Musical Expression in the Choral Classroom

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Expression is a critical component of musical experiences.

(Brenner & Strand, 2013; Juslin & Sloboda, 2010; Lindström et al., 2003; Pavlou, 2013; Scott, 1915; Trivedi, 2004; Woody, 2006 & 2013)
Learner

Performer: Musician & Actor

Educator
What is musical expression?

• a mechanical response
  (Broomhead, 2005; Davies, 2004).

• an emotional response (Brenner & Strand, 2013; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Reimer, 1989; Scherer, 1987; Stanislavsky, 1989; Woody, 2006).

• the combination of technical skills and lived experiences manifesting themselves through music
  (Brenner and Strand, 2013; Woody, 2006).
How do we *do* it?

- physical gestures
  
  (Broughton and Stevens, 2012; Luck et al., 2010; Nussek & Wanderley, 2009; Rodger et al., 2012)

- the use of metaphors and felt emotion
  
  • (Woody, 2000; 2006)

- “vocal expression of emotion”: the connection between emotional experiences and the acoustical properties of vocalizations
  
  (Buck, 1984; Darwin, 1872; Eckman, 1984, as cited by Bacharowski & Owren, 1995; Murray and Arnott 1993, as cited by Bacharowski & Owren 1995)

- Physiological responses to events or other stimulus
  
  (Cannon, 1927; Scherer, 1987)

- multiple-dimensions: combining technical skills, theoretical understandings, imagination and creativity to negotiate the internal and external components of music, transforming symbols and ideas through constantly moving and changing relationships

Vocalists may have additional, unique considerations:

- facial expressions
- vocal timbre
- acoustic manipulation
- interaction and interpretation of lyrics
- the organic development of their instrument with age and experience
What happens when ensemble singers come together in an attempt to create one collective musical expression?
What is it that INFORMS our expression?

- *What* information are we using?
- *Where* does the information come from?
  - *How* do we use it?
To explore with choral directors and their students, their perceptions of the ways in which musical expression is manifested in the choral classroom setting.
1. How do choral directors and their students **conceptualize** musical expression?

2. How do choral directors and their students **practice** musical expression?

3. How can we understand the various **relationships** that take place for choral directors and their students between their conceptualizations and practices of musical expression?
Methodology

- Observations, field notes and video/audio recordings
- Open-ended, in-depth interviews
- In-depth, stimulated recall interviews (SRI)
  

Two different approaches to SRI:
  a) Open response
  b) Framing
Suggested Protocol
(Nguyen, McFadden, Tangen, Beutel, 2013)

Protocol, present study

Round 1
Round 2
Round 3
RESULTS
1. How do choral directors and their students CONCEPTUALIZE musical expression?

A two-fold description:

The conveyance of ideas, thoughts and emotions through music

How we understand our own and others’ emotions through music
“It might not be just one thing...” – “V”

**Conveying**

“...is kind of a tool... ‘cause I think as individuals you experience a lot of different emotions and it’s hard to convey those different emotions to somebody and share exactly what you are feeling inside but I think music is a really good tool to do that with because it’s more comfortable for everybody.” – MW

**Understanding**

“... it’s a way to make emotions more sensible. Like you can’t really sense emotions but you can sense how it feels to sing something a certain way or play something a certain way and then you can hear the emotions.” – MW
Self and World
#2. How do choral directors and their students PRACTICE musical expression?

- Participants viewed audio/video recordings of their work in rehearsal.
  - They identified moments of musical expression.
  - They described what they were seeing and hearing as well as the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that were occurring during various moments.
  - They discussed what they did and how they did it.

7 distinct elements of musical expression emerged
Breath

Body Movement

Facial Expression

“Spotlight” affect

Tone

Phrasing

Storytelling

Energy/Intensity • Change/Contrast • Attention/Focus
Spontaneity and Intent
Breath

Spontaneous
Breath happens “automatically” depending on what is about to be said.

Intentional
Choices we make in how to use our breath to convey ideas, thoughts and emotions.

• Singers’ Prep breath
• Director’s Prep breath
• “Breathiness” in tone quality
Spontaneous
“I can’t stop my feet from tapping... when this happens you know I’m having a good time... I’m enjoying myself, I’m more involved... I’m able to express myself more” - “Seth”

Intentional
The movement in the warm ups helps release tensions. The voice can “come out” and is a more “genuine” reflection of what the singer is trying to say. – “Marie”

Attention and Energy: An awareness of others’ movements may inspire others to move and is often “contagious”.

Body Movement
Facial Expression

**Spontaneous**
Physiological response to ideas and emotions

**Intentional**
Director prompted or learned technique

- “bright eyes”
- “energy” in the face
- “lifted” eyebrows
- exaggerated mouth shape (vowel formation, diction)
  - focus of gaze

Attention and Energy: Awareness of director and peer facial expressions may be “contagious” or influential both in mood and vocal technique.
Spontaneous
Vocal tone may change unpredictably in response to an emotional experience or what they are trying to convey while singing.

Intentional
Singers can choose a specific tone quality to more effectively communicate ideas.

Attention and Energy: Energy in the tone is “catching” “She was just belting it out... it made me want to sing out.” “Marie”
**Phrasing**

**Spontaneous**
Phrases can shape themselves based on how we might naturally interpret text.

“It just happens” – “MW”

**Intentional**
Choices about phrase length, direction and arc are determined by what needs to be said and how it needs to be said in order to be meaningful. Choices of where and how to breathe seem to be involved.

Attention: Director prompted questions help find and develop the meaning of text through phrasing.

Energy: Employing different amounts of energy at different points of the phrase or syllables can change the meaning.
Spontaneous
Text and musical elements can “trigger memories” (“PW”) and make personal connections, which in turn, lead to more expressive performances.

Intentional
Choices are made by directors and students based on information in the score. Interpretive questions are answered with knowledge from personal experiences.

Attention: Personal “stories” are told through attention to experiences, text, diction, dynamics, articulation...
“Spotlight Affect”

Spontaneous
“...when everything else gets blurred out except for the one person, and something big happens.” “MW”

Intentional
Singers and directors can learn to “let go” of some external judgment and distractions and “focus”. “Not everyone is comfortable with this” ... “with taking off the mask”... “and just being themselves”... All

“Private in Public”
Taking off “the mask”
What was she doing?

#1 - R: “Where do the emotions come from?”

#2 - R: “How do you find them?”
3. What are the relationships that take place?

- Director models skill and vulnerability. Show their “authentic, genuine” self. “MW”

- Director is a leader in creating a “safe space” of “trust” where students can take risks and be vulnerable to explore deeper meanings and interact with peers.

- Director allows TIME for thinking, questioning and understanding.
  “...children are encouraged to question, embody and associate with the material presented by the teacher” (Pavlou, 2013, p. 74).

  “She allowed us to use our imagination and creativity without judgment or criticism” - “PW”
With this environment in place students are able to:

• Pay attention to it, notice it, think about it.
• Be “themselves”, share something of themselves

“It's about being yourself and doing it for you, not about doing it for the attention that you get.

“...when you put everything you have into one single thing then I think that's when you're at your most vulnerable... sometimes art can be like the most vulnerable that a person can be...” – “PW”
What happens when singers come together as an ensemble to create one collaborative expression?

• it all starts with the one individual ... you all sort of feed off of each other so like if you see someone singing in a group all happy and in the moment and enjoying it you’re not gonna be like all sad and down in the dumps – you’re gonna be happy and give that same performance I think. “Marie”

• it’s like notes on a piano - like there is one note but then when you make a chord there are notes playing at the same time which makes it sound better than just this one note so everyone has these different emotions and when they all come together it sounds like, really kind of beautiful I think. “V”
To be continued...

• What will we learn from multiple choral communities?

• “Socratic Method” and SRI as rehearsal practices-asking questions, reflecting on their own work=
  Director as MEDIATOR rather than DICTATOR

• “You might need to talk about more than just music.”

• This work is “therapeutic” but it’s not your “therapy”.
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