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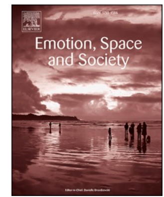

In harmony or out of tune: Affective and emotional geographies of all-male choirs in London, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing popularity of weekly amateur choral singing for adult men, with a specific focus in London, UK. This paper moves away from discourses of social health and wellbeing to bring together critical studies of masculinity with emotional geographies of sound, to better understand the links between choirs as an affective space and the complex, symbolic relationship between men and their voices. Where research has shown that non-competitive group activity is central to men's sense of connection and provides a space for men to express emotions, friendship and intimacy, there is great potential to analyse how the role of sound (volume, vibrations) and use of choral voice work (softening, blending, harmonies) directly facilitates this connection. This paper remains cautious of presenting group singing as an automatic panacea to disconnection, exploring the exclusions for those who are 'out of tune' and (musically and socially) unable to harmonise with others.

1. Introduction

Choir singing has a long history of shared belonging through its membership and repertoire, from collective spiritual workshop through to political activism.[1] Grassroots, secular community choirs differ from institutional choirs (more commonly associated with Church choirs) following the 'Natural Voice' (NVN) ethos that anybody can sing regardless of skill or ability. Research into the physical and psychotherapeutic health benefits of community choirs all harvest a similar message: group singing good for you. Singing *together* can boost the immune system, create feelings of happiness and belonging, reduces stress and is the most effective way to bond together large groups of people (Clift and Hancox 2001; Pearce et al., 2017; Robertson-Gillam 2018; Dingle et al., 2019). Community choirs are recommended for adults suffering from depression, physical and mental health difficulties, homelessness and marginalised lives.[2] The social well-being derived from community choirs has been researched in music psychology, with less critical analysis emerging from the wider social sciences. There have been some critical approaches to the otherwise overwhelmingly positive rhetoric of group singing, such as critiques of 'stress-beating' workplace choirs as masking the damaging impacts of neoliberal cultures of over-working during times of austerity (see Brammal 2015), yet sociological and geographical perspectives on choir singing remains limited.

This paper explores the affective space of all-male community choirs. The purpose of this research is neither to confirm nor challenge the individual and social health benefits that group singing brings to the relatively disparate group of men who participated in this study of two all-male choirs in London, UK; indeed the data both mirrors and problematises the celebratory findings of this arguably utopic activity. Rather, I ask what it *feels* like to be part of a male choir, approaching the study of choir singing from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together critical studies of men and masculinity (CSMM) with emotional geographies of sound (Doughty and Drozdzewski 2022), to better understand the links between choirs as an affective space and the complex, symbolic and sociological relationship between men and their voices. There is great potential to analyse how affective geographies of sound (volume, vibrations), and use of choral voice work (softening, blending, harmonies) directly facilitates male bonding, friendship and intimacy.

2. Masculinities, emotions, affect

The role of emotional expression (or lack of it) has long occupied the scholarly landscape of CSMM, both following and critiquing the common trope that hegemonic masculinity restricts men's ability to process and articulate emotional vulnerability, resulting in damage to themselves (poor health, rates of suicide; Seidler 2007; Garcia 2016) and

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[1] *Singing for our Lives: Stories from the street choirs* 2018.

[2] https://www.choirwithnoname.org/.

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societal relations. Despite the discourse within public mental health campaigns that encourage men to 'open up' and talk about their emotions,[3] as well as theory which suggests a *softening masculinity* as transformative to gender relations, there is disagreement that an inherent, or even socialised, emotional inexpressiveness is itself at the crux of men's problematic health and behaviours.

In response to the Euro-American mythopoetic men's movements of the 1980s, which sought to reclaim a 'healthy' masculinity from its 'toxic' contamination (Harrington 2021), feminist sociologists have largely rejected essential notions of authentic masculinity, instead focusing on multiple masculinities which are shaped differently across time, space, class, race and other socio-political settings (Connell 1995; Segal 2007). These theorists argue that unattainable expectations of hegemonic masculinity are at the source of the trouble and anxiety, while others argue simply teaching men to 'get in touch' with their 'softer' true emotions, or rewarding them for doing so, fails to challenge systems and cultures of oppression (Flood 2017). De Boise and Hearn (2017) concur that becoming more 'emotional' (itself a misconception) does not necessarily translate into being politically progressive, and go further to suggest that men have always been 'emotional', at times intensely so, yet these emotions have been 'context dependent and historically contingent on patriarchal, colonialist frameworks' (780). De Boise and Hearn thus challenge the assumption that to be more emotionally expressive is always 'good' for men and society, as men's emotions are 'shaped by and help to reproduce structural inequalities' (2017: 783). Rather, these authors offer an alternative framework to thinking about emotions, turning to feminist theories of affect (Ahmed 2004, 2010) where emotions are understood to be experienced and registered very differently by different bodies, in different spaces, and always relational to intersections of gender, race, class, age and environment. Critical to an affective understanding of emotion is, as De Boise and Hearn (2017: 789) assert: 'the political dimensions of non-intentional practices which circulate between, rather than reside in, individual bodies'. Affective moments (Ahmed 2004) are crucial to understanding social bonding (and in contrast, conflict and exclusion) and are intrinsically related to collective singing and sound. As a scholar with a developing interest in the sensual and affective dimensions of social life (Taylor and Falconer 2015; Falconer 2021), a focus on affect, I believe, speaks best to the arguments of this paper: that gendered identities and emotional connections intersect with the sonic sounds (harmonies, volume) and embodiment of the collective singing voice.

The affective *space* of the all-male community choir plays a central role in how men negotiate their emotional connections, bodies and masculinities. The non-competitive nature of choir singing emerged as a strong theme in this research. Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT; Anderson and McCormack, 2018) argues that the decline of homophobia has enabled a more emotional, tactile intimacy between (heterosexual) men, where friendships can thrive without the need to dominate, compete or masquerade behind 'playing sports, drinking, fixing things, or gambling' (Robinson et al., 2019: 852). Significantly, these intimacies do not need to be verbalized to be felt or acknowledged, and meaningful homosociality is more often 'played out through complex, embodied, practices' (Thurnell-Read 2012: 253). Moving beyond the cognitive and discursive realm reveals the relationship 'between men and their bodies, emotions and everyday geographies' (Hopkins and Gorman Murray's 2019: 301–302). A turn to affect is key here; Evers (2009) asserts masculinity is learned not just in the mind but *through* 'the body's sensual repertoire' (2009: 901). He understands masculinity 'as felt geographical assemblages—a spatial, biological, sociological, psychological emergence' (898), where 'affects can leap from one body to another to evoke tenderness, incite shame, ignite rage, excite fear, and so on' (902). Crowhurst and Eldridge (2020) continue the theme of affective and emotional dynamics in CSMM, shifting the focus from what a homosocial male-bonding ritual *is* to what it *does*: ie creates an 'electric atmosphere' or momentary 'vibe' of giddiness and fun, belonging and disconnection, as laughter, excitement or shame circulate between men bodies and spaces. Often, they argue, these affects both trouble and affirm hegemonic forms of masculinity. Non-verbal (ie not *talking*) communication is crucial to the affective space of the choir; the embodied voice remains a critical component-yet they *sing* together, *move* as one, rather than *speak* in turn. De Boise's work on 'learning to be affected' (2014) is again useful to think about how music, in my case group singing, encourages emotional and affective experiences that d*iffer* from other realms of everyday life. De Boise argues that through music, the performance of masculinity comes to be an embodied and affective practice-as men learn to attune their music tastes to register different affective responses, often in relation to others. It is through this framework that I explore the space of the affective all-male choir, focusing on emotional geographies of the collective male voice when used in sonic harmony. Getting 'closer' to how men become attuned to their bodies and emotions through song delivers a more nuanced analysis to the symbolic relationship between men and their voices, and the study of choir singing more generally.

3. Voice, sound, space

The 'sonic turn' in sociology and geography (Duffy et al., 2007), whereby the role of sound shapes our relationship with place, people and social relations, engages with wider power structures to reveal 'multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound' (Bull and Back 2003: 3). Closely allied with the turn to affect, recent scholars have affirmed the influence of non-representational theory on pre-cognitive sensations of sounds and the atmospheric soundscapes they produce (Doughty et al., 2016; Doughty and Drozdzewski, 2022). These sounds have 'the potential to affectively reconfigure social spaces in ways that open them up for alternative ways of being and feeling', moving us in 'unpredictable ways, that is, something *happens*' (Doughty et al., 2016: 39). Following geographer Doreen Massey, who criticized the notion of communities 'in the sense of coherent social groups' (1991: 27) being tied to places, Kyto (2011) suggests that soundscapes can play an important role in shared meaning, constructing 'temporal spaces for embodiment and feelings of belong in urbanized multicentered metropolitan regions' (78). Music is a language which embodies our understanding and experience of social life, as 'we simply don't have the words to transpose the alchemy of sound' (Bull and Back 2003: 12). Moving together in time and sound brings home what sharing affective experiences of music *does* to collective bodies in space, often in combination with other senses of flashing lights, sweat and smells to enhance feelings of connection (for example the smell of incense, feeling of ground under bare feet in trance music scenes, see Partridge 2006). Importantly, the same sounds do not always produce shared affects (for example, see Saldanha 2005 on racialised bodies affected by rave music scenes in Goa). Elsewhere I have argued that our relationship with music and sound can reconcile conflicting identities (Taylor et al., 2014). Here, I argue that 'certain music, sounds, rhythms, beats, instruments and even the audible volume of music is experienced through the bodies and particular spatial environments of participants' (ibid: 230), pulling bodies in and out of inclusive and exclusionary spaces and social groups.

This paper specifically focuses on emotional geographies of sound that relate to collective voices, whether in powerful unison or intricate harmony, and conceptualises vocal identity as a site of gender and power (Elorriaga 2011). One area where the affective power of voice and verse intersects with cultures of masculinity is fanatical football chants, where mass group singing is deeply and 'ritualistically embodied' (Armstrong and Young, 1999: 174). Fan culture further involves a spatial choreography of many bodies, clapping, waving, hugging, dancing, and men who 'unashamedly sing, shriek or cry in each other's company' (ibid: 176). The soundscapes of football stadium terraces is what Kyto (2011) refers to as acoustic communities, where

[3] See campaigns such as *Man Up; Mind; Movember*

'acoustic information plays a pervasive role for its members' (79) and the 'material and temporal qualities of sound and listening' enmesh with 'a profound agreement of cultural identity and companionship' (80). Kyto describes the sonic rituals involved in the collective voice of fans, following the audible ripples through a crowd, culminating in roaring volume as voices come together in unison, as loud and powerful as they can muster. The use of the voice in football fan culture produces rich affects: chants that are playful, rude, jesting of the opposition, sung with cheeky, bouncing tones, a passionate melancholia as a team shows signs of losing, and the thunderous strength of mass reverberations throughout a stadium, a pub, the street. Malbon (1999) study of clubbing refers to an 'oceanic' experience where bodies and emotions become one via the soundscape. 'Loudness', both in terms of audible volume and character, has been symbolically contrasted with spaces of 'peace' and spirituality, such as the 'sublime spaces' of underwater with muted sounds and silences (Munt 2010). The volume of sound can sweep bodies along, or exclude those for whom 'loud' or 'peaceful' sounds produce different embodied affects. The powerful wall of sound created by chanting in unison is significant when juxtaposed to the pursuit of softer, delicate harmonies found in choir singing, and these differences are pivotal to the motivations and experiences of men who desire to use their voices 'in tune' with one another.

Lastly, the use and sound of the human voice is deeply political and gendered. Characteristics of the speaking voice, whether forceful, shrill, passive, 'masculine' or 'feminine' produce judgments and dynamics of power in how we relate, and *who* gets heard as *what*. Kanngieser (2012: 336) asserts 'the voice, in its expression of affective and ethico-political forces, creates worlds'. Feminist theory is steeped in discourse on the symbolic 'power of voice': on empowering, raising, and importantly whose voices remain silenced (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). In music therapy that centres voice work, and singing in particular, the female voice has been used to explore 'how gender may be delineated, interrupted or disrupted through the act of singing' (Rolvskord and Halstead 2013: 420). These authors suggest, like gender, the use of voice is performative. Trained from childhood to operate it in restrictive ways, without exercising its full vocal range, our voices are ordered to conform to (or conversely, to subvert) normative categories of gender and sexuality (see, for example, Heasley 2005 on queer masculinities of straight men, where an absence of 'deep voice' is read as gay). We perform gender through our voices, in the Euro-American context, by emphasizing certain sonic pitches: 'male being low (pitch), dark (timbre), forceful (resonance), and strong(breath). Whereas the sound of the female voice is identified as diametrically opposed, being high (pitch), light (timbre), easy (res-onance), and weak (breath)' (Rolvskord and Halstead, 2013: 422). The characteristics of the 'masculine' voice thus reflect hegemonic stereotypes of loud, dominant and forceful, where the 'feminine voice' equally falls victim to essentialist qualities of soft, seductive and source of comfort and care-soothing infants through lullabies. There have always been music genres where the gendered voice is actively interrupted, subverted and performed differently as a political tool of resistance, such as the *Riot Grrrl* punk scene (Downes 2012) and the feminist appropriation of the traditionally machismo Reggaeton (Arauna et al., 2020). Where the sound of the voice doesn't appear to 'match' its gender identity in choral singing, troubles can arise for transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming singers, as well as some gay men. Research that actively seeks to queer and problematize the binary of 'male' and 'female' singing voice parts recommends choral directors to use gender-neutral, inclusive language (Palkki 2015). For anyone, regardless of gender identity, to be a bass, tenor or soprano, is central to redefining gender and masculinity through choral music. Choral directors work closely with the voice as a tool for expression.[4] This voice work is twofold: to project political or spiritual messages through lyrics and repertoire, and to train, coax and manipulate the voice to produce the correct musical dynamic and harmony. This research delves deeper into the affective space of the all-male choir to see what symbolically being 'in harmony' or 'out of tune' means for men who embody these spaces. The term 'harmony' here carries two interrelated meanings: a) to refer to the musical composition of simultaneous chords and b) the intense affective moments of connection and 'coming together'. Importantly, this paper remains cautious of presenting group singing as an automatic panacea to disconnection, challenging the idea of harmony as inherent in group singing, and exploring the dangers and exclusions of such solidarity for those men who are socially 'out of tune'.

4. Methods and sample

There are multiple traditions of male choral singing and related studies into gender, culture and identity. Research into men who sing together identifies a direct correlation with collective voices in harmony as rooted in an affiliative sense of shared purpose, such as nationhood, spirituality and landscape (Icelandic male choirs, Faulkner 2012), Folklore and Nautical sea shanties (Layton 2019), and the well-known Welsh Men's choirs (Rohwer and Rohwer, 2012).

In contrast, the two all-male adult community choirs who meet weekly in North London are remarkable in their absence of an overt sense of shared identity. Both choirs are non-auditioned, have no joining criteria other than to identify as men, who wants to sing. There is no expectation to have any choir experience, and no mention of cultural identity or sexual orientation, unlike the well-established London Gay Men's Choir. The assorted repertoire is highly varied, borrowing from the influences of male singing traditions over space and time, creating hybrid amalgamations of modern pop, satirical sea shanties (sailing *'from Shoreditch to Hackney',* nodding to a gentrifying urban London ecology), blues and urban folk. **Choir A** was founded in 2013, with 70 members turning up for the first rehearsal, with another 70–100 quickly forming a waiting list. Following on from its success, the choir leader began **Choir B** in 2015, which proved equally as popular. Having run women-dominated mixed gender choirs for many years, this rapid, intense popularity of men's choirs made the Choir Director curious as to the cause of this surge in men wanting to sing. It is widely acknowledged in NVN circles that women significantly outnumber men in mixed community choirs, with many choirs struggling to fill male voice parts. Speculations about the 'missing males' (Freer 2012) in (Euro-American) choral participation have turned to research into gender, masculinity and music education more generally, sourcing the stigma of singing to adolescence, young boyhood melancholia and the vocal projection of masculinity (Ashley 2010). The apparent sudden interest in all male choirs ignited this research, to respond to and capture the emotional and affective experience of these 'new' spaces.

This research was conducted between 2015- 2016,[5] with two all-male choirs in London, each with a membership of 70. Data was primarily collected from four focus groups, with a total of 40 self-selecting choir members who agreed of be part of the research. I carried out three in-depth interviews with the Choir Director (spread apart over two years), as well as ongoing observations through sensory fieldwork (attending gigs and performances, following social media accounts, singing in a weekly community choir and participating in open choral workshops) for a period of five years (2013–2017). Focus groups were carried out separate to the rehearsals, in a private room available for hire above a pub in the city. Participants were asked to fill out a blank card, writing down anything that they felt about being in the choir. Cards were used as prompts to start discussions, group interviews then

[4] There have been critiques of choirs as always providing freedom of expression. See O' Tool (2005): *'I sing in a Choir but 'I have no Voice!''* which argues oppressive organisational hierarches can work to supress certain voices.

[5] Ethical approval from both London Southbank University (2015) and the University of Westminster (2016). All names changed to protect anonymity; data recorded and transcribed.

flowed freely, lasting approximately 2 h each.

The limitations of capturing emotional, affective and sensual experiences of sound through spoken narrative consumed much methodological reflection, most recently by Doughty and Drozdzewski (2022) who ask how we *do* Sonic Geographies. Doughty et al. (2016: 40) note that empirical practices have yet to adequately respond to the methodological challenges of capturing sound, space and the 'movement and intensities of affect and emotion that are experienced through bodies', while theorists have engaged with audio walks and audio-visual methods. Pink (2015: 93) argues that doing sensory research through the traditional interview is however still possible, so long as the space of the interview/focus group is re-thought through a sensory paradigm; a process through which 'verbal, experiential, emotional, sensory, material, social and other encounters are brought together'. The focus groups created a space where (most) men collectively made sense of their felt experiences through words for the first time, creating an intensely affective atmosphere of conviviality and intimacy. The self-selecting nature of the groups allowed for those who desired talking about the profoundly transformative and therapeutic role of the choir in their lives, and most did so with aplomb. The participants eagerly introduced themselves to fellow singers they may have spotted across the room week after week, but never formally met. Songs and harmonies were hummed between stories and reflections; one participant affectionately looked around his group, smiling as he affirmed 'we do sound good don't we?'. Recently, sociologists have called to rehabilitate the sit-down interview (May and Lewis, 2020), even when researching embodied relationships, atmospheres and affective affinities, as it is the role of the researcher to learn to become attuned to the sensual within the data. Data analysis became part of this process of attunement, by way of noticing and *feeling* themes relating to sonic and symbolic harmonies within the intense, interactive flow of conversation, humming, song and sound. My positionality as a female, 'outsider' researcher enabled these observations to evolve, and the focus groups generated rich and fruitful themes relating to voice, harmony, masculinities and homosociality.

Both choirs rehearse weekly in North-Central London, and perform regularly at community arts events and choral festivals. Members demographically reflect the relative 'super-diversity' (Neal et al., 2015) of inhabitants in this densely populated city of global flows. Age was the greatest variant, spanning seven decades, from 20 years of age to over 80. Occupations were also wide ranging: students, bank managers, artists, film directors, lawyers, teachers, therapists and professional musicians. Both choirs are predominantly white, with BAME men increasingly present, yet less than 20%. There is greater diversity with regard to nationality, with members from Western and Eastern Europe, North/South America, Australasia, and also those who identify as straight, gay, bisexual and queer (approximately a third). At the time of the research there were no participants who identified as transgender, and three living with a disability. It would be accurate to attribute the sample to largely white, middle-class group of urban, cosmopolitan professionals, whilst acknowledging the prominent diversity of age, nationality and cultural identity. Crucially, the members who felt 'out of tune' in the choir, who withdrew after one or more sessions, or for whom the choir was a less than positive experience are painfully absent in this research. The self-selecting nature of participants resulted in discourses that were overwhelmingly positive. Theories about those who were figuratively 'out of tune', and who may have therefore killed the affective solidarity inherent in the data, have therefore been devised from wider critical scholarship (Ahmed 2004, 2010) into the dangers of omitting those who do not 'fit in'.

4.1. Emotional connection, voice work and masculinity

The whole thing about singing in the choir is you can't be louder and better than everyone else. If you stand out it's not going to work, that is not how the sound is created (Graham, 39, Baritone).

It's kind of like the opposite of competition. Because the only way that we win-as in doing a good performance-is by supporting each other and blending (Marcel, 56, Bass).

The experience of a perceived shared humility through group singing was by far the strongest theme that emerged in the data from the focus groups. Many of the men expressed their desire for a space where they could 'step back', 'settle down', be taught to *listen* to others, and be led as oppose to lead. Franco (35, Baritone) confesses 'I have always taught to be at the front, but I never wanted to be at the front. I never wanted to lead'. Others agreed they found having to be in charge, or expected to make decisions in other areas of their lives overbearing at times. Time again participants spoke of the joy and relief of relinquishing authority and control, allowing themselves to become washed with sounds and vibrations from others, and 'letting your guard down'. Embodying this 'stepping back' through the act of voice work played a key role. Most agreed there was an element of uncomfortable exposure in playing the 'instrument of voice' in front of others, especially for those who may not have sung in front of anyone since early childhood. Sam (36, Tennor) notes there is something 'quite emotional' about such a large group of men, 'some much older, or younger, or earning ten times as much as you' all 'simultaneously risking looking like a bit of a tit!'. Yet a sense of vulnerable discomfort was acknowledged as a small price to pay for highly sought after intense, emotional affects. Bart (34, Baritone) feels 'exposing yourself' is a welcome contrast to society that 'is still inherently patriarchal, so a man has to be strong, who doesn't make mistakes, or dither. In the choir you can sing the wrong note, and open up and say to yourself 'yes I am fallible''. Rather than standing out or projecting louder, Jacob (44, Tenor) notes the stronger and more competent singers use their voices to fade and blend with those singers who need to be carried: 'they are lifting other people around them ….there is an awful lot of self-management in the act of singing'. Eliot (69, Baritone), compares the concerted nature of song to the flight of the starlings, where the murmuration of birds in flight move as one. 'Winning' without having to compete emerged profoundly in the focus group narratives, and the collaborative nature of teamwork always related to how the men were taught to use their voices differently:

You have to listen and you have to blend. But even symbolically- and I may be going off on a tangent here-having to listen and blend so you are not 'ME! ME! ME!', is a different experience for men who have been taught to be at the front (Lukas, 42, Bass).

Yes, that's key to the way we relate. It's actually about vulnerability rather than strength. No-one is better than anyone else. No-one is a solo artist. No-one is allowed to take over (Hans, 68, Baritone).

I think we leave a lot of macho bullshit at the door when we come to choir, because men are choosing to sing. And they are not choosing to sing like a front man in a band, I mean I've been a front man in a band and it's kind of like a lot more ego based. In choir it's a different feeling, and its softer, so I think naturally you've already said you're going to sing in front of a whole load of guys together and so already a lot of aggression has gone (Seth, 37, Tenor).

The emotional and embodied joy derived from *blending*, both vocally and symbolically into a male group is articulated as part of a desire for what the men perceive as a 'softer' practice of masculinity, free from hegemonic characteristics of ego, machismo, aggression or the performance of leadership. That these transformations could be achieved through the vocal practice of softening the voice, carrying others through sound, and particularly harmonising, reflects how vocal therapy and singing can be used to 'interrupt' normative gender roles (Rolvskord and Halstead 2013). This perceived interruption was profoundly welcomed by men such as Otto (29, Bass) who professed 'I just think the sound of men is incredibly powerful and underused'. To be met with a claim that largely white, privileged and economically secure men lack power, and that their voices are underused or unheard, incites (at best) a level of scepticism in those who study the dominant or suppressed voices of powerful and marginalised groups. Yet for singers like Otto, to be immersed in this 'new' soundscape represents a real shift in the way he normally hears his voice, or the voice of others, as a man dominating

soundscapes in media or business meetings.

Whilst the use of voice was undoubtedly profoundly transformative for many of the singers as they reflected on their experiences of masculinity, Rolvskord and Halstead (2013: 425) warn of the clear limitations of vocal therapy being used in this way, which may be beneficial for individuals who are in a position to carry out such voice work, but does little to address gender relations, inequalities or contribute to social or political change. Rather, the emotional, personal therapeutic reflections for some men as they used vocal techniques of softening, blending and harmony created a deep sense of homosocial connection. Again, this intense experience of bonding through song was highly affective, and often attributed to a powerful amalgamation of this 'new' male space and the sonic beauty of the harmonies themselves. Several men recalled the first time 'the chords came together', and the 'beautiful and powerful' sound had a profound emotional affect, causing them to 'well up', experience 'prickles on the skin' or 'melt'. Teddy (40, Tenor) attributes the sense of connection he feels to the group as different to other social activities, as 'when you're having to harmonise-literally-there is a connection with the people around you which is quite intriguing and very special'. For some the emotional impact of the choir came as a shock, but was quickly acknowledged to be 'something I didn't know I was missing. Once I'd anchored that in on the first day, I was like 'right, this is where I want to be!'. And I was hooked in really' (Nelson, 50, Baritone). The affective charge of male energy which pulls men into spaces of deep connection resonates with the feelings of 'falling in love' so pertinent in male homosocial bonding (Robinson et al., 2019). Over 50 years previously, yet in almost the same very spot of Islington, North London, Lynne Segal recounts the motivations of the Islington's men group (formed in 1973) in similar expressions of desire and elation. Segal (2007), much like De Boise (2014), argues that contrary to opinion, men have never had a problem with being emotional around each other and enjoying close bonds, often through the exclusion of women, in forming clubs and trade unions (See Robinson et al., 2019 on the dangers of such homosocial intimacies at the expense of gender equality). Segal describes the virtuous anti-sexist agenda of the Islington Men's groups, where men sought to become attuned to their feelings, in order to be more loving, gentle, emotionally closer to women and their children. 'But above all they celebrated being more in touch with and supporting each other' (2007: 237), claims Segal, who argues that the men's groups became more about personal development and therapy work than creating any meaningful change regarding societal gender relations or the public face of masculinity. 'The point is', reveals Segal (238), 'these men *liked* displaying and developing what they experienced as 'the gentler parts of ourselves, our spiritual and nurturing capabilities, our ability to love', the feminine side of themselves'. This is not to say the choir participants shared the same (or indeed any) political agenda of the Men's Groups, and unlike their Islington predecessors who agonised endlessly about their role as men, there is certainly nothing explicit about addressing issues of gender and masculinity in the choirs in this research. Nevertheless, the similarities in the rhetoric of these men, who celebrate 'getting in touch' with 'softer' sides of masculinity and loving homosocial bonds, remind us that while therapeutic on an interpersonal level, we should be wary of heralding group singing as progressive to gender relations, or transformative to the specific forms of power and privilege brought about by raced and classed masculinities. This is especially the case for men who are 'cocooned in relative comfort' (ibid 238), and whose radical middle-class habitus permits such exploration of themselves and their identities.

In contrast to such powerful connections, some of the data revealed affective hostilities to those who were deemed 'out of tune'. Some comments in the focus groups suggested an implicit (classed) othering of the 'alpha-male', who can only sing ('badly!') when 'drunk after football games', as unable to 'fit in' to the choir environment and be open to the 'delicious' affects brought about by harmonising together as men, during the giddy peaks of their newfound intimate attachments. Contrary to recent theories of CSMM which reject typologies of masculinities in favour of a fluid, affective and contextual reading of gender (Green and Evers 2020), many of the participants agreed it was a certain 'type' of man who is predisposed to such spaces and sounds: one who has a 'yearning' to 'let go', open up to intimate connections, explore their masculinity. David (29, Tenor) said he knew of men in his life who 'wouldn't know how to connect on [the] level', needed to sing in the choir. There was a nervousness within the focus groups that should the choirs be infiltrated with 'types' of men they considered less open to the delicate practice of harmonising, it would threaten what many had come to feel as a sacred space in their lives. It is here we see that while the choirs were perceived to be relatively diverse and inclusive, some members may be pitted as 'out of tune', should they happen to be affected differently in such spaces. 'Alpha-males' who embody a sense of aggression, those who are not as eager to 'step outside their comfort zones', or men who are 'homohysteric', all present a discord to the utopian space of harmony. This retains 'Connell's fundamental insight around masculinities as constructed in opposition to 'othered' bodies' (De Boise 2014: 1).

4.2. Learning to be affected: in discussion with De Boise

These affective encounters- and who is included in them-can be better understood through an engagement with the work of De Boise (2014), who argues that acknowledging how masculinities operate *through* bodies opens up new ways if seeing how we 'learn to be affected' differently. De Boise's theories stem from an analysis of how men learn to be affected by music, and how this embodied and emotional process is shaped by other bodies, social interaction, biographies, materiality and social histories. Turning to affect offers 'more nuanced ways of exploring issues of masculinities and social embodiment … in a way that is neither biologically reductive nor sociologically deterministic' (2014: 4). De Boise firstly reminds us that feminist musicologists have long pointed out music has a complex relationship with male bodies precisely because it challenges the misperception that masculinity is linked to emotional repression. Quite the contrary, music is actively enjoyed by men *because* it is overtly linked to a highly emotional and affective state. Secondly, the embodied experience of enjoying (or not) particular musical sounds is a learned process deeply influenced by social interaction, relations, location and context. He asserts 'music's affective value was not simply determined by its relationship to immediate or imagined social groups but by the context in which it was experienced (8)'. That the choir participants experienced 'physiological 'chills'' (ibid: 4) when certain chords came together required them to register other bodies that were 'like them'. This is not to say they desire a homogenous social group, in fact the relative diversity of men (age, nationality, occupation, culture) was perceived as a key feature of the groups success-they *want* to bond with men outside the norms of their everyday lives, family, friends and work colleagues, age bracket, and are especially proud to be part of what they imagined as a cosmopolitan London milieu (Neal et al., 2015). Rather, the 'like them' in this context means those men who also felt 'the yearning' to explore what sound and singing could do to their emotional states, a thirst to feel intense affective connections missing from other areas of their lives, and those who were open to a therapeutic exploration of gender and masculinity. 'Masculinities then are frequently experienced in opposition to the ***idea*** of other masculinities rather than specific individuals' (De Boise: 8). This again reflects some choir singers fears that some 'alpha-men' could threaten the affective solidary of the choir, as they attribute the sonic exquisiteness of their collective voices to be created by the social harmony of the group. The singers allow their bodies to register musical affects so affirmatively, which then again solidifies their feelings of connection: 'Physical sensations of embodiment through sonic textures blur discrete boundaries between individual and society' (ibid: 5).

Importantly, De Boise (2014: 5) further denotes 'music is a pragmatic means of getting males to talk about their experience of emotions or being affected, without making emotional or affective experience the

explicit focus'. Whilst the voice is a key focus, the act of *not speaking* emerged as significant. Most of the men agreed it was unusual to find a space of such closeness and comradeship without having to talk to each other. To quietly exist in space of 70 other men, all of whom are waiting to sing together, was often felt as an affective charge of warmth, exhilaration and belonging (at least for those who were figuratively 'in tune', as I consistently argue). Repertoire was at times key to this connection, as some men noted they were still 'linked through words' without speaking, as the emotive lyrics of a song opened up shared feelings as much as the embodied vibrations of collective voice (such as the lyric *'I'm so tired of being alone'* which works to alleviate the fear of admitting deep loneliness through words by mass confession through song).

5. Conclusion and continuing research

An affective analysis of sound and collective voice can explain the harmonious connections felt through choir singing, beyond the discourses of health and wellbeing. In singing together, affective connections are unleashed, and choir spaces can be where shared emotions are *felt* through an atmosphere of sound. This research situates the affective power of voice within wider social contexts of critical studies into masculinities and emotions. To do this, it was necessary to focus on the embodied male voice itself, how it can be coaxed and softened to be in symbolic harmony with particular masculinities and desires. The singers in this research used their voices to both subvert and affirm hegemonic and essential notions of masculinity. They want to be loud and powerful, and soft and delicate. Ultimately, they want to be *affected*, to feel intense, thrilling sensations that differ from the mundane and disconnected habitus of the everyday.

Approaching the study of choir singing through this lens opens opportunities to think about gendered, raced and classed identities, and masculinities especially, as shaped by the circulation of affective bodies in space and time. Whilst this data is largely celebratory, it is important to consider that such powerful affects may work to silence some people rather than give them voice. Doughty et al. (2016: 39) question the potential for sound and music through affective and emotional registers to 'provide insights into how to address issues of power, justice, access and belonging to urban space by considering how particular sounds might work to open connections between bodies'. It is thus equally important to consider the dangers of 'affective unity' and shared belonging in choirs. De Boise (2014) asserts men register music affectively in ways which involve hostility, as well as attachment to values, attitudes and ideas of other masculinities. Certain bodies and identities may be symbolically 'out of tune' and serve as a threat to the celebration of harmony. White, middle class men in this research find themselves in contexts and spaces where emotional expression is rewarded and valued. It is necessary to consider which bodies may feel 'out of tune' in such spaces. Others have written about cultural whiteness in music education hiding 'racism in plain sight', behind the myth that music is a colour-blind, universal language (Bradley 2015). Ahmed (2010) has long argued that the mere presence of non-white bodies who enter predominantly white spaces can act as a 'killjoy', threatening the joyous solidarity of white (or middle class) bodies who would prefer not to be reminded that not everyone shares the same affective highs. Such unified embodied encounters may also be challenged by those affected by embodied trauma, anxieties and mental ill health. Further research is required to expose affective hostilities and exclusions within the 'inclusive' NVP spaces of choirs (of all genders), especially through an intersectional analysis of race, class and disability.

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