



Choir! Choir! Choir!

Benjamin Bolden

Abstract: In this article the author describes the Toronto phenomenon Choir! Choir! Choir!, analyses what makes it work as an approach to engaging people with music, and suggests implications for music education.

It was a February in the middle of the biggest snowstorm of the year. I remember trudging through the snow with my guitar thinking, ‘Who is going to come out to a real estate office to sing tonight?’ In the end, 20 people came, and we didn’t really know if we’d do it again. We had no plan. But it was pretty clear everyone wanted to come back. (Daveed Goldman, in Barry, 2014)

Right away we had people asking if we could do it the next day. And we were like, ‘We’ll do it the next month,’ and they were like, ‘Can we just come back tomorrow and do it?’ So we did it the next week and it’s just been snowballing ever since.’ (Nobu Adilman in Levack, 2011).

We moved to a bigger space, then a bigger space, then a bigger space as it kept growing. It took on a life of its own without us ever having a big plan. We’ve done it every week from February of 2011. It just never stopped. (Goldman, in Barry, 2014)

For some time I have been fascinated and inspired by the Toronto phenomenon ‘Choir! Choir! Choir!’

For over three years now, founders Daveed Goldman and Nobu Adilman have been bringing music making to the masses. Through social media they send out an open invitation for anyone interested to come out and sing. The singers (often numbering over a hundred) assemble in a designated bar or pub, pay five dollars, and learn how to sing simple but satisfying multi-part choral arrangements of pop songs—from Cohen to the Clash to the Cure to Death Cab for Cutie. Nobu leads the singing while Daveed accompanies with acoustic guitar. By the end of the session the singers perform the songs for a videographer, and a few days later a video is uploaded to YouTube for posterity (see choirchoirchoir.com).

Goldman and Adilman have stumbled upon a brilliant model for engaging people with music.

I have often thought there is something evangelical about being a music educator. The calling seems to come with a drive

to involve as many as possible in the joy and other benefits that we know participation in music making provides. I think music educators tend to have a missionary zeal for bringing people to—or back to—active music making. For those looking for new ways to engage more students, colleagues, friends or community members with music making, I think it is well worth analyzing what it is that makes Choir! Choir! Choir! so successful.

Here’s what I’ve come up with—the key reasons I believe CCC is so effective at drawing people in:

No Commitment

Choir! Choir! Choir! offers a one-night stand version of participating in a musical relationship—singing without baggage. Adilman refers to the group as a “no commitment choir” (Chandler, 2011). As one singer explained: “It’s very low commitment; no one is relying on me to be here on a weekly basis—even though I am. I think if it were a strict commitment, it would freak me out and I wouldn’t come” (The Sunday Edition, 2013). This approach works for those who want to make music but do not want the stress of something else they *have* to do. The experience becomes a little less like duty, and a little more like pleasure.

Open Opportunity

Choir! Choir! Choir! provides a simple, straightforward and non-threatening opportunity to sing for all who long to explore their inner Gleek. And as participant Lenni Jabour explains, this kind of opportunity is not easy to come by: “We’re always encouraged to sing as children, and then you grow up and, unless you go to church, when do you sing?” (in McLaren, 2014). With Choir! Choir! Choir! there are no auditions and no expectation that singers arrive with any kind of singing background or preparation; it’s strictly ‘Come as you are’. For many, this is the opportunity they’ve been waiting for:

“When I was little I had so many opportunities to sing...but all that went away as I got to be an adult...you either had to find a church service or get yourself up to professional level and audition...so when I found about this I was so excited (The Sunday Edition, 2013).

Accessible Repertoire

Singers appreciate that the material is accessible. “I don’t want

to be singing traditional classical music...I like the ease of singing songs that are more familiar to me” (The Sunday Edition, 2013). The Choir! Choir! Choir! repertoire is not only accessible because it is contemporary and familiar, but also because the arrangements are well-crafted; the parts sit comfortably within vocal ranges, the harmonies add richness without being overly complex; and with a little but not too much work, the songs sound *good*.

Clear, Tangible and Achievable Goals

At every session the goal is clear—to learn to sing the songs and get them performance ready, so that by the end of the evening the organizers can take a video and post it to YouTube. This goal is always achieved, and all singers can own the fruits of their labour: a digital keepsake that allows them to re-live and share the experience.

Relaxed Venue and Vibe

The choice of venue for the Choir! Choir! Choir! sessions is often a bar or pub; Goldman and Adilman take the music to the people. ‘I didn’t want it to be in a church, I didn’t want it to be in a school. I didn’t want it to be proper, a bunch of people in robes. We are a mass of individuals. We are a mess of people. It’s a fun place to be” (Daveed Goldman, quoted in Barry, 2014). One singer suggests: “There’s a lot of enthusiasm about what we do because it takes place in a bar, so there’s drinking...there’s a total casual vibe (The Sunday Edition, 2013). But my hunch is that the alcohol option is not so significant as the opportunity to sing in a place where people traditionally go to unwind. Goldman explains, “Once you start singing something and you start getting into it, you’re like, ‘Well I don’t really need to drink.’ You can, but you’re already letting it all out...you’re engaged” (in Levack, 2011). I think it’s more significant that the venue is a place where people feel comfortable. This enables what Goldman describes as ‘the vibe’: “It’s a very playful vibe...The vibe in the room at Choir! is that everyone feels like they’re 15 years old again hanging out” (in Barry, 2014).

Bringing People Together

It will come as no surprise to music educators that one of the main reasons people flock to Choir! Choir! Choir! is that it brings people together. Goldman explains:

At its core it’s still just about getting people out of the house and having a communal experience. Personally, I’ve found that as I got older, it gets harder to make friends, and people feel isolated. You’re connecting with so many people online and yet you’re not really connecting with anybody in real time. When we started doing choir, we realized right away that there was something special here. I think one night it was minus 15 outside and the place was just crammed with like 150 people. Nobu and I just looked at each other. I mean it couldn’t be colder outside but there we are with people just cramming into this place because they just wanted to get together and sing. (in Myers, 2014)

Of course, community building is something that happens in all ensembles, and a glorious by-product of music making well recognized by music educators. But in my opinion, it is al-

ways worth taking time to remind oneself and others of the power and potential of music making for nurturing community, and how much it can mean to people:

I come to Choir! Choir! Choir! because of community. I didn’t think I would ever meet and maintain friendships with so many people.... it kind of saved my life...there was a dark area, and now, opening up that door, and meeting all these people, and going to all these places with them...is really special. (The Sunday Edition, 2013)

Singing Together Is Good for You

Once again this is nothing new to music educators, but those who participate in Choir! Choir! Choir! realize that singing with others feels good. I think Leah McLaren, in a recent piece for the *Globe and Mail*, captured it beautifully:

The death clamp between my shoulders had miraculously loosened. The persistent hunted sensation of having lost something important I’d never quite managed to acquire was, for the moment, gone. I was changed, and I wondered why...Singing in a choir is a transcendent experience – and there aren’t many of those in life. It instills gratitude and bliss without the contortions of yoga or hangovers of alcohol. Singing doesn’t just make us feel better – it makes us better people. By singing in a group, we choose to recede for a moment from selfish concerns and pursue harmony with those around us. (McLaren, 2014)

Spread

Not surprisingly, others have taken note of the success of the Choir! Choir! Choir! phenomenon and have created their own versions.

Pam Kapoor, Andrea Stokes and Rob Cosh have set up the ‘613 Casual Choir’ in Ottawa. 200 people showed up to the choir’s launch last February (Deby, 2014). You can hear and see the group performing *Royals* by Lorde on YouTube.

A few weeks ago I attended a session of ‘Rabble Singing’ in Kingston, led with boundless energy and enthusiasm by music educator and choral director Andy Rush. I was one of a motley crew of about 30 singers of all ages (from children to seniors) who met on a Monday evening in the breezeway just outside the lobby of the Grand Theatre. Supported by Andy and a core of musicians from his community choir, Open Voices, (who not only sang, but also boosted our sound with guitar, drumkit, banjo, shaker, tambourine, and keyboard) we learned to sing—in harmony—Tegan and Sara’s *Closer* and *Sweet City Woman* by the Stampede. We worked on the two songs for exactly two hours, alternating between them. (Just enough variety to maintain interest without compromising the tight focus of the goal-oriented activity, i.e., getting the pieces performance ready.) Our ranks kept swelling throughout the session as passersby heard us through the strategically propped-open doors, poked their heads in, and were greeted by organizers with a welcome smile and sheet music and lyrics. When the songs were (nearly) ready, we performed them for the video camera, applauded ourselves and each other, and took off into the night.

So What?

I hope more musicians and music educators will consider adopting and adapting the Choir! Choir! Choir! approach as a means of engaging people in schools and in the community with music. I'm not suggesting music educators abandon traditional models of ensemble music making (regular rehearsals over an extended period of time). The extended commitment results in a breadth and depth of music learning and experience that is infinitely richer than a one-off experience. But as a means of casting the net wider, enriching and enhancing more lives with music...I think this model deserves serious consideration. For music educators who already run regular ensembles, this could be an outreach effort and service to those who—for whatever reason—don't or are unable to participate. It could also serve as a recruitment tool; sometimes a one-night stand, even for the most serious commitment-phobes, can lead to something more...

The long and short is that there is something significant going on here, and it is worth taking note. There may be elements of this model that resonate with music educators and suggest ways to enhance, develop, refresh or shift their own current programs and practices. There are plenty of under-activated music makers in our schools...what about reaching out to them by setting up a Choir! Choir! Choir! type event in a school cafeteria, lobby, or stairwell? Reaching out beyond the

schools...what are the possible venues in the community? Which coffee shops, restaurants, art galleries, public or semi-public spaces might work? What about trying it just once, with the option to repeat if it felt good?

Music educators do important work. It is well worth considering new approaches that might help this work to be recognized, appreciated and enjoyed by a wider population of re-activated music makers.

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