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References

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Learning to Perform Benjamin Britten's Rejoice in the Lamb: The Perspectives of Three High School Choral Singers

The purpose of this research was to examine the way three high school students perceived and experienced a choral composition they were learning to perform. This case study, conducted over a period of five months, chronicled the experiences and perceptions of three students from a large midwestern high school mixed choir as they learned to perform the extended choral composition Rejoice in the Lamb by Benjamin Britten. Three categories of experience (found to correlate with three philosophical forms of knowledge) emerged through data analysis: (1) impression (propositional knowledge), (2) construction (procedural knowledge), and (3) understanding (acquaintance knowledge). Participants generally experienced these knowledge forms progressively, but also shifted between them idiosyncratically. Singers tended to focus on the technical skills needed to perform the music with accuracy. Deeper levels of understanding were contingent on each participant's personal history, openness, and effort in relation to the composition.

High school students enrolled in choral music classes learn to perform a limited number of compositions. These compositions constitute the primary content of the choral music curriculum. Preparation for performance often requires weeks of rehearsal, allowing students an extended opportunity for in-depth exploration of these compositions. According to Reimer (2003), the specialized music program (i.e., performance curriculum) aims to provide learning

experiences that are purposefully "intensive and selective" (p. 275). However, the central role of performance in the secondary music curriculum does not guarantee an enriched learning experience for all students. Elliott (1995) cautions that a concentration on performance may amount to nothing more than a simplistic emphasis on the production of sound.

Choral students typically learn to sing compositions by reading musical notation in a score. This physical representation provides a means for the students to interact with the composer's musical ideas (Eisner, 2002). The score serves as a set of instructions for the musicians to follow, but ultimately, the music only exists in the perceptions of those who experience it. As Dewey (1934/1989) noted:

A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience... As a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced. No one doubts this fact in the rendering of a musical score; no one supposes that the lines and dots on paper are more than the recorded means of evoking the work of art. (p. 113)

Stubley (1995) draws from ideas found in Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature to characterize the relationship between the performer, score, and evolving performance. She notes that although the score (as text) remains stable, the musical "work" arises out of the personal experiences of the singers, who imbue it with meaning and transform it with each encounter. This ongoing transactional process results in what students perceive as the music or songs they are learning.

Students have the opportunity to gain at least three kinds of knowledge as they learn to perform choral music. They gain propositional knowledge — formal or descriptive knowledge about the music — such as the detailed historical and theoretical analyses written by musicologists. Student performers also develop procedural knowledge, that is, the ability to vocalize music as indicated by a written score (in keeping with Western traditions most commonly practiced in American classrooms). Elliott (1995) contends that musical knowledge is essentially procedural, naming four additional kinds of musical knowledge (formal, informal, impressionistic, and supervisory) that together constitute musicianship or musical know-how. Swanwick (1994) identifies acquaintance knowledge as another way students can come to know musical compositions. By directly encountering the particulars of a given choral score, students have the opportunity to intuitively grasp its parts and sense how they relate to the whole. In the words of Polanyi and Prosch (1975), "our personal knowing operates by an expansion of our person into subsidiary awareness of particulars, an awareness merged with our attention to a whole," and "this manner of living in the parts results in our critical appraisal of their coherence" (p. 44). Students in music ensembles actively bring the parts of a written score to life (literally "learning their parts") and experience them as they function in relation to the whole.

In addition to Rosenblatt's theory, aestheticians and philosophers have characterized this third type of knowledge in various ways: knowledge through direct perception (Feldman, 1996), an interactive experience or encounter (Dewey, 1934/1989; Gadamer, 1960/1989), and an intimate relationship (Abram, 1996; Armstrong, 2000). Along with Swanwick, other music educators suggest that the process of actively engaging with compositions resembles the way humans develop relationships with one another (Barrett, McCoy, & Veblen, 1997).

Related research studies in music education have largely focused on music learning in terms of measurable behaviors. One way researchers gauge how a student views music is through measures of preference. Studies of the effects of familiarity and repetition on musical preference often use short-term listening activities that include abbreviated musical excerpts (Hargreaves & Castell, 1987; Hargreaves, Comber, & Colley, 1995; Hargreaves, 1984; LeBlanc, Sims, Siivola, & Obert, 1996; McCrary, 1993; Rentz, 1994; Shehan, 1981/1982). In some cases, participants are asked to express preference about songs they learn to perform (Shehan, 1985; Siebenaler, 1999). Kjelland and Kerchner (1998) surveyed research literature concerning the effects of music performance participation on musical listening and concluded that those who are trained musically as performers "relate differently to music because they have 'known' music through direct physical experience" (p. 44). Studies that focused on song acquisition, which can be viewed as a short-term version of the process of learning to sing larger choral compositions, emphasized how students (primarily elementary-age) acquire the ability to sing a song, but did not explore the ways learners experience and relate to particular songs (Brand, 1998; Elmer, 1997; Harwood, 1987; Killian, 1996; Klinger, Campbell, & Goolsby, 1998; Moore, Brotons, Fyk, & Castillo, 1997).

Studies in which researchers investigate music performance emphasize cognition, skill acquisition, learning styles, practice strategies, and musical achievement. The significance of how students respond to the music they prepare and perform has not been closely examined and warrants further investigation. The purpose of the present study was to bring to light the individual experiences and perceptions of three high school singers as they learned to perform a choral composition. Specifically, what is the nature of a student's perceived experiences in relation to a choral composition being learned for performance? A study of this phenomenon seems necessary to assist choral music educators who seek to foster meaningful and comprehensive learning experiences for their students.

METHOD

This case study, conducted over a period of 5 months, chronicled the experiences and perceptions of three students from a large midwestern high school mixed choir as they learned to perform an extended choral composition, *Rejoice in the Lamb* by Benjamin Britten. This research can be classified as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), as it explores three cases as a means to better understand the manner in which students come to know music.

The high school that served as the research site was chosen because of the exemplary record of both the choral teacher and the choirs, and because of their expressed willingness to cooperate. This allowed for data that highlighted what was possible in an exceptional case, permitted easy access, and was in an unfamiliar location, which allowed me to maintain an appropriate critical distance during the study.

The personal nature of musical knowing is a primary assumption of this study. The role of the knower as conscious entity cannot be discounted in light of Polanyi and Prosch's (1975) observation that all learning occurs within the context of individual perception. As Reimer (2003) states, "we must make room for, and give all due recognition to, what our students add to the experience from their own, individual perspective" (p. 89).

The Choral Teacher, the Students, and the Composition

This study coincided with the beginning of Nola Franklin's [1] eighth year of teaching choral music at Duncan High School, a large midwestern high school of Grades 9-12 in close commuting distance from a large metropolitan area, with an enrollment of 1,580 predominantly Caucasian (96%) students. Over time, she had seen the program grow from one choir of 32 singers to six varied choirs involving 198 students. Trained as a clarinetist and accompanist, she had amassed more than 20 years of experience as a general music specialist in Illinois, Texas, and Colorado. A petite, animated, and nurturing educator, she characterized her work at Duncan High School as an "experiment" in teaching high school general music with a choral emphasis. This mentality led her to use unconventional teaching methods that stressed music-reading skills, student autonomy, self-assessment, and the use of related arts — all implemented through creative classroom activities in an environment where she consistently affirmed student efforts.

During the preceding spring, I administered a questionnaire to more than 200 students. I chose approximately 30 potential participants based on my independent judgment of their ability to express their perceptions as demonstrated in the length and clarity of their written responses to the questionnaire. Based on her own reading of questionnaire responses and her personal knowledge of these students, Mrs. Franklin recommended 15-20 students, who, in her opinion, were reflective thinkers and writers, mature enough to be comfortable with interviews and observations, responsible enough to keep journals, and rarely absent. Together, Mrs. Franklin and I made a conscious effort to choose a group of students that varied in gender, ability level, and experience. The resulting participants were one senior boy and two junior girls from the Concert Choir.

The total membership of the Concert Choir included 2 sophomores, 17 juniors, and 35 seniors. Of the 54 members, 24 were boys, and 30 were girls. The three participants discussed in this report are Alien, a senior baritone in his second year as a member of Concert Choir, and sopranos Jennifer and Faye, both juniors in their first year in this choir.

Alien was instantly likeable, humorous, and popular among his peers (he had been elected copresident of the student council for that year). His musical background included singing in a boy choir as a child, participating in community and school musical theater productions, and playing string bass for a few years during middle school while his voice changed. He expressed insecurity in his singing abilities and readily acknowledged his poor sense of rhythm. He had been in school choirs since his sophomore year. Jennifer was mature and pensive, a well-read literature enthusiast who was an outspoken critic of social inequities. She grew up in an unusual and diverse household with three adopted foster siblings and parents who exposed her to aspects of both Catholic and Jewish traditions. She took a few years of piano lessons when she was younger, participated in school choirs every year beginning in sixth grade, and had taken private voice lessons in recent years. Faye was an energetic conversationalist who loved performing. She was trained in dance and was strongly devoted to a community youth show choir she had participated in since fourth grade. She had sung in school choirs since her sixth grade year and had participated in band for four years.

Mrs. Franklin had carefully chosen choral literature for the fall semester, seeking optimum learning opportunities for her students and keeping in mind the group's invitation to perform at the state music educators' convention that January, a distinguished honor reserved for four select choirs in the state. She chose *Rejoice in the Lamb* by Benjamin Britten (Britten & Smart, 1943), a lengthy festival cantata composed in 1943 for soloists and choir, after she consulted a respected colleague who suggested it was the most important work in 20th-century choral literature. Britten assembled the text from portions of *Jubilate Agno*, an extended literary work by 18th-century English poet Christopher Smart, who was confined to an insane asylum at the time of its writing. The main poetic theme suggests that all created beings worship God, each in its own way. The composition consists of 10 short and contrasting sections, a "Hallelujah" refrain serving as both the third section and reappearing in identical form as the 10th and final section. Four of these sections are written for a soloist from each voice part. Britten's musical setting is noted for its surprising simplicity and poignancy (Carpenter, 1992; Kennedy, 1993). A performance of the entire work lasts approximately 16 minutes, four or five times as long as the typical choral octavo performed by high school choirs. Nevertheless, the contrast between the 10 sections makes it seem like a series of smaller octavos. Mrs. Franklin was enamored with the work, said that she believed it to be a realistic challenge for the group, and predicted that the "quirky" text would appeal to her students. Originally, Britten composed the piece for a volunteer choir of men and boys with four soloists and organ. Mrs. Franklin chose to have all members of each voice part sing their respective solo in unison as a section and used piano for the accompaniment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection methods included observations, interviews, reflective journals, and stimulated recall. The Concert Choir met for 90 minutes every other day for the entire school year, and I spent 9 days (13.5 hours) observing this choir. Observations were conducted during three separate phases of the study: (1) the initial week of school late in August, (2) the week prior

to a midterm performance at the end of October, and (3) the week preceding the final performance of the semester in mid-December.

The primary student participants were asked to record their thoughts and impressions after each class meeting during the fall semester. All participants were able to do this through written e-mail messages. The students were encouraged to write specifically about their experiences with the musical selections they were learning, but were given freedom to write about other facets of the process. I was able to discern aspects of the experience that held significance for each individual by analyzing the primary focus of these entries.

At the midpoint of the study (9th week) and again at the end (17th week), I conducted individual semistructured interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour, with each student. The teacher was interviewed separately on three occasions (preceding and following the entire study). Additional interviews were conducted with three of the participants' teachers in other subjects, the choir accompanist, one of each of the participant's parents (both parents in one case), and the middle school vocal music teacher. The students also took part in group interviews immediately following both the midsemester performance in October and the performance at the end of the term in December.

Late in October, at the end of the 9th week of the semester, participants were asked to recall their thoughts and impressions while viewing a videotape of themselves during a class session. Students viewed and responded to these videotapes on the day they were taped or the day immediately following the taping. This process, known as stimulated recall (Clark & Peterson, 1986), allowed participants to verbalize what they remembered thinking during the learning process.

I began analyzing data before the final phases of the study had been completed, which allowed me to generate and refine themes and identify issues that informed subsequent observations and interviews. I coded meaningful portions of text, identified emergent themes, created keys, sorted texts, and constructed and tested models of relationships among the identified codes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). A considerable amount of analysis took place as part of the writing process. Mrs. Franklin and the three participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcripts and a draft of the written report so they could offer reflections and request revisions. I incorporated these comments into the final document.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants in this study did not use the terms musical work or score to identify the music they were rehearsing. According to them, they were learning to sing "songs" (Rejoice in the Lamb was often the "long song" in Jennifer's descriptions). This characterization suggests the transactional nature of musical performance set forth earlier in this article. Choral compositions existed in the participants' experiences of singing them, and it is important to keep this in mind when considering student descriptions of the learning experience.

From a broad standpoint, student participants acquired various forms of knowledge of musical compositions in a progressive sequence, beginning with propositional knowledge, moving to procedural knowledge, and ultimately reaching varying levels of acquaintance knowledge. Jennifer hinted at this three-stage progression in a comment made about singing Francis Poulenc's *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* [Litanies to the Black Virgin] during the previous school year: "At first when you're learning it, it sounds awful. It seems like the notes would never sound good together, but once you have it, it gets inside you, and it makes perfect sense." In other words, once the necessary skills were mastered and she came to know the music internally, her initial impressions were transformed into personal understandings. Similarly, three categories of experience emerged through data analysis. These categories correlate with the three forms of knowledge discussed earlier: (1) impression (propositional knowledge), (2) construction (procedural knowledge), and (3) understanding (acquaintance knowledge). In the following sections, I discuss the findings in each of these categories and their implications for understanding the learning process experienced by the participants.

Impression

During initial encounters with a new piece of music, the participants in this study gathered propositional knowledge about the composition, often making comparisons to previous musical experiences. Alien recalled that in Grade 5 he had sung another composition by Benjamin Britten with the Southeast Boy Choir. He observed that *Rejoice in the Lamb* was "a pretty long song," and also remarked, "I've never seen the meter change so much in one song." He derived these descriptions by weighing the external traits of the music against his experience with other compositions. Faye compared *Rejoice in the Lamb* to her past experience, noting, "It's pretty different than what I'm used to.... This is the first year that we're not singing a piece in another language ... and it's just different to sing in English for once." Jennifer's first impressions also focused on external characteristics such as the English text and "surprising" length (40 pages). Thus, participants displayed an initial tendency to relate a new composition to prior experiences.

Faye's recognition of the mental and technical skills that would be required revealed another facet of her preliminary observations. She wrote,

Most of the music looks very difficult! I am excited to begin working on the pieces ... I'm definitely ready to get into the technical aspects of learning a song again ... they are pieces that look challenging, but in the end you will have such a sense of accomplishment, and I love that feeling.

This description centered on the challenge of the task and the "sense of accomplishment" Faye said she believed it would ultimately afford her. She adopted this orientation at the outset, viewing the music as a mountain to be scaled rather than an artistic entity to be explored and known.

In addition, Jennifer viewed the composition in terms of how the audience might respond. She wrote:

Even after a flash through the lyrics and a quick stumble through the first eight pages of the soprano part on my piano at home, it seems destined to become the Most Boring Song of our pieces. Audiences probably won't want to sit still long enough for us to sing it.

But after Jennifer heard a recording of Rejoice in the Lamb in class a few days later, she reconsidered her initial assessment, writing, "If we can sing it like the CD sounded, I don't think people in the audience will be bored." Hearing the complete performance introduced Jennifer to the lyrics, musical structure, and vocal parts in combination from beginning to end. While she was listening, Jennifer's affinity for language drew her to the text: "The words are what did me in. I am a person who appreciates the genius in insanity." She further observed,

I particularly like how the music hit me in comparison to the words. At first it felt like the instruments sounded too beautiful to be partner to such random, almost haphazardly chosen words. But then, it was as if the beauty in the music helped to highlight the beauty in the words of the song. I respect the way the song was written, and that really makes me excited about singing it.

When given the opportunity to experience the music as a listener, Jennifer was struck by the sounds, which led her to perceive the less-apparent beauty of the text. Jennifer's capacity to hear and process the combined elements of the composition with insight allowed her to open herself up to a more meaningful learning experience.

Construction

After forming first impressions, the students began the task of transforming the written notation into musical sounds. The score became a problem to be solved, and their remarks stressed aspects of the procedural knowledge required by the task. The singers became mentally preoccupied with interpreting the symbols and disciplining the body to perform them accurately, which limited their potential to reflect on the expressive and artistic intentions of the composer. Also, the fragmentation, dissection, and isolation necessary for successful mastery segmented the composition, taking elements out of context and further complicating meaning-making.

Alien provided descriptions of the progress they were making and often called this "working on" the piece. He was less likely to describe the character of the composition and more prone to talk about the quality of the choir's efforts to sing it. A particular vocal challenge came in the opening measures:

It starts out very, very soft and for me, this is high. And since the choir's all on one tone [middle C], it's really difficult to sustain

that high, soft sound for me, and sometimes the notes will just not be there.

As the choir progressed to new sections, Alien identified the rhythms as "rather difficult," focusing on the procedural challenges of the music. While watching himself on videotape late in October, he described his insecurity about making entrances during the "Hallelujahs" of the third section:

Sometimes [Mrs. Franklin will] forget to cue us, because she's talking about the shape of vowels or something with one of the other sections. So I sit there and panic about it ... because I'm not confident necessarily with rhythms, I'm watching her. I'm almost completely dependent upon her for that.

Alien worried about the composition's requirements that exposed the limitations of his technique, and these stressful experiences seemed prominent in his perceptions at this stage of learning.

As the weeks progressed, Faye characterized the tedious repetition of rehearsal as a "pain," but admitted that it enabled the choir to achieve the desired results. She described the process as "work," frequently using phrases like "clean up" and "fixing." Late in October, Faye chronicled the group's efforts:

Even though it seemed like we were getting nowhere, I'll have to admit that we did fix many problematic areas as well... Basically we just ran over every little inch of the song, making sure each note and rhythm was correct... but this took a long time! It was frustrating, yet I feel that by doing that it helps me with memorization and preciseness.

Faye acknowledged her frustration, but saw the tedium as beneficial as the choir sought to master the vocal technique and musical skills needed to sing Rejoice in the Lamb with precision.

At the start of the last week of October, Faye volunteered these comments about a particular section she had come to like:

I really like page seven, starting at measure 41 ["Let Ithamar ..."]. I think it sounds cool because we finally split into a bunch of parts and it's probably my favorite part of the whole thing. The harmony is my favorite, but it's like an explosion. ... It's kind of challenging, and it feels cool because you're kind of by yourself and it feels like you're accomplishing something.

Faye's affinity for this excerpt appeared to stem from the sense of achievement she gained through singing it.

At the same time, Faye expressed strong dislike for a portion of the second section of Rejoice in the Lamb:

Measure 47-50 – I can't stand it. It's "bless God in the dance," but it's all of us in unison and it's got flats and it'll go back to naturals and I think it sounds like crap. [Laughs.] And then we all get to the top and it's really accented, "dance, dance, dance." [She punctuates each one.] And it goes really fast and it's going up the scale so nobody really gets all the notes and it just sounds too jumbled and mixed up for me. I'm always trying to sing it, and if you get behind, it's really a problem there because you have to get all the notes, but still go fast enough. It just doesn't seem like it fits with the rest of the song, because it's kind of got a pattern, and that breaks the pattern... So it just seems kind of random to have those notes there.

In this case, the challenges of the music were an obstacle to obtaining a sense of accomplishment and ultimately, to deeper levels of understanding. Faye had not considered the possibility that the composer intentionally chose to set the word "dance" to a series of notes that suggested dance-like movement. The frustration she experienced when trying to sing this passage seemed to overshadow her ability to analyze and reflect on the compositional treatment of the text. By contrast, Jennifer later spoke of the satisfaction she felt when singing Britten's setting of the word "dance" in this passage, which made sense to her.

Early in December, Faye expressed how proud she felt when the choir was able to sing through the entire piece from memory, writing,

I feel a great feeling of accomplishment. The song is so tricky with all of the changes in rhythms, style, etc. It is vocally very challenging, and it is so awesome that our HIGH SCHOOL choir is able to sing it and sound good.

Because of the difficulty level and the length of the score, Faye was pleased that the choir had mastered it. Yet after months of rehearsal, these remarks do not reveal other levels of knowing that extend beyond her well-earned sense of accomplishment.

In terms of procedural knowledge, Jennifer found there was a limit to how much she could "conquer" each time she returned to Rejoice in the Lamb. In the third week of October, she stated,

Right now I think I'm so busy just trying to make myself look at all the little details. We've [only] been in choir six weeks. There's only so much that I can actually conquer a little bit at a time. It's just

kind of building on more and more things to make it a cleaner piece of music.

To her, the process was cumulative and required a long-term commitment, with new challenges to master as time progressed. Earlier Jennifer had remarked, "We know the first few sections of the song already well enough to care about stresses and volume." "Caring about" (or "attending to") these markings came after securing knowledge of fundamentals such as pitches and rhythms. Jennifer's comments suggest that there are layers in the learning process. Learners must patiently persevere through foundational learning so they can come to understand the music more readily as they grow to focus on increasingly finer grains of detail.

Understanding

Once students made substantial progress in learning to perform Rejoice in the Lamb, they began to consider their own relationship to the composition (as they had come to know it) and expressed levels of understanding that seemed to spring from their ongoing association with it. These comments suggested a deeper level of knowing, or what I characterize as acquaintance knowledge.

One of Alien's journal entries in the middle of November seemed to signify a notable turning point in how he related to the composition. He wrote,

I'm looking forward to hearing our version of the ENTIRE piece. I think that even though it is extremely difficult to sing, and the lyrics are difficult to follow, that the piece can be gorgeous if sung right.

Alien had come to terms with the choral score, what it required of him, and how well he and his classmates performed when trying to sing it. Now he was beginning to consider the choir's own "version" of the piece — what the choir would bring to or make of this composition. By capitalizing the word "entire," Alien demonstrated a growing sense of Rejoice in the Lamb 'as a whole and an increasing interest in how the isolated sections he had practiced functioned within a unified whole. He recognized that the mastery of difficulties would result in aesthetic rewards.

Alien's initial comments included value judgments that he eventually came to reconsider. After listening to a recording on the second day of class, he labeled the lyrics as "really bizarre." During the early weeks of rehearsal, he again referred to Rejoice in the Lamb as "bizarre," once playfully nicknaming it Silence of the Lambs after the title of a popular suspense film. But in the second week he wrote, "it doesn't sound so bizarre; it's not bad at all." The composition grew to seem less odd to Alien after he began to hear and experience it firsthand.

Early in October, Alien indicated, "I really don't care for this song," but 10 days later admitted, "I'm actually starting to enjoy some of the music we are producing with Rejoice in the Lamb.

It's still a really bizarre piece, but I'm learning to appreciate that." This was the first time he mentioned his perception of aesthetic qualities as he experienced them while engaged in performance. The printed notation had not changed, but Alien had begun to find a way to value the peculiarities of the composition.

At the end of the process of learning Rejoice in the Lamb, Alien stated, "For the most part, I still don't know that I care for the music all that much, just because there's not anything that really grabs you and pulls you in." To Alien, the piece did not actively command his attention and interest. He seemed unaware that he could personally take responsibility for finding meaning in the music.

In the first week of December, Faye wrote about her relationship to Rejoice in the Lamb, saying, "I am really beginning to get attached to that song, as it is sounding better every time we sing it." Faye's affinity for the "song" had developed in conjunction with the choir's ability to perform the piece well. No longer did she need to focus on the skill demands, since she had mastered these elements through concentrated effort and repetition. The "attachment" she experienced may have arisen from her increasing familiarity with the composition, as well as a growing sensitivity to the aesthetic elements of the music.

The presence of varied musical textures in Rejoice in the Lamb seemed incongruous to Faye, and this raised her curiosity about the composer's intent. When interviewed at the end of the third week of October, she admitted,

I was kind of wondering what the person was thinking when they wrote it, because it just has a lot of weird things brought together. Like some of it just doesn't make sense, unless there's something behind it that I'm not seeing. And the text is just pretty random.

Although Mrs. Franklin had spent a portion of class time discussing the poet Christopher Smart, Faye's preoccupation with technical challenges may have kept her from reflecting on Britten's reasons for choosing and setting the text as he did.

After 6 weeks of classes, Jennifer described how she responded to the music they were creating. She observed, "It really is a very easy song to 'get into,' and I think that in the end that will really help our energy, and we'll sing it like we mean it." The informal expression "get into" was used by other participants and seemed to imply a sense of how the students resonated with and responded to the music. For Jennifer, this composition invited that kind of response. Because of this, she felt energized and more able to sing it with a clear sense of intent. "Getting into" the music often translated into a physical "bouncing" or "dancing" by the singers, which I witnessed on my visits to the classroom. Jennifer also revealed her desire that the choir perform with sincerity, or "like we mean it." It seems reasonable to assume the

choir could not achieve this kind of authenticity without possessing a certain degree of understanding.

When interviewed in October, Jennifer made her first reference to the need for the choir to make something of the choral score they were learning to sing. She said,

The thing that will make it sound good and the reason why it's harder than it looks, is we're going to have to get the collective tone together of what we want to do with it... I think there has to be a very large emotional contrast between section two and section three, and to get everybody within the same feeling, then that is probably going to be the problem with that.

Jennifer revealed her understanding of the choir's role in capturing and portraying what she saw as the emotional content of this piece and the need for a unified sense of it among all members. In suggesting a decision about "what we want to do with it," Jennifer implied something outside the composition itself and alluded to the choir's creation of their own interpretation of the score.

A significant change in perception came for Jennifer midway through December. It was then that she talked about her enlightened understanding of the structure and meaning of Rejoice in the Lamb:

I got excited the first time I realized what the "Hallelujahs" [Sections 3 and 10] were all about. It felt like they had a purpose. I was seeing things in my head. I got this feeling, I was like, wow, Hallelujah! And it was a different feeling for the first one, the first time that we sing it and the last time, and it was just fitting. I don't know if this ever happens to any other person, but I'm sure it's got to happen one day that something just clicks and you know exactly, or at least to yourself, what the song is all about and get that feeling. You're like, wow, I need to sing some Hallelujahs right now.

Jennifer's epiphany, complete with visualizations and a sense of the purpose of the two distinct instances of the "Hallelujah" sections, was charged with emotion. This experience-based understanding differs notably from the commentary offered by Evans (1996), whose scholarly analysis cites the possible influence of composer Henry Purcell on the work: "By bringing back the Hallelujah to end the cantata, Britten seeks to give it the force of a ritornello, as in much seventeenth-century music" (p. 88). In contrast to this formal observation made about the composition, Jennifer came to understand its construction experientially, feeling the appropriate placement and emotive role of the final set of "Hallelujahs." She also recognized

that she had come to this realization on a personal level, "to herself," and that it would likely happen for others who sang the composition, but at different times and in different ways.

After the December concert, I asked Jennifer how her opinion of Rejoice in the Lamb had changed and how that opinion affected her experience. She answered,

It's not necessarily [an] "I didn't like it before" and "I like it now" thing. But all of a sudden, within the past one and a half weeks, it turned into a real song. It was just bits and pieces of stuff that we'd been working on. And I think for me, there's a really big difference between these disconnected little pieces ... and putting it all together.

Jennifer's attention to isolated parts had kept her from experiencing Rejoice in the Lamb as a whole until a few weeks before the December concert, when she felt the significance of the placement of the two "Hallelujah" sections in the context of the composition as a whole.

Looking back on her experiences while learning Rejoice in the Lamb, Jennifer stated, "I think the more time that you spend on it, the more easily that you can let yourself concentrate on the big picture of what types of feelings you want this to make you have." Jennifer saw the connection between her ability to perceive the composition on a larger scale and the amount of time she spent with the music. She also noted a qualitative change in her perceptions, stating, "In Rejoice in the Lamb, there were just a lot of sections that I didn't enjoy at first; like the Hallelujahs. Now I see things, not necessarily differently, but more. It's like now I kind of understand a little bit more about why they're in there. I know what kind of feeling leads into the other one." These felt understandings constitute a level of knowing that can only be reached when a learner remains receptive during a prolonged period of association with a choral composition.

CONCLUSIONS

The students in this study were able to find varying degrees of meaning in the music they were learning to sing. As Reimer (in Reimer & Smith, 1992) notes, a composition's "potential meanings" are "revealed more fully and experienced more subtly" only after the perceiver makes an active contribution over an "ongoing program of engagements" (p. 31). According to Rosenblatt (1978), the reader of a literary work may take on a stance where she perceives the text in terms of what it points to, or she may attend to what she is living through during her relationship with a particular text. This transactional nature of learning and performing a composition was evident in student responses in this study. When asked whether she thought the song had changed over the course of the experience, Jennifer remarked,

We have changed the song so much since the first day we picked it up and looked at it on paper. Anything on paper has the potential to be something else, and it just kind of takes

shape in one direction or the other. And in that way, you really rebuild the song no matter what's on the paper. It always turns out to exactly what the choir brings to it. And I think that change is so massive and so right in front of us all the time that it might get overlooked, just because from the very first notes that we've sung of the song, we kind of built it around ourselves.

In many ways, the music became what Jennifer and her classmates chose to make it, and the knowledge they gained was a form of self-knowledge, enhanced via the composer's perspective. When reviewing the findings of this study as a whole, it is important to keep in mind that the participants were a carefully selected, articulate group of adolescents. Essentially, these students' experiences with Rejoice in the Lamb began with impressions, progressed through constructions, and at times, resulted in understandings. Yet the students also demonstrated levels of knowledge that proved to be exceptions to this progressive sequence. For example, Jennifer reacted with sensitivity to the beauty of Smart's poetry (acquaintance knowledge) early in the process, while Faye persisted in her concerns about performance accuracy (procedural knowledge) even after the final rehearsal.

The depth and nature of the knowledge gained by the students seemed to result from the combination of at least three factors: (1) what each participant brought to the experience, (2) the characteristics of the composition itself, and (3) how the potential for understanding was pursued by the individual or fostered in the context of the classroom. Although it is not the goal of this report to discuss the teacher and her instructional techniques, undoubtedly her approach contributed to the way these students came to understand the music they studied. Both her sensitivity to the singers' diverse perspectives and her knowledge of the composition affected her ability to provide ways for each learner to fully perceive and come to understand the music. If Rejoice in the Lamb is indeed a composition worthy of study, as numerous historians and educators would contend, then teachers might use these findings as they seek to help their students move past first impressions, meet a score's skill demands, and grow to some level of understanding of the artistic import of a composition. This is in keeping with Reimer's (2003) belief that music education "exists to nurture people's potential to gain deeper, broader, and more significant meanings from musical involvements" (p. 165). It seems that Alien, with his musical insecurities, and Faye, with her selective tastes, could have had richer learning experiences had they found a way to be more inquisitive and reflective as they studied the composition. Perhaps what Jennifer brought to the experience (in her openness and intentional reflection) could have been cultivated in the other study participants.

Also worth consideration is the possibility that the composition's inherent challenges (exceeding the skill level of a typical high school choir) may have prevented Alien and Faye from achieving more significant levels of acquaintance knowledge. Perhaps their teacher could have selected repertoire better suited to student skill levels and therefore allowed the

singers to have the heightened perspective that seems to allow for deeper levels of understanding. However, one might also wonder if Faye would have felt the same sense of accomplishment had the composition not been as difficult to master.

Choral music educators seldom have the opportunity to monitor student perceptions as they learn to perform music in their classrooms. Accounts given by the three participants in this study provide a window into the ways singers perceive various aspects of a composition during the learning process. This study verifies how instructive it can be for choral teachers to become aware of their students' thought processes. The challenge for teachers is to find efficient ways to expose what their learners are thinking. Student journals or practice cards with space for reflective comments could bring these understandings to the attention of the teacher. Periodic classroom dialogue could also allow these associations to be heard and developed in a group context. Sensitivity to a student's misgivings about a work and a simple response to balance student perceptions might be enough to sustain interest and encourage openness.

In both written and spoken commentary, participants focused primarily on the technical skills required to perform the music with accuracy. This preoccupation was most evident in the case of Faye, who found great rewards in surmounting the challenges of *Rejoice in the Lamb*, but failed to see and understand (by her own admission) the depth of many of the aesthetic qualities of the composition. This orientation toward technical mastery reinforced the rewards of performance achievement, but cast the composition as a means to this end. On more than one occasion, Faye claimed to measure personal success by whether the audience's "jaws dropped" in amazement upon hearing the choir perform. This definition of success fails to address the possibility that both singers and audience members might also be affected, inspired, or challenged by the artistic elements of the performed composition. A teacher who is aware of this tendency will gently and continually refocus student attention toward aspects of a composition that will enlighten the learners' understandings and enable them to make better sense of the music on a personal level.

Further research could focus on what factors most influence a student's ability to gain deeper levels of understanding while learning to perform choral compositions. An examination of these factors and how they correlate with student understandings would benefit teachers who wish to foster these kinds of substantive associations with choral compositions.

Propositional, procedural, and to a lesser extent, acquaintance knowledge surfaced in varied measure in student experiences. Although the teacher played a key role in mediating these forms of knowledge, ultimately the responsibility fell on the students to reflect on the meanings and artistic intentions of the score, or in Jennifer's words, to "make themselves care." The act of participating in this research alone (keeping journals, discussing videos of themselves, responding to interview questions) seemed to elicit a higher level of reflection from these students. In order to explore, personalize, and interpret music, students must

invest themselves in the process, and not, as Alien suggested, passively wait for the composition to "grab" them and ignite their interest. Together, music educators and students would benefit by exploring and developing ways to effectively relate to and more fully understand the compositions they are learning in the choral classroom.

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NOTE

1. All people and places in this article have been given pseudonyms.

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