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Learning to Sing

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Project Takeaways

After reviewing my poster you may be left with the impression, “but why?” You may understand the project, have a grasp of the semester-long process that I followed to get my voice and my confidence ready for the final performance, but you still may not understand why I did it, why I chose to break away from a more traditional research project and do something so heavily focused on the arts.

I want to try and replicate the general impression I left with those who visited me at my poster on the presentation day, and my answer to the “but why” of “because why not?” I cannot replace the fulfillment and satisfaction I feel for completing this project simply because it was something I genuinely wanted to do.

I had missed the comradery of my high school band days, the comradery felt when the class had spent months working collectively on a piece and then played it just right at the concert. Having the opportunity to work within a performance group again was not an opportunity I could pass up. Carol Ponder, an Appalachian singer from North Carolina, says, “Of all the arts, I feel that vocal music can provide the most direct connection between the mind and the heart.” (A Teachers Guide to Appalachian Roots). I wanted to test this, to see if the bond I felt in chorus was stronger than the one I felt in band.

“There is no human culture without singing,” (Jordania) says Joseph Jordania, in his book *Why do People Sing? Music in Human Evolution*. For me, being raised in a musical family—a grandfather who played for 40 years in a jazz band, my father who still plays 70s rock tunes with friends after work, and my mother who played the violin—has led to music as its place in my culture. I didn’t want to lose the link I had with this small, nuclear culture. Generally in western

cultures, people sing less when compared to more traditional eastern cultures (Jordania). I may not have sung as much as others, but I certainly didn't want to lose my innate musicality.

There was also a little bit of pride involved with my project, in knowing that yes, in the end, I could learn to sing. I was not singing because I was entering into war, because I was defending my territory or on a hunt, as is believed to be the evolutionary advantage of singing, (Jordania), but merely because I wanted to see if I could do it. Maybe this generalized me with the majority of westerners who sing; those who do primarily sing in community choirs because of the perceived psychological and physical health.

The two largest challenges during my process of learning to sing were understanding the nuances of vocal performance and reinforcing my own self-confidence. The nuances for me were the small techniques that came naturally to other singers. This is sometimes referred to as "social polyphony," when singers "coordinate their pitches and rhythms together." (Jordania). Having the proper posture, breathing at the right moments, and expanding my diaphragm were challenging to engrain in my muscle memory. Overall, however, keeping my confidence high was the most difficult obstacle. It was a delicate mix of humility, knowing that I was not the best singer yet also was one who could complete the piece. There was a particularly strong tenor from the CCRI choir who sang next to me, and his powerful voice first shocked me at rehearsal. I did learn, however, not to try to compete with him, but rather use my own voice to add balance to the ensemble in other areas.

Changes in my confidence could be detected in the transition in my reflections in my chorus log that I shared with my sponsor, Dr. Audrey Cardany. In the beginning, a lot of my reflections and comments were about very basic skills that I needed to learn and practice. It is not necessarily that my lack of skills correlated to a lack of confidence. However, once my

reflections shifted more towards the finer points of singing, like the comparing of my singing styles to Robbie the URI tenor section leader, or when I began to notice how much of a difference my breathing techniques would make when I tried to squeeze out the higher notes, a clear transition in my skill and confidence as a singer could be noticed. April 11th was the first time I reflected on the quality of sound. It had taken me from February to April to handle the rote techniques needed to get the notes out of my mouth; now my basic confidence in vocal performance had shifted and I was able to focus more on other aspects, like quality.

I was also often asked if I planned on continuing to sing, to which I replied, “Yes.” I hope to return next year to the same choir as a graduate/community member.

Works Cited

Jordania, Joseph. "Why Do People Sing? Music in Human Evolution." LOGOS, 2011. Print.

Ponder, Carol. "A Teacher's Guide to Appalachian Roots." Tennessee Performing Arts Center, 2003. Print.