept choirs of non-traditionally abled singers as valued within ACDA. Members of this group summarized their discussions with this quote: “How can we use research to help us help others make the changes we need in our field?”

Inclusiveness in Choir and Choral Teaching

This group’s primary concerns were about access and barriers to choral music in schools and society at large. One issue warranting further research is an examination of recruiting practices in university settings and how issues of “musicality” can deter students from seeing themselves as potential choral singers, and, conversely, how structural and philosophical tensions between voice teachers and choral conductors can affect choral participation of music majors. We have anecdotal information at present, whereas an empirical approach might be needed.

This group also examined possibilities of expanding choral offer-
ings in school settings to meet the needs of the school/community population. A related research study might involve case studies of choral programs that changed in response to their populations. This group reported the need “for us to view ourselves as more than ‘choir directors’ or ‘choir teachers,’ but as facilitators of group singing or other types of singing. This paradigm shift might lead us to engage people in different types of music making.” Finally, the group expressed curiosity about how the balance of Choral Journal content might best serve the population of its readers (i.e., the proportion of musicological to pedagogical content).

Conductors, Conducting, and Choral Pedagogy

One of the emphatic points of this group’s discussion concerned choral scholars’ need to build upon our profession’s existing base of research-supported knowledge by replicating studies with different populations and suggesting refinements as a result. For instance, several studies presented at the Symposium concerned aspects of expert teaching; future research might explore those same aspects with different study populations to see what aspects are common and which are situational. This could impact, for instance, the collegiate training of future teachers and conductors.

This group also raised the need for continued research about effective pedagogy and, importantly, rigorously-designed studies concerning long-held traditions of repertoire selection. Other expressed needs were for updates to existing studies about sight-singing approaches, the boy’s changing voice (specifically using neuroimaging techniques), the relationships between conducting gesture and choral sound, and the efficacy of varying approaches to choral curriculum and the accompanying instructional materials. This group also called for research on: choral conducting/choral education; vocal
health and vocal pedagogy; vocal effects of hormone therapy and implications for pedagogy; mindfulness; socio-emotional learning in group settings; and longitudinal studies to explore changes in conductors, pedagogues, and singers across time.

Symposium Leadership
The Symposium on Research in Choral Singing was supported by ACDA’s National Standing Committee on Research and Publications, chaired by John Silantien (University of Texas at San Antonio), with members Steven Demorest (Northwestern University), Patrick Freer (Georgia State University), Alan Gumm (University of Central Michigan), and Carmen Tellez (University of Notre Dame). Steven Demorest served as Symposium Host, and Patrick Freer was Program Chair. The eleven-member Editorial Board of the IJRCS evaluated all Symposium proposals; members not named elsewhere in this report were David Howard (University of London), Joanne Rutkowski (Pennsylvania State University), and Sten Ternstrom (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm). And, the entire program was facilitated by an outstanding group of PhD students at Northwestern University: Erica Desaulniers, Patrick Horton, Amanda McClintock, Casey Schmidt, and Adam White.

Patrick K. Freer
Georgia State University
pfreer@gsu.edu

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