

When I Sing: The Nature and Value of Choral Music Education

by David J. Elliott



This discussion introduces several ideas from a new philosophy of music education.¹ Underlying this philosophy is a new way of thinking about music; not new in the sense that it says things that no one has ever said before, but new in that it provides new reasons to believe that "music" and "musical understanding" are far richer than past aesthetic theories have assumed. It is beyond the scope of one article to explain something as large as a philosophy of music education. This article's present purpose is therefore modest. It proposes that musicianship is the key to musical enjoyment, both now and in the future. In this "praxial" philosophy, all music students (general music students and performance students alike) ought to learn music in the same fundamental way: as reflective musical practitioners engaged in the kind of active, cognitive apprenticeship we call music education. Indeed (as I argue elsewhere),² the natures and values of music and musicianship point to the conclusion that authentic music-making (which necessarily involves intelligent music listening) ought to be at the center of all music education curricula. The following discussion elaborates these proposals in the context of choral music education.

The Nature of Singing

At root, singing is a particular form of intentional action. When I sing, I select a specific musical context with an intention in mind. When I sing, I deploy, direct, and adjust my singing actions to make changes of a certain kind in sounds of a certain kind. In addition, I judge the results of my singing in relation to the standards and traditions of specific choral prac-

tices. In short, to sing musically is to achieve changes of a musical kind through actions that are taken up deliberately or at will.³ It follows from the above that to sing musically is to act thoughtfully and knowingly. Why? Because selecting, directing, adjusting, and judging are all forms of thinking and knowing.

There is a consensus among philosophers and cognitive scientists today that thinking is not always and only verbal. Instead, thinking and knowing take a variety of forms.⁴ Action is a form of thinking in and of itself. Put another way, thinking and knowing are exhibited not only in words but also in actions, including the actions of musical performing. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle puts it this way: "Overt intelligent performances are not clues to the workings of minds; they are those workings."⁵

Singing done well is an exquisite form of what Donald Schon calls "thinking-*in-action*" and "knowing-*in-action*."⁶ In choral singing, one's musical knowledge is not manifested verbally but practically: it is manifested *in* one's singing itself. For example, when a school chorus achieves an artistic performance of a given work, such as Bach's "Duet and Choral" from Cantata No. 93,⁷ the quality of their performance reflects the quality of their musical thinking and knowing. Another term for knowing-*in-action* is *procedural knowledge*. When a student is singing musically, he or she is demonstrating a rich form of procedural knowledge called *musicianship*.

Two points deserve emphasis. First, although it is common for people to describe singing as a skill or a behavior, these old ways of talking are inaccurate and reductive. They fail to acknowledge the rich cognitive nature of musical singing as musical knowing-*in-action*.

Second, the level and quality of a person's musicianship is *not* equivalent to what a person is able to *say* about pieces and procedures. Again, musicianship is a form of knowledge that is

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evidenced in the practical action of artistic music-making. Practical musical success validates musicianship, not words about music. Said another way, musicianship is what excellent music-makers know *how* to do.

This is not to say that verbal concepts about pieces and procedures are unimportant. As explained next, musicianship draws upon several kinds of knowledge in surrounding and supporting ways, including verbal knowledge. But verbal knowledge is secondary to the primary mode of knowing in music—procedural knowing, or knowing-in-action.

Musicianship in Choral Performance

Learning how to sing musically involves developing, combining, and proceduralizing four kinds of musical knowledge: formal, informal, impressionistic, and supervisory musical knowledge.

By *formal musical knowledge* is meant textbook-type information: verbal facts, descriptions, theories. In domains such as

the performing arts and athletics, where thinking intelligently in action is what counts, the relationship between procedural knowledge and formal knowledge is highly variable.

Choral singing is sufficiently complex that formal knowledge is inevitably called upon when needed. Verbal facts and principles about matters of tongue position, musical phrasing, melodic structure, musical form, and so on can influence, guide, shape, and refine a student's singing (thinking-in-action and knowing-in-action).

Some choristers grasp principles nonverbally in the action of singing and in the course of seeing and hearing models of how to sing musically. Others require that principles be verbalized before they can be converted into action. Some students will be full of verbal information about what they do; others will get along very well without it. Overall, most young singers grasp principles both nonverbally and verbally.

The important issue for choral music educators is this: by itself, formal knowl-

edge is inert and unmusical. Verbal concepts about musical pieces and procedures should be viewed as nothing more or less than resource materials for improving the reliability and portability of a student's musical thinking-in-action. In short, to become part of the student's musicianship, formal knowledge should be introduced parenthetically (as needed, or "by-the-way") in the context of ongoing efforts to solve musical problems through active music-making.

Halfway between procedural and formal knowledge is *informal knowledge*. By this I mean the musical "savvy" developed by music-makers who learn how to make music well. Informal musical knowledge represents what the truly musical performer takes to be obvious about music-making. Such knowing is hard to get at. It is not found in textbooks.

For example, to achieve a musical performance of Ella Fitzgerald's *A-Tisket, A-Tasket*,⁸ as arranged by the author, one of the many things that young singers must learn is *how* to "swing." What this means

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is that students must learn how to interpret and perform *A-Tisket* in relation to the particular standards and traditions of the blues-rooted, "4-beat" swing *practice*, of which this piece is a part, and of which Ella Fitzgerald was an acknowledged master. True, some concepts about "swing feel" can be put into words and notation; but this is not enough. At best, words and notes are rough approximations of rich nonverbal understandings. To sing *A-Tisket* musically, singers must develop a nonverbal *action-concept* of how swing goes.

Authentic music-making ought to be at the center of all music education curricula.

How is such informal knowledge acquired? Through progressive musical problem-solving in the action of music-making. The informal knowledge component of musicianship develops from a singer's efforts to develop personal solutions to authentic musical challenges in relation to the standards, traditions, history, and lore of specific musical practices.

In other words, informal knowledge is a form of "situated knowledge."⁹ It is a form of knowing that is highly sensitive to and highly dependent upon the specific context in which it is encountered and used. Through artistic music-making in relation to traditions of practice (and through listening that is *directly related* to music-making), students develop the informal knowledge they need to sing musically.

Another component of musicianship is *impressionistic musical knowledge*. This kind of knowing is often called "musical intuition." Impressionistic knowledge is a strongly felt sense that one line of action is better than another, or not quite right, and so on. Music-makers acquire nonverbal impressions, or a "sense of things," while doing, making, and reflecting in specific musical contexts. These impressions influence our subsequent efforts. Impressionistic knowledge is another form of situated knowledge.

Lastly, *supervisory knowledge* is sometimes called metaknowledge or metacognition. This form of knowledge includes both the disposition and the ability to monitor and adjust one's musical thinking-in-action. The necessity of supervisory musical knowledge becomes obvious when singing is compared to activities like reading a book or adding a sum. In reading and arithmetic, thinking and knowing are deployed in predictable or closed contexts. In contrast, the thinking-in-action we call singing often occurs in front of others and in uncertain or unfamiliar circumstances (open contexts). The same holds for many other kinds of reflective practice (e.g., teaching or athletics) where supervisory knowledge is essential to succeeding "on one's feet" and "in the moment." Supervisory musical knowledge develops through interaction with a learning environment centered on musical performing in relation to challenging musical works.

We can summarize this section by saying that to perform and listen intelligently requires the development of musicianship. To develop this form of procedural knowledge requires, in turn, that four other kinds of knowing develop and interweave in musical action.

Musical Challenges

Why is musicianship such a rich form of knowing? Because excellent musical works are multidimensional challenges to our powers of consciousness—our powers of attention, cognition, emotion, intention, and memory.

The complexity of musical works is often underestimated. For example, music education's past philosophy of "aesthetic education"¹⁰ rests on the narrow and widely disputed assumption that music is a collection of autonomous objects or pieces that exist to be contemplated for their aesthetic qualities (or formal elements) alone. In short, past doctrine advocates a one-dimensional, acontextual concept of musical works.

In opposition, the praxial philosophy outlined here argues that music is never a matter of pieces alone, and pieces of music are never a matter of aesthetic qualities alone. Instead, music is a diverse human practice, and musical works are always multidimensional constructions. More specifically, musical works always involve

at least four and often as many as six simultaneous dimensions of musical expression, "information," or meaning.

The first two dimensions of a heard musical work are the *performance* dimension and the *design* dimension. Whether live or recorded, every piece of music we listen to is an expressed interpretation of a composer's design, or an improvised design.

Indeed, if the interpretation-performance dimension was not fundamental to music as a performing art, then any accurate sounding-out of a score (like a numbered print) would be as good as any other. But this is not what happens in practice. Performing does not exist merely to produce sounds for people who cannot read scores in their heads. The knowledgeable action of performing is a matter of giving audible form to (of breathing musical life into) an otherwise abstract design.

Part of what knowledgeable listeners attend to while listening is the particular understanding of a composition that is presented in the moment-to-moment *artistry* of, say, a

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In addition to these first two dimensions, an excellent musical performance is always expressive of the standards and traditions of the musical practice of which it is a part. For example, one dimension of a truly excellent performance of Bach's B Minor Mass is an expression of the standards and traditions of Baroque musical practice as understood by knowledgeable Baroque artists.

The fourth dimension is the *cultural-ideological* dimension. All works are expressions of their time and place; musical works are never autonomous aesthetic objects. Musical practices and the musical outcomes they produce are social-cultural constructions. Music is made by people and for people; conversely, music-makers are influenced, to greater and lesser degrees, by their social worlds.

Leonard B. Meyer offers a clear example of this two-way relationship. In a recent study of Romantic music,¹¹ Meyer highlights many direct relationships be-

tween the cultural-ideological beliefs that anchored nineteenth-century Romanticism and the compositional processes and products of Romantic composers. These relationships are part of what intelligent performers and listeners understand, attend to, and enjoy in the process of performing and listening for Romantic works.

Last but not least, music can be expressive in two other senses. First, pieces and performances can be expressive of specific human emotions (e.g., sadness, joy, melancholy). In addition, musical sound can represent or characterize the attributes of natural phenomena, events, individual personalities, places, and so on. As a result, some (but not all) musical works involve one or both of these last two dimensions. For example, while a great deal of instrumental music does not involve musical representations of people, places, or things, the complex relationships between texts and compositional designs in choral works mean that choral performances frequently involve musical expressions of emotion and musical rep-

resentations in addition to the other four dimensions explained above.

In summary, musical performances of compositional designs are never a matter of aesthetic qualities alone. The performances we make and listen for are multidimensional expressions of musical, social, and cultural relationships. Accordingly, the best "description" of a musical work is a performance of that work.¹² For it is only in an artistic *performance* of a composition that all its dimensions of expression are fully presented and realized as a whole.

Implicit in these thoughts is another key point: listenership does not merely overlap with musicianship; listenership is rooted in musicianship. How so? Because what listeners actively "put together" while listening for any given piece of music is always a multidimensional *performance* of one kind or another. To know how to listen for musical performances requires knowledge of music as a "performative presence." Put another way, what listeners must know to listen intelligently includes the same five categories of musical knowledge that intelligent performers must meld together in action to perform musically: procedural, formal, informal, impressionistic, and supervisory musical knowledge.

Educationally speaking, then, to develop intelligent listeners we must first develop intelligent music-makers. Learning to listen intelligently will not develop by listening to recordings and/or dabbling in musical "means behaviors." In order for listenership to improve beyond a beginning level, students must develop musicianship. This requires, in turn, that students be inducted into musical practices.

Moving "inside" and becoming part of musical practices by learning to make music well is the only way that *all* the component knowings of musicianship develop and cohere. Learning to interpret and perform music is a matter of progressive musical problem-finding and problem-solving. It is through active music-making, in relation to standards and traditions of creative musical practice, that early, middle, and secondary school students develop musicianship. It follows from this that the ideal listener for a given performance is the music-maker who has achieved a proficient level of musicianship with respect to the musical practice of which that performance is "a piece."

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That listenership is embedded in musicianship and that music-listening depends on knowing how to make music are not new ideas. Gilbert Ryle made these same points decades ago in his influential book, *The Concept of Mind*:

The knowledge that is required for understanding intelligent performances of a specific kind is some degree of competence in performances of that kind. The competent critic of prose-style, experimental technique, or embroidery, must at least know how to write, experiment, or sew. . . . The one necessary condition is that he has some mastery of the art or procedure, examples of which he is to appraise. . . . the capacity to appreciate a performance is one in type with the capacity to execute it.¹³

In fact, Aristotle laid the foundation for this praxial viewpoint in his discussion of the nature and value of music education. The following passage occurs in *The Politics*:

And now we have to determine the question which has been already raised, whether children should be themselves taught to sing and play or not. Clearly there is a considerable difference made in the character by the actual practice of the art. It is difficult, if not impossible, for those who do not perform to be good judges of the performance of others. . . . We conclude then that they should be taught music in such a way as to become not only critics but performers.¹⁴

The Value of Singing

Recall two main points. First, choral singing requires a rich form of knowing-in-action called musicianship, which includes listenership. Second, the musical compositions we perform and listen for are multidimensional challenges to our powers of consciousness. In other words, an excellent musical composition is an exquisite kind of "thought-generator." These are the keys to understanding the primary values of performing in general and choral singing in particular.

David Perkins reminds us that humans are sapient beings.¹⁵ We have the ability to represent the world to ourselves and to elaborate upon our representations of the world. Accordingly, humans are not only concerned with satisfying deficiency needs; humans also have achievement needs. In the same vein, Aristotle reminds us that a central tendency of the human species is the desire to know, including the desire to know oneself. To the American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a central tendency of the human species is to strengthen and order

consciousness.¹⁶ Another word for consciousness is "self." Human beings, says Csikszentmihalyi, strive to ensure the integrity and growth of the self.¹⁷

How do humans order and strengthen consciousness? Two interlocking conditions must be in place: 1) something to do (a challenge), and 2) the capability to do it (know-how). Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the prerequisite for self-growth is a *match*, or a least a balance, between a specific kind of challenge and the specific abilities required to meet that challenge.¹⁸

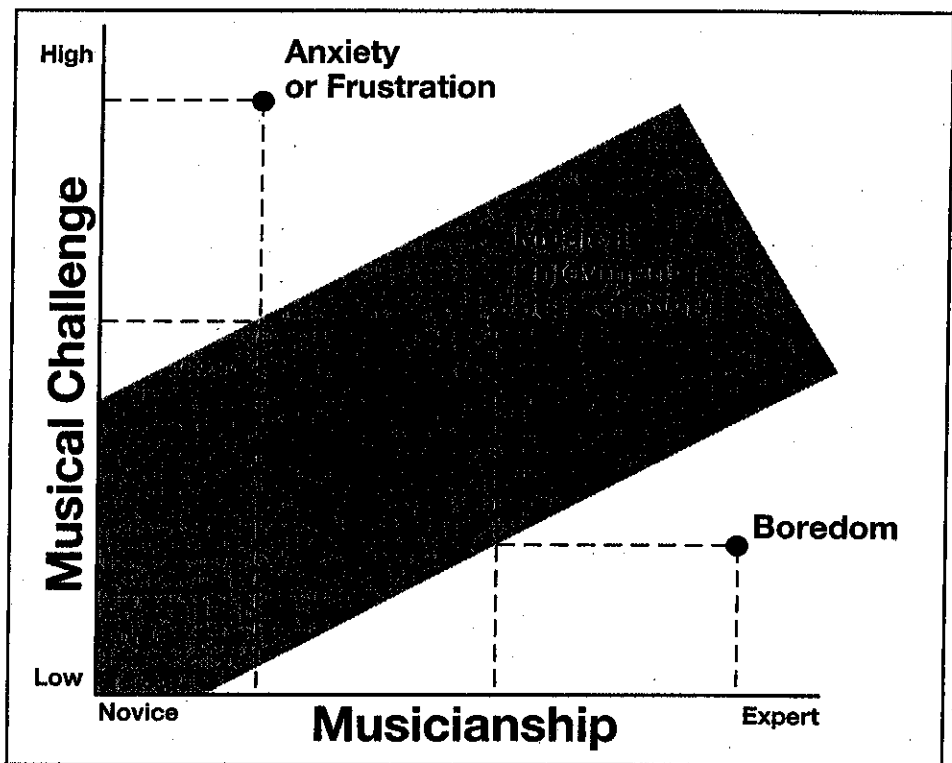


Figure 1

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Self-growth results from the active extension of one's powers of consciousness. The kind of feedback that orders consciousness is that which arises from successful action—from taking up challenges that match and extend one's powers of attention, awareness, and memory.

Moreover, when a person's know-how matches a given challenge, there is an affective payoff of positive satisfaction or deep enjoyment. There is no anxiety or disruption when consciousness is ordered by the incoming feedback that, "I am this person who is doing this thing well."

Choral singing offers participants the two necessary conditions for achieving self-growth and musical enjoyment: musical challenges and musical know-how or musicianship. When a singer's level of musicianship, beginner to expert, is matched with an appropriate level of musical challenge, this matching relationship brings order to consciousness. Singing done musically (i.e., in relation to the standards and traditions of a musical practice) engages the whole self. The energy resource we call attention is completely absorbed in the thoughtful actions of singing. All the resources of consciousness are engaged. Such experiences are what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as optimal experience, autotelic experience, or "flow."¹⁹ The term for optimal experience in the musical context is *musical enjoyment*. Figure 1 (after Csikszentmihalyi)²⁰ brings the above ideas together.

As the diagram shows, when a singer's musicianship falls below the level required

to meet the full challenge of a particular work, this lack of "fit" may be experienced as anxiety or frustration. Alternatively, when a particular work falls below the current level of a singer's musicianship, the singer may experience boredom.

Excellent choral music educators are able to sustain a matching relationship between student musicianship and challenging choral works. Indeed, even for a young singer who is just beginning to internalize the standards of specific musical practices, singing provides second-by-second feedback about how well he or she is "musicing." Of course, singing also provides expert singers with feedback about how well they are performing in relation to the goals and standards of the practices they know so well.

Most choral practices are dynamic practices. Dynamic practices are those in which the musical challenges and the musicianship that ground the practice spiral upward in complexity, thus allowing for the continuous matching of musicianship and musical challenge.²¹ What this means, in turn, is that one's powers of consciousness are also propelled "upward" in terms of complexity and integration.

In summary, choral singing is intrinsically valuable. Singing is not merely a "means behavior" in general music programs as past music education philosophy maintains. Instead, singing is a logical, viable, and appropriate *end* for general music programs and performance programs alike. Learning to sing musically is something worth doing "for its own sake," which is to say, "for the sake of the self." Singing is a unique and major source of the most important kind of knowledge human beings can achieve: self-knowledge.

Conclusion

Learning to sing musically is an endeavor worth doing by all children. Musical performing through choral singing is a fundamental way human beings in all societies, past and present, bring order to consciousness and achieve optimal experience. Musicianship, in turn, is the way to self-growth and enjoyment in the choral context.

In this view, choral music educators are right in focusing their efforts on the development of student musicianship through progressive musical problem-solving in balanced relation to excellent choral music. It

is this matching of choral musicianship and carefully selected choral challenges that results in student self-growth and enjoyment. As one song puts it: "When I sing, it's a funny thing, I just feel a lot better, feel a lot better . . . when I sing."²²

The task of music education is to make musicianship and musical enjoyment accessible to all children. All children? Yes. For while it is true that some children have higher levels of musical intelligence than others, the majority of children have sufficient levels of musical intelligence to achieve a competent (if not a proficient) level of musicianship, given the kind of music program described above.

In conclusion, musical achievement pivots on a multidimensional form of knowledge called musicianship. Musicianship can be taught and learned. All music education programs, including general music programs, ought to enable children to develop musicianship through active music-making. Robert Shaw says it best: "Musical artistry is not a privilege for the few, but a necessity for all."

NOTES

¹ This new philosophy is explained in David J. Elliott, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (New York: Routledge), in press.

² Ibid.

³ Cf., Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 154.

⁴ See V.A. Howard, ed., *Varieties of Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 57.

⁶ Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 50.

⁷ J. S. Bach, "Duet and Choral" from Cantata No. 93, ed. Doreen Rao (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1991), OCTB6592.

⁸ Ella Fitzgerald, *A-Tisket, A-Tasket*, arranged by David J. Elliott (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1966), OCTB6456.

⁹ John S. Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning," *Educational Researcher* 18 (January-February 1989): 32-42.

¹⁰ For critical discussions of "aesthetic education," see Wayne Bowman, "An Essay Review of Bennett Reimer's *A*

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Philosophy of Music Education," and David J. Elliott, "Music Education as Aesthetic Education: A Critical Inquiry." Both articles appear in *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (Fall 1991).

¹¹ Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

¹² Here I follow the thoughts of Peter Kivy as presented in his book, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹³ Ryle, 53-54.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ David N. Perkins, "Art as Understanding," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22 (Spring 1988).

¹⁶ Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Csikszentmihalyi, eds., *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3ff.

²⁰ The original version of this diagram appears

in Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 74.

²¹ Csikszentmihalyi, 30.

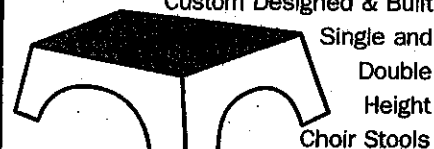
²² Bill Henderson, *When I Sing*, arranged by David J. Elliott in *Some Sung Songs* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1992), OCTB6456.

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