

I Sing In A Choir But I Have “No Voice!”

By

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the conventions of choral pedagogy are designed to create docile, complacent singers who are subject to a discourse that is more interested in the production of music than in the laborers. Consequently, I present my choral experience from a critical feminist perspective in an attempt to expose the web of power relations that one enters during choral rehearsals. I use critical feminist strategies, and the theories of power described by Michel Foucault, to question meanings and expose the constitution of the power.

Choral rehearsals, choir practice, singing in a choir, vocal ensembles, vocalists – these words conjure up images shaped by a specific vocabulary which translates into practice: the director stands in front of the choir, behind a music stand, and chooses the music to be performed; soprano, alto, tenor, and bass singers stand on risers and sing under, for, or perhaps with the director; choral music, that is, good music is performed; warm-ups, note reading, and singing in tune will yield good performance. The fact that most people probably would agree to this partial image of the choir indicates that ideas about the role of the director and singers, about what kind of music should be sung, about how music is rehearsed, and what entails a good performance have become “normalized” or deemed “common sense” in our society. This “normalizing” process masks the fact that typical choir practices and discourses are fraught with power relations that serve specific interests and intentionally create silences and gaps.

In this article, I tell a story that is a composite of the many choral experiences I have experienced both as singer and director. This is not a happy story. I have chosen not to dwell on the beautiful and aesthetic moments that can occur when making music, because they rarely happen for me as a choral singer or director. I find that the conventions of choral pedagogy are designed to create docile, complacent singers who are subject to a discourse that is more interested in the production of music than in the laborers. Consequently, I present my choral experience from a critical feminist perspective in an attempt to expose the web of power relations that one enters during choral rehearsals.

Feminist criticism offers a lens by which to deconstruct the possibility of universal or absolute meanings such as those promoted through “common sense” pedagogy. This discussion will use critical feminist strategies to question meanings and expose the constitution of the power. Feminist criticism is useful in this sense because women have traditionally been

marginalized, especially in the music profession, and from this perspective women have asked different kinds of questions in the interest of creating different power relationships. In this article I will use primarily the theories of power described by Michel Foucault. Feminist theory is as diverse as the theorists who use it. In this article, I align myself with the branch of feminism that searches for a non-hierarchical, dialogical description of power relations.

There are four convergences between feminism and Foucauldian theory that are especially useful:

Both identify the body as a site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted. Both point to the local and intimate operations of power rather than focusing exclusively on the supreme power of the state. Both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses. And both criticize the ways in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the Western masculine elite as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom, and human nature (Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p. X).

It is these four sites – the body, local operations of power, discourse, and the criticism of Western humanism – that will be the focus of my discussion of choral pedagogy.

Some caveats must be stated about the limitations of my use of narrative. This story should not be read as the ultimate truth about my choral experiences and/or about all choral experiences. The problem of using experience as a pedagogical device is that it is “never as knowable, as universal, or as stable as we presume it to be” (Fuss, 1989, p. 114). In other words, this story does not address the experience that everyone has in choirs, nor does it suggest a belief that everyone might have this experience, although they don’t speak about it. Experience is diverse: It is oppositional as well as complacent. Subsequently, I speak of a fictional, personal experience that allows us to devote attention to issues previously ignored.

In addition, narrative and power interrogation can be used to disassemble and reveal the politics of my own desires as a director, for I unwittingly have become part of the practices that reproduce oppressive, hierarchical power relations and seek to understand how I have been drawn into this construct. Consequently, this text is weighted with my discontent and anxieties about participating in choral music both as singer and director. I aim “for believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control” (Stivers, 1992, p. 424). Finally, the sex of the director in this story is not revealed, because I believe all choral musicians are subject to creating this role because of the way power influences the choral setting.

Paradox

I am now completing a master’s degree in choral conducting and a doctoral degree in music education. Yet it has been many years since I have enjoyed singing in a choir, for I find the pedagogy boring, tedious, and over-controlling of my personal, political, and professional interaction with music. My discomfort and dislike for singing in a choir started during my freshman year of undergraduate school, when I was studying to become a high school music teacher. I sang in the school’s “top” choir, and I enjoyed a pleasant friendship with the director. I hated singing in this choir so much, however, that for four years I routinely skipped rehearsals or mouthed the words because I was too painfully bored to sing. The director chose “good” music and used humor to get us through the two-hour sessions, but something important was missing. At that time, I did not have the experience to understand what that might be.

Similar feelings of discontent have accompanied me over the last 12 years as I have sung in numerous choirs; I keep singing even though I don’t find choirs very exciting on a rehearsal-

to-rehearsal basis. In further contradiction, I presently direct four different choirs. Obviously I find something appealing about directing a choir that does not transfer to singing in a choir.

Power!

Through the normalizing discourse of choral pedagogy, power over the singers is granted to the director. According to Foucault, discourse “a conversation with a specific vocabulary that intentionally creates ignorance as well as knowledge” is a performance of power. Therefore, discourse is invested with interests that have material effects on the social body (Foucault, 1978; Bartkey, 1988). For example, surrounding the conventions of choral pedagogy is a pervasive discourse that privileges male culture. Historically, choral music has been organized almost exclusively around the contributions, achievements, and advancement of men. Male composers, performers, and conductors have received central attention in historical and theoretical analysis of music. The canonized contributions of these historians and theoreticians, most of whom were men, created the standards by which music is judged worthy of study and performance. By promoting this specific version of history, men have tightly controlled the meaning-making system within music; consequently, the dominant discourse in music is partial to male culture. Further, discourse concerning what is considered “quality” music, how music is thought about and listened to, and how music is talked about in terms of appreciation and aesthetics has been crafted in large part by men and serves primarily the interests of male culture.

The following is an example of how this litany of male achievement has established a prohibitive discourse that prevents the “body” of female musicians from fully participating in music. More women composers emerged in Italy between 1566-1700 than in any previous period in the history of Western music, because society considered the study of music appropriate for well-bred young girls and suitable for those entering religious orders. From their

study, many women began to compose but were excluded from full participation in the musical mainstream by a strict policy, sanctioned by sacred and secular institutions, against hiring women (Bowers, 1986). Historians and theoreticians have named these women and their compositions “naïve” and proclaimed them unable to match standards achieved by male composers of that era. This discourse has succeeded in excluding these Italian women from full participation in music making.

Discourse is powerful. As it creates a specific practice, it also creates a means to silence alternative (e.g., female versus male composers). It is this same hegemonic insistence that prevents alternative practices from being accepted within choral pedagogy. Through the efforts of feminist musicologists operating within alternative discourses, these compositions and knowledge of their social and historical environment have been made available for study and performance. The dominant discourse continues to represent these compositions as substandard to the canon produced by males by maintaining a context in which the two canons are continuously compared.

Hopeful

I recently sang in a unique choir associated with a small college and composed of approximately half community members and half students. This was a remarkable group due to the individuals’ cumulative experience and knowledge, for many of the members held advanced degrees in music, others had sung in top-notch college programs such as those at St. Olaf and Luther College, and several were excellent musicians although they had no “formal” university training.

I was excited about the possibility of singing with these experienced musicians and of having rehearsals that were inspiring, intellectual, and creative. I hoped that collectively we

could shape and craft challenging choral music. But this choir became like every other choir in my experience, despite the talent of its members, as the director rehearsed us in a “traditional” manner: 10 minutes of warm-ups, followed by 80 minutes of learning notes, phrasings, pronunciations, nuances, and so on. These skills were determined exclusively by the director and “taught” to us as we stood silently on the risers. What made this particular situation worse than others was the director’s air of antagonism, projected in order to get the most “music” out of us. In using this teacher-directed, antagonistic, hegemonic approach, the director effectively silenced the wealth of talent and experience within this group, and once again recreated for me the boring, tedious, and personally exclusive rehearsal process.

Discipline

In a poignant critique of modern society, Foucault has argued “that the rise of parliamentary institutions and of new conceptions of political liberty was accompanied by a darker counter movement, by the emergence of a new and unprecedented discipline directed against the body” (Bartkey, 1988, p. 61). This “new” discipline of the body, which focuses on self-regulation as opposed to self-flagellation, extends beyond political allegiance or the appropriation of the products of its labor; rather, it invades and regulates the economy and efficiency of the body’s every movement. According to Foucault, these disciplinary power relations are played out in armies, schools, hospitals, prisons, and factories. The aim of this discipline is to produce a body that is more efficient and productive:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A “political anatomy,” which was also a “mechanics of power,” was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies (Foucault, 1979, p. 138).

The production of “docile bodies” requires that disciplinary constraint be applied to the process

of bodily activity, not only to results. This “micro-physics” of power fragments and partitions the body’s time, its space, and its movements (Foucault, 1979, p. 28). In terms of the bodies as they are practiced within a choral rehearsal, docility is achieved through architecture. The choir is enclosed in a room and distributed upon the risers according to voice type, and possibly according to talents. The director is then positioned in front of the choir, so singers see the director primarily and each other only peripherally. All attention and focus moves vertically toward the director. Horizontal interaction that might create “dangerous” community among the singers is strongly discouraged by the director as a distraction from the focus on music-making, that is, from the director’s control.

Further, during performances the director overtly accepts credit for the choir’s work. Even though the director may not personally feel solely responsible for the choir’s product, the architecture and discourse surrounding concerts certainly suggests it. Because of how subjectivities are constituted through bodily coercion, (e.g. the physical positioning of the director in front of the choir is “taken for granted” and not considered a problem), it is difficult to conceive of a different physical structure for choral rehearsals.

The only architectural variation in my experience involved the singers’ making a complete circle around the director, which did not change the power structure; it only made me self-conscious of the disciplinary gaze of each singer *and* of the director, as all were positioned to observe my every movement. This circular formation had the potential for new and different meanings like “trapping” the director and overturning the power relations, but the director’s disciplinary power induced instead, in me at least, a state of self-conscious and permanent visibility that assured the automatic functioning of power. One of the goals of disciplinary power, then, is to prevent alternative meanings from being implemented (Foucault, p. 201). In

this case, the singers maintained roles of self-discipline and never considered turning on the director.

Disciplinary power over the bodies of singers exists not only in the architecture of the choral rehearsals; it also exists in the hegemonic discourse that gives privilege and primacy to the director. The tenants of this discourse begin with the notion that choral music is part of the “official” or “high arts,” as distinguished from other categories of creativity such as pop art, hobbies, or crafts.

The fact that these forms of creativity are distinguished from each other suggests a preponderant ranking accompanied by a value system. Within choral music, there is a similar ranking of knowledge and skills that sorts people into power-laden categories such as director and choir member. This sorting is made possible by the existence of institutionalized knowledge which consists of musical skills such as sight-reading, ear-training, and analysis abilities; knowledge of historical time periods and performance practices; and performance skills like vocal abilities and conducting skills. This “legitimate” knowledge is valued and promoted over other types of knowledge such as social skills or love of singing.

Music institutions contribute to this hegemonic process by granting degrees which sanction “legitimate” knowledge and skills. Someone who has acquired institutionalized, sanctioned knowledge has the credentials to inhabit the role of director; this is an example of the Foucauldian notion that knowledge equals power. The role of the singers, according to this discourse, is occupied by people who have not acquired director credentials and thus, in the power relationship, are subordinate to the director. By inhabiting the role of “singer,” choir members agree to abide by the relations of power created by this ascendancy, even if they also possess sanctioned, institutionalized knowledge.

Disciplinary power is inegalitarian, as the differences in role responsibilities between the director and choir members indicate. Within this normative discourse, power and privilege are granted to the director because it is more efficient for one person, rather than a committee, to make decisions. However, both the roles of director and singer are subject to the discipline of music, in that there are expectations of and limitations to both roles. The position of director is defined by acquired institutional knowledge that disciplines the physical behavior and subjectivities of the director, just as the position of singer is subject to the discipline of the director.

Returning to my experience, it is through the conventions of choral pedagogy, as accepted by both singer and director, that the choir member's experience and knowledge were silenced. It is a paradox, then, that within the space of choral rehearsals, singers are expected to have no voice!

Frustration

The director of the choir in this story, inspired by our first concert, programmed an extremely difficult, demanding, and musically interesting second concert. Unfortunately, the director also modified rehearsal techniques to reflect the arduous nature of the music, becoming abusively demanding toward singers and repetitively emphasizing technical aspects of the music. Using the arrogant mantra, "I'm only making sure that we reach our full potential," the director sought to justify this negative pedagogy. Consequently, we spent hours poring over phrasing and word accents, finely tuning intonation, carefully forming vowels to achieve an impeccable blend, and never mentioning things like the singers' interaction with the text, or with each other, or the overall affective experience.

As is the choral tradition, all technical and musical choices were determined by the

director as the singers stood subdued on the risers. Occasionally, choir members sought to participate actively in the rehearsals by joking to relieve the pressure or by inquiring about the background or translation of the music. In reaction to the interjections, the director curtly reminded us that our task was to learn the music; “interruptions” only detracted from this process. I was frustrated that the director saw inquisitive comments as distractions, but the director clearly felt that we should solve these problems on our own rather than waste “valuable” rehearsal time. It quickly became obvious to me that the music and the performance of it were much more important to the director than the experience of the singers.

Further fracturing any sense of community, the director insisted on naming or drawing attention to the section that was having problems. For example, the choir once started a piece of music five times in a row after singing only the first phase. The “problem” was with the sopranos, and the director felt that each mistake had to be named and corrected immediately. This method created tension and a sense within the choir that the sopranos were not doing their part, that they were a problem, and that their contribution was somehow “less” than those of other choir members. Because of the general air of discomfort, comments were mumbled from within the choir: “Learn how to read, sopranos,” and “This would be a great choir if it weren’t for the sopranos.” As a soprano, it was difficult not to take personally this release of frustration by the other choir members. It also irritated me that the blame fell on the sopranos instead of the director; after all, it was the director’s pedagogy, not the sopranos’ lack of effort, which created the tension that caused individuals to turn on each other.

The most frustrating aspect of the director’s pedagogy was the construction of the aesthetics of the music entirely independently of the experience and talent of this choir. The director came to rehearsals with a particular musical sound already imagined, and it became

obvious that it was the choir's job to bring the director's internalized sense of the music to life. In other words, the music was not crafted from within the choir's collective knowledge and experiences.

The most blatant example of this was the manner in which the director taught a Mendelssohn partsong, diligently sculpting our singing of each phrase until the music and the German text came to life with a sense of energy and excitement. Yet the singers were never given a translation of the text. I knew by the sound of the music that it was about hunting; otherwise, I had no idea what we were "bringing to life." The director praised our performance, so we must have matched the internalized aesthetic. As a performer, however, it was extremely unsatisfying to construct aesthetic phrases and nuances out of nonsense syllables, to feel literally like an instrument. It was equally unsatisfying to perform an entire concert into which I had no creative input. Completely ignoring the talent and experience of this well-informed choir, the director alone was able to define and create the music that she or he desired.

Surveillance

Every detail of a choral rehearsal suggests discipline, from the manner in which music is taught and discussed, to the learned and highly refined gestures of the conductor. According to Foucault (1979), discipline allows for the meticulous control of the operations of the body, assures the constant subjection of its forces, and imposes upon them a relation of docility-utility (p. 136). This meticulous control is achieved by controlling and defining each movement, gesture, and attitude, and the rapidity by which these happen. Further, the body's movement is economized and made efficient through a constant process of persuasion (Foucault, 1979, p. 136).

The creation of the individual and collective choral body is an embodiment of this

meticulous control. The choral body does not exist naturally; rather, it is an instrument made through discipline. Directors carefully construct the way the body is held, the manner in which specific muscles are used for breathing, and the physical shape of the internal and external mouth. In addition to the physical choral body, directors also discipline the emotional and mental choral body by condoning desired behaviors and attitudes and by valuing the knowledge belonging to directors over the experience of the singers. This intellectual, emotional, and physical control creates a practice by which every part of the singers' involvement is subjected to disciplinary power. Etymologically, by calling itself a discipline, music draws attention to its technologies of power for creating the practiced and subjected body.

In addition to the meticulous defining of the choral body, discipline is maintained by subjecting the singers to a process of "individualization." Foucault suggests that "individualization" maintains power by sorting individuals according to the demands of the system (p. 141). For example, through the audition process the director knows each singer in terms of a voice part, a quality of voice, a set of musical skills determined as either strengths to be used or weaknesses to be disciplined, and in terms of previous choral experience. With this knowledge, the director then constructs the choir and determines how to discipline the group to efficiently produce good music, or to help the choir "live up to its potential." According to Foucault (1979), this continuous process of individualization is power in practice. In the choir of this story, the director never knew our specific social histories, desires, and needs. It was more efficient for the director to use only institutionalized knowledge to deal with the singers as rigidly defined bodies rather than to address our messy, and not so easy-to-discipline social histories.

According to Foucault, it is the "docile" (p. 135) or the easily manipulated body that is a

requirement for and a product of this machinery of power. The submissive body is easily subjected to discipline for the purpose of efficient productivity. The director in this particular choral experience kept our bodies highly disciplined. S/he controlled our physical responses by making it seem inappropriate to ask questions or to confer with other choral members. S/he disciplined our effective and aesthetic responses by dictating the expressive and interpretive parameters of the music by choosing to not share with us translations of foreign texts and by choosing repertoire that included many misogynistic texts. While our exteriors conveyed activity, beneath that was a barrier of self-induced docility. The director probably would argue that our rehearsals were models of productivity.

Such rigid control cannot be maintained without a relentless system of self-surveillance; otherwise, why would individuals submit themselves to such a restrictive supervision of power? The director plays a role in promoting and maintaining the insistent disciplinary power, and each individual participates as well through self-discipline. This regime of asceticism is the essence of Foucault's disciplinary society and is described in Bentham's model prison, the Panopticon. Bartkey describes it succinctly:

At the periphery of the Panopticon, a circular structure; at the center, a tower with wide windows that opens onto the inner side of the ring. The structure on the periphery is divided into cells, each with two windows, one facing the windows of the tower, the other facing the outside, allowing an effect of backlighting to make any figure visible within the cell. "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy" (Foucault, 1988, p. 200). "...the effect of this is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1988, p. 201); each becomes to himself his own jailer. This state of conscious and permanent visibility is a sign that the tight, disciplinary control of the body has gotten a hold on the mind as well (p. 63).

Within the discourse of music exist standards by which we all survey and discipline ourselves. For example, a person hums a pleasant melody and wonders whether or not s/he is a "good" singer; or a person learns to play the guitar by ear but wonders how much better s/he might be if s/he learned to read music. Comments like "I could be better if..." indicate

that constant and voluntary surveillance and disciplining are the metaphoric Panopticon in operation. Choral singers are exposed to the same power relations; they are visible to the director in the tower of the Panopticon who can not only see, but also presumably hear each and every singer. Ironically, it is the singers, rather than the director, who subject themselves to the transforming pedagogical conventions of the discipline of music. What is insidious about this process is that this disciplinary coercion establishes “a constricting link between increased aptitude and increased domination” (Foucault, 1988, p. 138). Consequently, the “better trained” the musicians, the more forces of domination act upon them.

Blame

The sopranos were the director’s favorite target. I believe the sopranos were as talented and as hard-working as the other sections; it was just our misfortune that the director’s ear was attracted to our part in the music. S/he constantly criticized us for singing out of tune, for singing “off of the body,” for not being expressive, and for not trying hard enough. These unflattering remarks were not balanced with compliments and encouragement; the director addressed the sopranos only to criticize. Consequently, rehearsals became physically and emotionally unbearable; the more the director complained, the more the muscles in my neck and jaw tightened to the point of a throbbing pain. I swore each night as I left rehearsals that if I didn’t need the grade, I would never return.

Through pedagogy intended to inspire the choir to “live up to its potential,” the director ostracized the sopranos from the rest of the choir. The enmity within the group was so intense that one soprano frequently left at break because she couldn’t tolerate any more negative attention. A community member who has a beautiful voice but claims to be a “poor musician,” she was insecure about her contribution to the choir; so she took the director’s repeated criticism

of the sopranos personally. Although I am not aware of the details of their conversation, I do know that this resistance was ended after a confrontation with the director, and she no longer left at break.

Another soprano also took the director's pedagogy personally. One evening during the rehearsal, I saw her sit down quietly on the risers. When I asked if she was ill, with tears in her eyes she said she didn't know what to do to please the director. Frustrated because she respected the director's talent and knowledge, the soprano only wanted to "sing it right."

To work out the problems that were occurring during rehearsals, the sopranos formed a quasi-support group that met at a local bar after the last rehearsal of each week. Most of the sopranos showed up on a regular basis, and over drinks we would discuss our frustrations with the director and that evening's rehearsal.

A few basses joined us one week and were amazed at our perception of and dissatisfaction with rehearsals. They told us that we were being whiny and immature; we should think of the good of the choir and try to work harder. Needless to say, they weren't invited back! It amazed me however, that the basses shared the rehearsal experience with the sopranos, yet had so little understanding of our experience. We saw ourselves as victims, but the basses saw us as offenders. What they considered whining, we thought of as coping.

Efficiency

"Generally speaking, it might be said that the disciplines are techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities" (Foucault, 1988, p. 218). There is nothing unusual about this description of the disciplinary system of power, but what is characteristic is the threefold tactics that disciplinary powers defines in relation to these multiplicities. First, it works to increase the ratio of docility to utility. Secondly, it tries to obtain power at the lowest possible cost and by its

relative invisibility. Third, it brings the effect of social power to a maximum intensity and extends it as far as possible without failure (Foucault, 1988, p. 218). These three characteristics of power can be used to make some sense of the relations in the choir with which I sang, especially between the sopranos and basses.

To eradicate conflict and increase docility-utility, power tries to achieve a unity of vision. Subsequently, the discourse in choral music puts forth a singular definition of Choir that becomes a part of the singers' subjectivities in order for Choir to be successful. The discourse promotes the notion that the purpose of choral music making is to reconstruct canonized choral literature in a stylistically "appropriate" and "aesthetically pleasing" manner; in other words, the music is of primary importance. This means that in order to construct choral music, one must acquire specific knowledge about choral repertoire, style periods, performance practices, and vocal pedagogy; hence the need for a "master of the discipline." As previously stated, other choir members may have institutionalized knowledge of music, but since power is most interested in efficiency and productivity, it becomes "common sense" that only one person should direct the choir. The fact that one person directing the choir is "common sense" returns us to the beginning of the discourse – the purpose of choir is to create a quality product, not a quality experience.

From my discussion with the sopranos, it was clear how this discourse of uniformity disciplined our bodies and subjectivities. In the case of the soprano who left at break, singing in this choir meant that she had to constantly evaluate her abilities and contributions, decide if she was capable of being a "good" choir member, and then determine how to become more efficient and productive. Her self-esteem was subordinate to uniformity. The soprano who was brought to tears by frustration is another example of the Panoptical gaze. She had not been overtly indicated as the "problem," but she took that self-policing role upon herself to try to placate the

director in the tower of “revered talent.” Uniformity, in her case, did not allow for the personal needs and desires of individual singers. Finally, for me, uniformity disciplined by subjectivities to ignore the physical pain that I experienced as I left each night with my jaws clenched and shoulders scrunched against my neck from tension.

According to Foucault, power seeks to operate at the lowest cost, and the less visibility it has, the more cost-efficient it will be. Edward Said (1986) explains this phenomenon in terms of circle: “Inside the circle stand the blameless, the just, the omnicompetent, those who know the truth about themselves as well as the others. Outside the circle stand a miscellaneous bunch of querulous, whining complainers” (p. 50). In this choir, the inner circle was established with the director at its center, and the norms created by the inner circle were used to judge all else as deviant. The basses served as agents in this power struggle, and the fact that they functioned also as choir members and friends kept the visibility of the coercion low. The basses were not pushed out of the circle by the director’s pedagogy; rather, they became part of the “blameless” and in fact asserted blame, reinforcing the uniform vision: “Think of the good of the choir, and try to work harder.”

The effects of the social power, Foucault’s third point, were brought to maximum intensity when our leisure time – our meetings at the bar – was preoccupied with and structured around our discomfort with choir. The disciplinary effects of power were exerted in our very choice to have these meetings; we were motivated to be part of the inner circle, and we wanted our work recognized and appreciated. We talked about how frustrated we were with the director’s pedagogy and what that meant to us as individuals. Our proposed solutions to our discomfort, however, were stated in terms of what more we could do. We thought about holding extra sectionals, asking for a different standing arrangement, and talking to the director (which

we never did). We did not speak of dropping out of the choir anytime soon, only in terms of next year. Ironically, even though we were unhappy as members of this group and felt as if we were doing all that we could, the power of the normative discourse had encouraged a self-policing subjectivity by which we blamed ourselves. Remember, we were “well trained” musicians.

Companionship?

I have been involved with choral music for 18 years as a singer or a director. It has been difficult to understand the complexity of my experiences, so I find myself asking others “Why do you sing in a Choir?” and “Why do you teach music, what’s the purpose?” By listening to others, I hope to better understand my own experiences as I see myself reflected in and left out of their experiences and meaning-making. Consequently, I asked three friends with whom I was singing in a choir to read my narratives. I wanted to find out if they saw reflections of themselves in my story and what those might look like. Although all three friends come from different musical backgrounds, it is not my intention to regard their experiences as if they represent the voices of all who are like them. Rather, I wanted to see how three people from different positions within the institution might talk about the web of power relations discussed in my story. I consider my three friends fictional because I did not do in-depth interviews with each friend; rather I simply engaged them in short, and (by ethnographic standards) somewhat shallow conversations. As a result, you are hearing my voice probably more than those of the individuals.

My friend Molly, a junior studying theater arts, is singing for her third year in the choir described in this story. As a result of 12 years of piano study, she is an accomplished musician. Molly is also a soprano and stands next to me on the risers. Her response to my narrative was agreement, which I expected because we frequently commiserated during difficult rehearsals. She said that she was in choir to have fun and sing “good” music; she was not there to be

antagonized. “I really hate when singing becomes a chore, and I have to make myself come every night. Some directors are definitely more fun to sing under than others. I like it when we can joke and have fun, but still accomplish all the things that the director wants us to do.”

In one of his most profound statements about power, Foucault suggests that “Power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself” (1978, p. 86). In the case of choral rehearsals, power and privilege also seem to be made invisible or at least tolerable by pleasant personalities, i.e., benevolent dictators. This statement is applicable to Molly’s perspective that singing in a choir became a problem when the director was self-centered and hostile toward the singers; she felt silenced and abused when the director had an unpleasant personality. The conventions of pedagogy that granted privilege and authority to the director did not, so far as our limited conversation indicated, evoke such feelings for her. Molly acknowledged that she had been part of some intolerable experiences and that things could change, but her observations about the web of power relations did not enter our conversation. Further, I felt that Molly believed in the need for a hierarchical relationship between the director and the choir.

I asked Annie to read my vignettes because she is a music education major who will soon be facing pedagogical issues in her own teaching. Annie identified with the soprano who wept from frustration and commented that she had similar experiences. She wondered aloud what the director could do to improve rehearsals, as the director was obligated to enter rehearsals with a plan of action; otherwise, Annie felt, rehearsals would become chaotic and unproductive. I asked Annie if she wanted her students to feel such frustration as a result of her teaching, and she said no, but she did not know what to do differently.

For Annie, choral pedagogy operates at the level of common sense; there are no

alternatives. When she begins to teach, she will probably try to make the best of typical power relations. Moreover, Annie will be rewarded as an educator by working within this system; a discourse of difference may not be as easily successful.

When talking about her frustration from being unable to please the director, I felt that Annie believed that she deserved to be admonished in order to become “disciplined” enough to achieve the primary goal: a highly polished performance. In other words, if she could only become more self-regulated, Annie could avoid the unpleasantness of the director’s pedagogy. This self-discipline once again hearkens back to Foucault’s (1979) theory of how power acts on the body:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles [master and slave]; he becomes the principal of his own subordination. (p. 225)

Through her allegiances, Annie assumed responsibility for the constraints of the director’s power and became the product of her own subordination.

Finally, Annie’s fear of chaos sets up a binary opposition between chaos and order. The power operating in this binary wants us to believe that if there was not order (and hence, someone creating the order) then chaos would prevail. This is an example of how power seeks efficiency by promoting singular definitions – chaos or order. There are many degrees of control between chaos and order that might offer possibilities for rethinking choral pedagogy.

The third person I asked to read my vignettes was Randy, a graduate student in choral conducting. We had a long discussion about my ideas, in which Randy indicated that an overly “picky” director can be frustrating, but he vehemently denounced the rest of my paper. He said that music educators who are interested in this “mushy, feel-good stuff” are killing the profession. “There are already too many incompetent musicians, and we don’t need to devise

another system that detracts from the skill-learning process,” Randy asserted. He didn’t feel that music teaching needed to be as negative as the pedagogy of the director I describe. With great fervor, however, he expressed concern for the lack of well-trained musicians who were capable of learning and performing high- quality choral music.

I probably shouldn’t have been amazed at Randy’s defensiveness, considering that I asked him to question the very assumptions upon which he will probably build his career. I found it disheartening, however, that Randy equated student-directed pedagogy with incompetence. This hearkens back to the singular choral vision promoted by dominant discourses that say efficiency is best achieved by one director. Similarly, Randy seemed to be in favor of the binary opposition that gives authority and privilege to skill learning over emotional development. Moreover, it made sense that the director would focus exclusively on the technical requirements of the music because a technically correct performance was pleasurable to Randy. Further, for Randy, community within a choir was created by going out for drinks after the rehearsal. I asked him how I could convince him that there might be other ways to direct a choir, and he replied that he would be willing to accept a different process if I could prove that it produced the same or a better product. Within a performing group, it is difficult to escape product-oriented thinking.

My search for companionship was somewhat successful. I found friends who, like myself, felt choir could be tedious and boring at times, but their proposed solutions staved well within the boundaries of “traditional” practice. As a result of normative discourses within music and choral practice, there aren’t many spaces to think of, let alone practice, choir in a different manner.

No Happy Endings?

It has not been my intent in this paper to blame the director for the silence of the choir members, although it would be easy to credit this situation to “bad pedagogy.” The relationships among director and choir members are much more complex than that. Singers are not passive victims; they willingly enter into a position that is, by the conventions of choral pedagogy, subordinate. Singers do possess the ability to subvert the authority lent to the director. Similarly, directors are trapped by the conventions of choral pedagogy. Their role is rigidly defined by the system of rules created by the institution of music and the expectations of singers. Susan Bordo (1988) explains,

Foucault reminds us that although a perfectly clear logic may characterize historical power relations, with perfectly decipherable aims and objectives, it is nonetheless “often the case that no one was there to have invented” (Foucault, 1988, p. 85) these aims and strategies, either through choice of individuals or through the rational game plan of some presiding “headquarters.” This does not mean that individuals do not consciously pursue goals that advance their own positions, and advance certain power positions in the process. But it does deny that in doing so, they are directing the overall movements of relations, or engineering their shape. They may not even know what that shape is. Nor does the fact that power relations involve the domination of particular groups – say, prisoners by guards, females by males, amateurs by experts – entail that the dominators are in control of the situation, or that the dominated do not sometimes advance and extend the situation themselves (p. 91).

Because it is impossible to blame director or singer, I argue that it is the system of beliefs, the conventions of choral pedagogy which determine the interaction between director and singer, that must be questioned. This re-vision is not a simple task, as exemplified in my story. Even though many choir members were dissatisfied with rehearsals, they did not question the system of rules that created this situation. Rather, they focused on the personality of the director, the talent and efforts of the sopranos, and their individual contributions.

Feminist theory helps disable the predominance of male culture which established this power structure and system of beliefs within choirs. Feminist musicologists have unmasked the value-laden assumptions of the Western canon and revealed the strategies used to dismiss music

written by women. Similarly, feminist pedagogues and feminist theory provide a lens to question the historical and political context of choral pedagogy, and therefore the means to question the inherent power relations.

Obviously, I have no simple answers! I do, however, have many questions. For instance, is it possible to stop thinking of Choir, which is defined by universal Truths, to which all singers and directors must be subjected? I wonder if we could talk about choir as being made up of individuals with diverse interests, needs, experiences, and social histories and how their knowledge could inform and transform our practices? Directors are as diverse as singers; therefore, how could that diversity play and work to its fullest advantage within each specific situation, instead of trying to fit into a conventional mold?

In addition to re-thinking the choral bodies, I wonder if we can break the bind of the process/product binary that seems to center finally on product. Is there something more, or different, or other than process versus product? Could we re-configure choirs with a different language that might mediate different practices? In conclusion, my final and summary question: How can choral bodies be actively designed anew?

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