CHAPTER ONE
MINDFUL THINKING ABOUT CHORAL SINGING AND ITS PEDAGOGY

“Those who sing chorally are sometimes victims of fallacious ideas.”

This book explores choral singing and its pedagogy. More particularly, it addresses ways that choral music professionals can think and act more purposely to nurture the unique acoustic and interpersonal relationships that define choral singing and contribute to its enduring value. Unless you opened this volume by mistake, you have an interest in such matters.

You may be an undergraduate college or university student who aspires to be a choral teacher-conductor. Some research data suggest that your choice initially to pursue this interest may stem from previous participation in a high school or middle school, church, or community choir (Bergee, Coffman, Demorest, Humphreys & Thornton, 2001). The significant meanings you attributed to that involvement possibly motivated you to consider a professional life devoted to enabling such experiences for others. Respect for a particular conductor-teacher may also have been instrumental in your decision (Madsen & Kelly, 2002; Kantorski, 2002). Coursework, observations, and subsequent singing experiences at the university level have likely reinforced your decision if you are reading this book in your junior or senior year; however, your interest now is probably more focused or intense as graduation nears and you contemplate your imminent entrance into the profession.

On the other hand, you may be a veteran conductor-teacher. With some years of experience under your belt, you are better acquainted with the realities of this endeavor. But the satisfaction you derive from working with choirs and your decision to continue doing so may motivate you now to dig more deeply into particular aspects of your craft. Possibly, you are reading this book in conjunction with a self-devised program of ongoing professional development. Perhaps you have decided to pursue a graduate degree in choral conducting, choral music education, or church music.

If you sing with a church, civic, university, professional, prison, hospital, or nursing home choir, it could be that choral singing simply moves, attracts, or engages you because of its beauty or the sense of community it can engender. Perhaps you serve as an assistant conductor-teacher or section leader in your choir. While you do not contemplate a career in choral teaching-conducting, you do want to learn more about the dynamics of choral singing and its pedagogy.

Whatever the genesis or focus of your interest, you are in good company. Since antiquity, choral singing has played important roles in the lives of individuals, social institutions, and nations. Strimple (2002) captures this panorama simply, but eloquently. Throughout history, he says, choral singing has “educated children, promoted political agendas, enhanced worship, expanded experiences, created pleasing diversions, and provided hope for people in circumstances of extreme duress…” (p. 9).
Each of us, the author of this book and you, its readers, has cause to believe, perhaps passionately, that choral singing experiences should be cherished, both for ourselves and for others. There is little need to persuade us of the worth of choral singing or the potentially empowering nature of its pedagogy. Of those things we are already convinced, for we believe both in their goodness and in their contributions to the quality of human life.

PROFESSION AND THE SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING

Precisely because we subscribe to such beliefs, however, it is important to give an accounting of them. As professionals, we have a responsibility to work toward credible, intelligible understandings of the ideas and practices our values engender. This enterprise is necessary for two reasons: (a) to comprehend and appreciate more fully the complexities and beauty of our chosen art in its own right; and (b) to fulfill an obligation to those in whose company and by whose graces we teach, learn, conduct, sing, listen, and share experiences of singing chorally.

Choral Profession

Profession is a word often used, but rarely defined. However, because this term and its cognate, “professional,” occur frequently today in reference to the training, certification, employment, continuing education, and aspirations associated with choral singing pedagogy, it bears scrutiny. For example, if you are now in a college or university pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree with a concentration in choral music education, choral conducting, church music, or similar major, then you likely are enrolled in a school, department, or series of courses customarily viewed as being a function of professional, as opposed to liberal arts, education. Upon graduation, you may seek and find a job in a school, church, or other institution that employs persons with professional training, degree credentials, and often some form of certification. If you have not done so already, you will be encouraged to affiliate with organizations such as the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) or MENC: The National Association for Music Education whose purposes, journals, and conferences all incorporate the terms profession and professional. So what might all this mean?

Historically, profession carries at least two broad sets of meaning. The etymology of the word suggests an act of “professing.” A profession in this original sense is a public commitment, vow, or declaration with respect to a specific sort of activity, typically one with demonstrable altruistic or public service attributes, undertaken after a period of study and training.

A contemporary, perhaps more familiar, understanding is that of occupation. A profession in this sense is a job. But it is work that some commentators suggest entails specific characteristics of entrance and practice, among them: (a) advanced or specialized training; (b) ability to make reflective judgments guided by theory and research; (c) provision of service to others; and, (d) in deference to its original meaning, adherence to a code of ethics. A profession may sometimes be described as well in terms of salary, class, and gate-keeping functions, or as an undertaking distinct from amateur dabbling.

Central to all perspectives on profession, however, is the contention that professions are grounded in a knowledge base. Professional activity both stems from and contributes in an ongoing way to a body of theory, research, and practice. In this respect, professionals are competent in the expertise attributed to and shared among members of their particular profession.
Schulman (1997) suggests six characteristics of professional knowing.  (a) It is service oriented.  
(b) It is dynamic, i.e., continuously “created, tested, elaborated, refuted, transformed, and re- 
constituted.”  (c) It has practical applications to real life situations.  (d) It functions by creative 
judgment, taking knowledge that is demonstrably true for the most part and deciding if and how 
it relates to the unpredictable variables of particular contexts.  (e) It values learning from 
experience in one’s own professional practice and how that learning may help to refine the 
overall knowledge base of the profession. Finally, (f) professional knowing occurs in the 
distributed expertise of a community of professionals.

A critically important issue for any profession, then, is how it comes to know what it thinks it 
knows.  Simply put, for choral professionals the conceptual paradigms, presumptions, and lenses 
that give rise to and inform our practices require continual scrutiny.  We must have reasonable 
assurance that they are the very best ones currently available for the job. When they are found 
wanting, then we need to revise or discard them. What Socrates said of individual lives pertains 
as well to the collective lives of professions: “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, 
Apology, trans. 1948, p. 22).

On Knowing What We Know

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the American Choral Directors Association published a 
book entitled Quest for Answers (Glenn, 1991). Some thirty prominent choral conductors were 
interviewed about a variety of matters deemed basic to the work of the profession, such as 
rehearsal techniques, achieving choral blend, desirable tone quality, and formulating 
philosophies of choral music-making. Their answers evidenced a shared, often profound 
dedication to the choral art. Beyond such dedication, such testimony revealed a wide range of 
beliefs and opinions. But there appeared to be little overall consensus among the conductors with 
respect to the fundamental matters about which they were queried.

Such an enterprise may tell us two things about the status of professional knowledge in choral 
singing and its pedagogy. First, of course, this type of interviewing process can potentially 
contribute to the knowledge base of the profession, at least indirectly and to the degree it 
systematically gathers and intelligently analyzes data. In this sense, it provides us with a quick 
snapshot of the status of belief and opinion among some leading conductors at particular points 
in time. Such information could be used to identify matters that may require clarification, or it 
might lead to the formulation of hypotheses that can be tested by other research methodologies. 
Moreover, it is interesting information in terms of the history of ideas and in glimpsing how 
certain well-known individuals may think.

Secondly, however, efforts such as Quest for Answers provide a reflection of the current state of 
knowledge in choral singing and choral pedagogy, both in terms of what is known and how we 
traditionally go about seeking understanding. As exemplified by that book and similar efforts, 
the chances of finding substantial, credible answers solely from this mode of quest are slim to 
none. Nussbaum (1997) hits the issue squarely on the head: “If all we have to work with is what 
people believe, how will we make progress?” (p. 38).

In the context of the present discussion, Nussbaum’s question does not necessarily disparage 
testimony as one ingredient in a profession’s initial quest for understanding. It does, however, 
remind us that testimony per se is not a strong source of knowledge in its own right. Ultimately,
testimony both relies upon and appeals to some other, prior way of knowing, e.g., perception or reason. It is, therefore, most properly assessed in those terms. In a court of law, for example, testimony of witnesses, even “expert” witnesses, is still subject to established rules of procedure and evidence that seek to evaluate its credibility. Rarely is it taken at face value.

A tendency to suppose that solutions to questions about professional practices can be determined simply by soliciting the testimony of others can result in what Lagemann (2001) terms a “weak” profession. A weak profession, in Lagemann’s view, is one that has not yet identified credible, reliable ways of knowing and acting specific to its domain, or yet assembled a common core of knowledge and norms by which professional work can be evaluated. In a similar vein, Reid (1983) describes the “propensity to rely upon human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so” (p. 281) as a proper, perhaps even necessary, way of knowing for young children. But such a propensity is not typically appropriate for adulthood.

By some indications, the choral music profession at the beginning of the twenty-first century appears to remain largely preoccupied with the compiling and distribution of testimony as a preferred means of knowing. Interviews with distinguished conductor-teachers continue to be a prominent, popular feature in professional journals. The contemporary promotion and marketing of various products, e.g., videotapes, instruction manuals, DVDs, and workshops, by prominent teacher-conductors suggests that, as a profession, we remain somewhat indebted to the model operative in eighteenth and nineteenth century “Singing Schools,” whereby particular teachers promised quick proficiency in various aspects of singing by the purchase and use of their own materials.

As of this writing, electronic versions of efforts like Quest for Answers, such as the listservs and electronic bulletin boards promulgated by choralnet.org and MENC, circulate the views of particular respondents who reply to posted questions about vocal pedagogy, rehearsal strategies, literature selection, and the like.

It is surely a good thing and a sign of the beneficial use of internet-related technologies that choral directors nationwide, even worldwide, can communicate with each other easily in cordial, professional dialogue. This means of communication, moreover, is often invaluable in terms of locating or borrowing choral literature, sharing programming and administrative ideas, and discussing matters of mutual concern. But when it functions, whether intended or not, as a means of communicating, building, or stewarding the profession’s knowledge base, at least two potential drawbacks merit attention.

One is that opinion and point-of-view may become confused with credible knowledge. Choral teacher-conductors pose a question, and, voila, receive quick answers. Given such ease and efficiency, there is little apparent need to think mindfully, or to evaluate the evidence upon which such answers rely. In a number of these electronic forums, of course, respondents are self-selected. Whoever happens to read a posted question and decides to respond may do so. Sometimes responders have particular expertise in the area of inquiry. At other times, responders, albeit with the best of intentions, appear simply to pontificate upon their experiences, which may or may not be relevant, or assemble a series of quotations or paraphrases from secondary source materials.

Secondly, there is a growing trend to bundle together all responses to a particular question and archive them on the web site in encyclopedic fashion. This process, whether it intends to do so
or not, lends to such collected testimonies an aura of credibility heretofore reserved for more rigorous, refereed undertakings.

Lest it be misunderstood, this observation is offered in the context of how a profession at large seeks and evaluates credible knowledge. It is not a challenge to the egalitarianism promulgated by such forums, nor an elitist value judgment that only persons with certain credentials or versed in particular methodologies are entitled to contribute to or oversee a profession’s knowledge base. Indeed, such observation is not concerned in the least with who says what. Rather, it is concerned with how we, as a profession, come to know what we think we know. Testimony offered in an electronic forum or by any other means may ultimately turn out to be true. Similarly, results of even the most well-conducted research investigation may ultimately be flawed and false. The point is that a profession, if it is to mature and prosper, must develop and attend to some means of both justifying and periodically evaluating its knowledge base in the most credible ways possible. Such a task is at once difficult and complicated. Yet it is not optional. It is absolutely necessary if a profession is to honor its calling.

**Ethical Dimensions of Profession**

In both its original and more contemporary meanings, profession has a strong corporate dimension. In making profession, we affiliate ourselves with a particular community of musicians, past, present, and future: those dedicated to nurturing and advancing choral singing. By embodying that dedication, moreover, we also accept the fact that much of what we do as choral professionals inevitably affects other people in some direct way, either positively or negatively. Because of this dimension to our work, choral pedagogy may not be approached exclusively as our private and personal business, to be conducted in any manner we choose.

Imagine if the medical profession had not advanced its knowledge base beyond those assumptions and ways of knowing prevalent among physicians over a century ago. Or, consider the consequences were medical professionals today trained with textbooks and journal articles that had scarcely moved beyond those methods and assumptions common in the late nineteenth century. Regardless of an ongoing service and “professing” orientation among physicians, the quality and span of human life in the twenty-first century would be dramatically different. That such is not the case is a testament to physicians’ taking seriously their responsibility to continue research, refine practices, and improve their knowledge base.

The professional actions of choral teacher-conductors, of course, do not typically entail literal life-and-death consequences as do some physicians’ decisions. But, as professionals, we have an obligation nonetheless to subscribe to something like the first article of the Hippocratic Oath: “First, do no harm.” Credible understandings, both of what we do and why we do it, are required in order to accomplish this most basic aim. If we are unclear about what to avoid, our potential to move more proactively in seeking to do good can be severely compromised.

In some respects, frankly, the choral profession, despite its laudable intentions and even in consideration of testimony to the great good it has accomplished, may have a less than stellar record in this regard. Too many adults today may consider themselves non-singers because a vocal music teacher or choir director conveyed to them as children that they could not sing (Knight, Killian, Welch studies). A contributing factor to some jaw and facial muscle injuries among choral singers is their choir directors’ insistence on literally “dropping the jaw” while...
Anecdotal information suggests that hoarseness can be a badge of honor among some who participate in all-state or regional choral events where they sing athletically for six to eight or more hours per day. Some adolescent and pre-adolescent females, perhaps because of their ability to play piano or sight-sing well, have been labeled “altos” from their middle school years onward and denied, at least in choral contexts, the opportunity to exercise properly those muscle and vocal tract co-ordinations that can build vocal range and flexibility (Thurman, 2001). Some choral teacher-conductors have but the vaguest comprehension of the anatomy, physiology, and acoustic properties of the human voice (Davis, 2003), and, perhaps as a result, continue to promulgate such myths as “support your breath from the diaphragm.”

There is, of course, a growing body of well-conducted, data-based research studies available, though not always easily accessible, to choral music professionals. May its tribe continue to increase, for such undertakings constitute encouraging signs of professional health and vitality. Nonetheless, various surveys of choral pedagogy research conducted at the graduate level between 1945-2003, while noting progressive improvements, understandably describe such efforts on the whole as somewhat narrow and fragmented to date, given the relatively short history of such investigations in the life of the profession (Gonzo, 1971; Hylton, 1983; Grant & Morris, 1998; Turcott, 2003).

Additionally, there appears at present to be some disconnection between data-based research findings and the assumptions and content reflected both in choral methods textbooks and the profession’s ongoing discourse. With some notable exceptions, e.g., the investigations of Cooksey and Gackle with respect to adolescent changing voices, traditional choral methods textbooks tend to cite data-based research only sporadically. Indeed, as Koza (1994), Hart (1996), and others have observed, choral pedagogy textbooks over long periods of time evidence very little change in the knowledge and techniques they convey. Moreover, these materials, on the whole, appear largely disinterested in, or perhaps unaware of, relevant research conducted in disciplines other than music, e.g., voice science, acoustics, neurobiology, philosophy, and speech pathology. Such investigations potentially offer considerable contributions to the understandings and practices of choral conductor-teachers.

Consider, for example, the following contention:

A vital choral sound is very much dependent upon a well-balanced, carefully selected group of singers. Yet this phase of choral activity is often neglected by conductors who simply do not take the time to audition and classify their choir members. Robert Shaw would personally audition up to six hundred voices to select the thirty members who would tour annually with the Robert Shaw Chorale. If a conductor of this stature would take the time and expend the energy necessary to audition this many singers, the value of auditioning and classifying voices should be obvious (Robinson and Winold, 1976, p 74).

This account illustrates several ways of knowing as categorized by Kiplinger (1986): (a) knowing on the basis of authority, or knowledge from a respected source; (b) knowing on the basis of intuition, i.e., it feels right; and (c) knowing because of tenacity, or the fact that we have always believed it. A well-known conductor, in this instance the late Robert Shaw, represents respected authority. If Shaw did it, then so should we. Why did Shaw audition and classify voices? According to the authors of the passage above, it was to achieve a vital choral sound. That answer “feels right” intuitively, because it fits with two things that we think we already
know, e.g., that in choral singing there is a necessary meritocracy based on talent or aptitude, and that the quality of its individual voices determine the acoustic quality and balance of a choir. Intuition in this case is related to a goodness of fit with respect to other, already widely-accepted paradigms. Finally, tenacity is evident because this passage both depends on and is apparently at pains to reiterate something that many in the choral profession have always believed, i.e., that select choirs are preferable to non-select ensembles. Rather than state that value judgment so boldly, however, the authors take a somewhat circuitous route by implying that conductors who “simply do not take the time to audition” get what they deserve in terms of choir sound.

The point of this example is not to rule out authority, intuition, or tenacity as ways of knowing. Nor is it to question per se the value of the opinions and viewpoints offered by well-intentioned authors. The point, as will be abundantly clear as this book progresses, is that each one of the assumptions opined above, particularly when viewed in a prototypical or universal manner, is arguably false in the light of both current research and mindful analysis.

Kerlinger (1986) also describes a fourth way of knowing, the scientific method. This mode of knowing, he contends, is demonstrably superior to authority, intuition, and tenacity, because it depends solely on empirical data gathered and analyzed in a carefully controlled, systematic, and objective fashion.

Yet, the empirical observations of science and the data derived from them may not be necessarily neutral, objective, or value free. Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper, two of the most influential philosophers of science in the twentieth century, mounted cogent arguments in this respect. Popper (1963, 1972) demonstrated that inductive evidence was by its nature limited and that scientific observations of the natural world were always colored, “theory laden” events. Kuhn (1972) explored the history of science and concluded that, in large part, science advanced by revolution and not through successively progressive stages of neutral observation. Scientists have always worked under specific paradigms or worldviews, be they engendered by Ptomley’s insistence that sun revolved around the earth, or Einstein’s theory of relativity. Only when new theories questioned the dominant paradigm itself was progress achieved. Each new paradigm was not an objective explanation of the world, but rather an interpretation of the world.

Richard Rorty (1979) argues persuasively that science at heart is subjective because objectivity as a correspondence to what exists “out there” is impossible to achieve. Truth, on this account, is always written with a small “t,” i.e. as possible truth or provisional truth.

Seeking Credible Knowledge and Practice

Given such considerations, what are we, as professionals, to do as we search for understandings that can contribute to a viable knowledge base for our profession? Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, has traditionally held that knowledge is comprised of beliefs that are both justified and true. That stance may yet serve us well. A belief or proposition is true when it can be demonstrated that it corresponds with the evidence, i.e., that what is asserted is actually the case. Justification refers to the process of establishing evidence for holding or not holding a belief or proposition. Accordingly, if we base our knowledge claims on scant evidence, we run the risk that much of what we know will be false. If, on the other hand, we refuse to admit anything to
our knowledge base for which any degree of doubt remains, then we will find ourselves with little knowledge.

However, between the absolutism of credulity ("believing too readily") and the absolute relativism of cynicism ("mocking the value of any belief") lies credibility, i.e., plausible knowledge derived from some systematically rigorous method that can withstand the best available scrutiny (see Figure 1.1).

![Figure 1.1. Continuum of credulity, credibility, and cynicism.](image)

Credible knowledge is knowledge that is more true than not. Credible knowledge is worthy of confidence, at least for a foreseeable time being. Credible knowledge represents our very best efforts to "get it right" by the using the most rigorous methods currently available to us.

**Habits of Thought**

In his book, *Blink! How to Think Without Thinking* (2004), Malcolm Gladwell surveys in popularized form some interesting findings from neurobiology and the cognitive sciences. By nature, human beings are quite adept at making snap judgments. We do so by means of mental or conceptual structures, developed over time and through experience, that both shape and filter the ways we understand the world. Cognitive scientists sometimes refer to such filters as mediated thinking behaviors, conceptual frames, or mental schemata. Some philosophers call them habits of the mind or tacit knowledge. Whatever the term, such schemata are learned, highly organized, and networked conceptual patterns that actively create expectations as one encounters new data. Much like a supervisory branch of cognition, they function interpretively to construct, process and integrate our thinking.

In many circumstances, the activation of such automated neural networks serves us well by saving us time. If, for example, we awaken in the night to the smell of smoke entering around the bedroom door, our automatic assumption that "where there’s smoke, there’s fire” enables us to respond to the situation quickly and prudently. The synapses of our brains have instantiated and stored for automatic recall any number of routines, beliefs, schemata, and other data that rush into play if deemed relevant or similar to the circumstances at hand.

Sometimes, however, such automatic thinking behaviors impede us. An “If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck” assumption does not serve us well, for example, when the subject of our interest turns out, after all, not to be a duck. Neurobiologist Arthur Damasio (2003) uses a story by G.K. Chesterton to illustrate this point:

> A much foretold murder was committed inside a house while four people stood guard and closely watched who was coming and going from the house. That this fully expected murder came to pass was not a puzzle. The puzzle was that the victim was alone and the
four observers were adamant: No one had gone in or out of the house. But this was quite false: The postman had gone into the house, done the deed, and left the house in plain view. He had even left unhurried footprints in the snow. Of course, everyone had looked at the postman, and yet all claimed not to have seen him. He simply did not fit the theory they had formulated for the identity of the possible murderer. They were looking but not seeing (pp. 190-191).

Similarly, our thinking as a profession is sometimes so indebted to particular, entrenched habits of thought that we rarely recognize our tendencies to process and evaluate phenomena only in ways that fit these already established expectations. Consider, for instance, these comments sometimes heard or made by choral teacher-conductors. “Take out your music.” “Look at the music!” “Sorry, I left my music in gym class.” Even, “Let’s sing it this time without music.” Their meaning is so apparent that we immediately and automatically understand that, in these instances, “music” is synonymous with the choral score.

Such mental behavior is quite remarkable. To think of music existing somehow, somewhere as an autonomous, independent object would be alien to aural choral singing traditions where enscored music is neither obligatory nor common, as is the case with some ethnic and popular singing cultures. In such choral singing contexts, “Take out your music” makes about as much sense as “Take out your dance,” or “Place your singing on the table.” Such a concept would be foreign even to so-called mainstream Western music prior to the eighteenth century, where the score was approached primarily as a starting point, with singers expected to add their own ornamentations and improvisation.

Beliefs about the authority, autonomy, and indispensability of the score as art object are so pervasive in our Western fine arts tradition, however, that we regularly commit what Alfred North Whitehead calls the fallacy of “misplaced concreteness,” i.e., confusing abstract symbols, in this case as manifested in a choral music score, with the phenomena they symbolize. We come to believe, in other words, that a symbolic object, e.g., a choral music score, has autonomous carrying power and authority, i.e., in and of itself. Choral conductor-teachers reference such patterns of thought when they make statements such as “The musical form of the musical work determines the formation of the choir” (Ehmann, 1968), or “Choral literature is both the purpose and curriculum of the school choral music program” (Whitlock, 1989).

Numerous modern choral methods textbooks and choral conducting manuals owe much to this particular network of habituated beliefs. Consider, for instance, this statement:

What is the choral experience? Simply stated, it might be defined as an interaction between a singer and a piece of music within a group setting under the guidance of a conductor. More accurately, it is an unusual experience of communication between a composer and a singer, in which the singer is able to perceive the universe in a new perspective—through the eyes of the composer (Robinson & Winold, 1976, p 3).

The defining characteristic of this perspective is a posited relationship between an individual singer and a composed musical work as mediated by a conductor. Even the descriptor “choral” attaches primarily to the experience of a musical work. Other than its dependent role in the realization of a composer’s intentions under the “guidance” of a conductor, no agency is ascribed to the chorus, which itself is cast simply as an aggregation of individual singers.

Ponder as well this catalog description (2002) from a well-known institution of higher education:
The goal of the graduate choral conducting program at the (school name withheld) is to enable the student to refine technical skills and develop advanced interpretive techniques through the study and performance of significant works from the choral repertoire.

This description per se contains no explicit mention of human beings other than the aspiring conductor. Yes, the reference to performance of choral works implies the presence and cooperation of others, and we can infer that among those other people there would be a choir. Yes, the stated goal of this specialized degree program, whether we happen to agree with its logic or not, is primarily to train conductors, not choirs. Nonetheless, in the value hierarchy occasioned by focusing first on the conductor and the repertoire, the choir becomes simply a means or vehicle ultimately subservient to the conductor in her role as interpreter of musical works.

Indeed, it is not all surprising to find in the list of required courses for this degree program several semesters of private conducting lessons, i.e., instruction in choral conducting technique without context, absent the presence of a choir. Such a focus, when pursued relentlessly and narrow-mindedly, can quickly run amok. Consider this controversial choice of title for a book about conducting: Conducting the Music, Not the Musicians (Nowak & Nowak, 2001).

Whether and to what degree music exists, or can be said to exist intrinsically, i.e., independently of the people who perform it, is but one facet of a larger, longstanding, and rather complex set of questions about both the nature of music and the nature of knowing. These are “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, ….?” sorts of questions. Figure 1 offers one lighthearted, yet perhaps thought-provoking perspective on this matter.

Choral music scores, of course, exist in some sense as artifacts apart from choral musicians. You can, if you like, go to the library and check one out right now. But is this score music per se? Or, rather, does it loosely represent music in some way, or contribute to music, or perhaps facilitate or become music under certain conditions?

In order to sustain the notion that music-making involves primarily the re-production of pre-existing, autonomous musical “works” as symbolized, preserved, and copyrighted in music scores, philosophers and musicians alike have found it necessary to appeal to some form of idealistic, transcendental aesthetic. The author(s) of the catalog description just considered, for
example, evidently assume that what philosopher Lydia Goehr (1992) terms *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* is indeed real and open for business. One way of justifying such patterns of thought, following a theory first proposed by Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), is to posit an ongoing, continuous perception of art objects in some universal mind, as conveyed in this limerick by Ronald Knox (quoted in Popkin & Stroll, 1993, p. 220):

There was a young man who said “God,
I find it exceedingly odd
That this tree I see should
Continue to be
When there’s no one about in the Quad.
Reply.”

“Dear Sir:
Your astonishment’s odd:
*I* am always about in the Quad.
And that’s why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by
Yours faithfully,
GOD”

Although both the cartoon and the limerick cited above are lighthearted, as is the playful comparison here of musical works with trees in the forest, the sorts of assumptions and embedded habits of thought to which they allude are hardly idle or inconsequential ones. Such conceptual constructs function, often unexamined, in many areas of our professional practices. In addition to instances referenced above, consider the common practice of compiling lists of “works” into recommended or required music lists for choral performance. Choral music lists published by various state organizations, for example, routinely categorize these works according to difficulty level. In so doing, they simply compare scores with other scores, i.e., as self-sufficient entities. Such compilations acknowledge the ensembles of human beings who sing these works only indirectly, by further classifications according to the voicing indicated in the score, e.g., SATB, SSA, etc., and age grouping, in those compilations that distinguish between literature presumed suitable for upper elementary, middle school, and high school ensembles. Sometimes, additional sorting occurs according to the size of school populations. Because they initially presume the autonomy of scores, however, these procedures typically neglect to consider that all sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, still less all ensembles comprised of said sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, may not possess equivalent or even similar abilities. Perhaps the assumption of a positive correlation between the ability to perform compositions of a determined difficulty level and school size, as reflected in some listings, is a recognition that in large school populations the chances of finding singers to fit scores are greater than in small schools.
Emotion and Reason

One of the dominant societal images of the musician emerging from the late eighteenth century is that of a fiery and temperamental Beethoven, communing with his muses in solitary genius. Musicians, particularly classically trained or affiliated musicians, are perceived sometimes as operating extensively in the realms of subjectivity, emotion, sensation, affect, feeling, and inspiration. To some extent, musicians themselves have abetted this sort of image by using it as an excuse both to avoid and to cast suspicion upon scientific, and sometimes even logical, thinking with respect to their art.

Such a stance, however, rests ultimately upon a pervasive, yet increasingly problematic, assumption: the posited duality or separation of the human mind from the human body, and hence a supposed separation of reason from emotion. Yet, current neuro-biological research into how human brains function, along with sophisticated analyses by philosophers and others, indicate, as Damasio (2003) points out, that “mind and body are parallel and mutually correlated processes, mimicking each other at every crossroad, as two faces of the same thing” (p. 217). LeDoux (1998) sums it up this way: “Cognition is not as logical as it was once thought and emotions are not always so illogical” (p. 3).

In contexts outside the fine arts there is today an emerging emphasis upon correcting the supposition that reason could be separated from emotion and feeling. As Johnson (1987) succinctly reminds us, “our rationality is embodied” (p. xix). How to put the body back into the mind, therefore, is a challenge confronting some Objectivist and Positivist routes to understanding that have heretofore maintained the possibility of achieving a “God’s eye,” transcendent perspective of things as they really are apart from the embodied human experience of them.

For some choral conductor-teachers, however, the opposite error of emphasis sometimes prevails, i.e., an erroneous supposition that emotion and feeling could somehow have little to do with reasoned thought. Putting the mind back into the body is thus an important task as well. The fact is feeling and thought could not exist without each other in the human bodymind. Thought both stems from and calls forth feelings. Emotions may be inherently rational (de Sousa, 1998; Nussbaum, 1997). That we may view ourselves primarily as impractical, emotion-bound artists or musicians, in other words, can no longer, if indeed it ever could, excuse us from having to think mindfully about what we do and why we do it.

Mindful Thinking

“Mindful thinking,” as employed in this book, relates specifically to a set of inter-related phenomena or processes that social psychologist Ellen J. Langer (1989, 1997) refers to as “mindfulness.” According to Langer’s research, three major variables come into play in a mindful approach to life and learning: (a) “the continuous creation of new categories;” (b) “openness to new information;” and (c) “an implicit awareness of more than one perspective” (Langer, 1997, p 4).

Mindfulness, in her view, is the opposite of “mindlessness,” the characteristics of which are “entrapment by category;” “automatic behavior;” and “acting from a single perspective” (Langer, 1989, p. 10). What Langer finds true of human relations is posited here as applicable to
professions in general and the choral music profession in particular. In other words, choral teacher-conductors, as they go about their business, are no less immune to being set in their ways than any other human beings. They thus have a choice between “going with the flow” or charting a more intentional course.

Several other terms and approaches, of course, seek to describe, in various ways and from slightly different angles, many aspects of mindful thinking. Among them are critical thinking, logic, meta-cognition, philosophy, conceptual integration, or even “blowing your mind.” Each has particular strengths and weaknesses. Two characteristics of Langer’s approach, however, merit its use here. First, it stems from a respected body of research. Secondly, this approach may be more immediately accessible and useful to readers whose primary studies have been in music.

Mindful Practitioners

Choral teacher-conductors can aspire to becoming more than unquestioning technicians of accepted wisdom. They can develop and nourish, both within themselves and their profession, a capacity to function as mindful practitioners, those adept at seeing multiple perspectives and eschewing premature cognitive commitments.

The major purpose of this book is to guide readers in identifying, exploring, understanding and nurturing those relationships integral to choral singing and its pedagogy. Such relationships, however, are complex, dynamic, contextual, and interactive. They resist both universally prescriptive and overly simplistic approaches.

Accordingly, although this book acquaints its readers with a variety of data-based perspectives and strategies for working with choirs, its primary goal is not to dictate what you must think and do independent of context. Readers who hope to locate quick recipes or a handy guide to Ultimate Truth with respect to choral singing and its pedagogy will likely be disappointed. Instead, this book prods you, in the first place, to consider why you need to think strenuously for yourself about these matters. From there, it details how you can go about mindful practices in a manner appropriate to choral music professionals living in the twenty-first century.

DIMENSIONS OF CHORAL SINGING AND ITS PEDAGOGY

A first step toward mindful habits of thought is to note that we can examine phenomena associated with choral singing and its pedagogy through numerous lenses. Such lenses are not mutually exclusive. Each lens, however, affords a slightly different viewpoint, and each of their calibrations contributes to understanding the overall richness and complexity of choral singing.

Eight Lenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociological</th>
<th>Psycho-acoustical</th>
<th>Psychological &amp; Neuro-biological</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>Musicological</td>
<td>Therapeutic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Philosophical      | Historical        |

Figure 1.2: Eight lenses commonly employed to examine choral singing and its pedagogy.
A sociological lens views choral singing as a manifestation of human social behavior. In so doing, it underscores a very basic and, for the most part, irreducible consideration: choral singing is group singing. A singing group may be formally organized and function with some regularity, as is the case with a choir, chorus, glee club, singing society, or choral union. Or it may be informally organized and of a more temporary nature, as happens when friends or the wait staff at your favorite eating establishment serenade you with “Happy Birthday.” A sociological lens focuses both on the interpersonal dynamics within a group of singers and on the functions of group singing itself within larger social contexts.

Physiologically, choral singing entails particular sets of vocal and aural co-ordinations. Choral singing is different from solo singing, because singers in a choral ensemble coordinate their individual phonation and resonance strategies in ways that vary somewhat from how they would sing as soloists. Such variations arise because group singing tends to emphasize the fundamental frequency (Fo) of a tone more than the reinforcement of overtones through the singer’s formant. Also, choir singers involve themselves continuously in an effort to balance the aural feedback they receive from their own voices with what they hear of the rest of the choir. They need to blend their voices in some manner with the perceived sound of the ensemble as a whole. More details about these physical aspects of choral singing will be addressed as this book proceeds.

An important point to emphasize at this juncture is that the context of singing, e.g. solo or choral, appears to impact certain physiological dimensions of singing.

From a psycho-acoustical perspective, choral singing occurs at that point where the sound signals from multiple voices overcome the capacity of human ears to sum and fuse simultaneous sound waves into a perceived single sound. Efforts to localize this sound and identify it with its individual sources are disrupted. Our ears become both confused and fascinated by the perceived complexity of this event. Choral singing, in this sense, involves a phenomenon commonly called the “chorusing” or “ensemble” effect. The presence of this effect distinguishes psycho-acoustical perspectives from sociological viewpoints in one important way: Not only is a group of singers often required, but “chorusing” must also occur.

SIDEBAR
AMOST, BUT NOT QUITE:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHORUSING EFFECT

“Sing precisely on the pitch that’s notated!” Choir conductor-teachers sometimes offer such comments in an effort to improve ensemble intonation. But beware of what you wish for. Were choristers indeed able to produce sound with no independent variations in phonation frequency, we would not perceive the resultant sound as “choral.”

Likewise, when choir teacher-conductors address desired cleanness of ensemble attacks by means of such exhortations as “Exactly together!” or “Not a second before, not a second after!,” they speak metaphorically. If each singer did somehow manage to initiate phonation at precisely the same moment and synchronize it perfectly with every other singer, some of the richness of “choral” sound would be lost.

What makes choral sound so appealing and engaging to human ears? Simply put, singers, being the human beings they are, (a) sing with subtle variations in pitch and (b) do not start at precisely the same time. It is this “almost, but not quite” character, particularly in terms of pitch,
and, to a lesser degree in terms of timing, that makes the complex, quasi-random sound produced by choirs so distinctive.

Why such is the case can be explained at least partially by the physical phenomena of flutter, beats, scatter, and jitter. Singers cannot sustain a precisely steady pitch to the degree, for instance, that a piano can. That fact is not a value judgment; it simply characterizes one ingredient that makes the quality of a human voice distinctive. Most human voices flutter up and down in an average range of some 10 to 20 cents. Cents is a unit of measurement that denotes frequency ratio (one cent equals one one-hundredth of a half-step; 20 cents = .20 half-steps; 1200 cents = 1 octave).

The normal vibrato of the human voice, for example, is a type of flutter. It lends a quality of naturalness to the voice and marks it as human. Such would not be the case with alleged straight-tone singing. Perfectly straight tones sound mechanistic and artificial, much like electronically-generated sounds before they are enhanced by some means. Human beings cannot naturally produce truly straight tones. It is physically impossible for them to do so, because flutter is a natural product of the human voice organ. Sometimes, contentious debates occur between voice instructors and choir directors based on posited differences between vibrato singing and straight-tone singing. When argued in those terms, however, such disagreements evidence confusion on one notable scientific fact. Human voice vibrato rate and extent can either be controlled or allowed free range, but vibrato cannot be eliminated entirely from human voices. In that respect, these periodic disputes constitute misplaced debates that mistake differences in degree for differences of kind.

With a single voice, fluctuation in fundamental frequency occasioned by flutter does not normally affect overall perceived pitch. But when a group of voices phonates jointly, typically three or more voices in unison, these small differences in fundamental frequency are exacerbated by the production of irregular beats. Beats are fluctuations in amplitude (perceived loudness) occasioned by vocal sound waves that alternately reinforce and cancel each other. Because human voices produce irregular beats, this phenomenon is not as readily perceptible as it would be, for instance, in more stable sound-producing instruments where the amplitude fluctuations tend to be perceived as periodic. However, the irregular beats produced by human churning are so numerous and so profuse that the capacity of human ears to identify sounds with their sources is confused. The ears, in effect, give up an attempt to distinguish how many voices are singing in unison. They accept this rich complexity of sound as a unit, but one where the quality of the sound is perceived as somehow disconnected from its original sources.

Scatter, the dispersion of pitch or fundamental frequency within a choir or choir section, also contributes to a churning effect. One way to look at this phenomenon is in terms of a group “de-tuning” average. How much disagreement with or deviation from a group phonation frequency occurs over some unit of time, typically the duration of single note, constitutes scatter. Ternström (1989) reports that in one non-professional choir, scatter ranged from plus or minus 13 cents in the bass section. That is, approximately two-thirds of the basses, on average, were about one-eighth of a half-step from the group average at any one point in time. Such dispersion in a good amateur choir is not sufficiently great to produce a perception of unacceptable intonation, but it does add to the complexity of choir sound. Experiments with synthesized singing, moreover, suggest that the higher the frequency the less the maximum acceptable scatter (Ternström, 1989).
**Jitter** refers to frequency perturbation due to changes in glottal periodicity. Human vocal fold tissues contain irregularities that result in somewhat less than periodic oscillations. These period to period variations due to built-in oscillation differences among human voice organs produce a very small amount of pitch fluctuation. This kind of fluctuation primarily affects vocal timbre, lending it a degree of perceived roughness. Such roughness, though, is multiplied in group singing.

Timing is another factor that contributes to the chorusing effect. Human voices in a group context can time their individual acts of breathing and phonation onset such that they are perceived as unified. However, slight differences in this synchronization effort remain. This factor has not yet received the same degree of scrutiny by choir acousticians as has frequency variation. But the history of efforts to synthesize a chorusing effect that might be used, for example, in electronic keyboards, may be instructive in this regard.

A synthetic chorusing effect was first obtained by taking an input sound, adding a series of very short time delays, and then randomly mixing these delayed sounds together. Technology has since progressed from these early time domain efforts to the frequency domain techniques common today, because obtaining convincing results by manipulating synchronization was very time consuming (no pun intended). Also, time domain techniques proved not as satisfactory to the human ear as the simpler process of using bandpass filters to split an input sound into numerous frequency bands, which could then be varied in phase and amplitude before being re-mixed. Earlier time domain efforts, however, do indicate that synchronization of voices plays a role in the chorusing effect, though it is likely not as prominent a factor per se as frequency variation.

The subjective, perceived character of chorusing results, then, from the mixture of multiple sound sources all of which exhibit slightly different and not precisely steady frequencies. The complexity of this mixture, whereby the relative phases of the sound signals occasion partial cancellation and reinforcement over a broad frequency spectrum, allows the conglomerate sound to be perceived as something apart from its individual sources. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. Ternström (1989) describes it this way: “In a cognitive sense, the chorus effect can magically dissociate the sound from its sources and endow it with an independent, almost ethereal existence of its own” (p. 10).

Choirs, however, are only one element of the chorusing effect. The acoustic character of the venues in which choirs sing also plays a critical role. The character and complexity of conglomerate choir sound can change, sometimes dramatically, according to the reflections, or relative lack thereof, occasioned by the structure of the room or venue in which a choir sings.

Each of these factors, and more, contributes to what is often called the chorusing effect. In Chapter Two we will examine aspects of these associated phenomena in more detail.

From a *musicological* perspective, choral singing is typically discussed with some reference to musical compositions, whether scored or improvised. This emphasis in turn invites considerations of composers, musical styles, music theory, relevant societal constructs, and poetry or other textual material as they relate to choral singing. At this writing, the discipline of musicology is in flux.

Since its founding as *Musikwissenschaft* in the nineteenth century, however, musicology in both its historical and systematic thrusts has largely alleged that there are formal or aesthetic qualities
inherent in musical works (particularly those of western art music). Moreover, it presumes that these qualities can be investigated in a positivistic manner, and that such investigation assists understanding, rehearsing, and performing those works. Very generally, what appears to distinguish traditional musicological perspectives on choral singing from the historical perspective to be discussed below is this privileged position customarily afforded choral literature in general and western classical choral compositions in particular.

Some musicologists today question this emphasis and seek to move beyond what they consider its bias. Many other musicologists continue scholarly investigations according to the traditional assumptions of this discipline.

In notated contexts, score-based clues regarding characteristics of the conglomerate vocal sound imagined by the composer, the range and tessiture of individual parts, and the meaning and declamation of the text receive attention, along with a host of analyses such as form, harmonic structure, composer biography, and comparison with other works provide primary data for musicologists. With improvised choral singing, ethnomusicologists in particular, attend to descriptions of the sound, its historical, ritualistic, or cultural uses and contexts, and the rules for improvisation.

Because it takes seriously non-western, ethnic, and improvisatory musics, and also because it values the contextual dimensions of choral singing over its works manifestations, an ethnomusicological perspective may be considered both a subset and a possible challenge to traditional musicology. In this sense, ethnomusicology tends to be an anthropological approach to music. Titon (2001), for instance, refers to it as the study of “people making music,” an emphasis that tends to avoid a presumption that music making depends on the prior existence of musical works said to transcend particular social contexts.

Psychological and neuro-biological perspectives tend to approach choral singing as a mode of cognition and emotion. Long held dualisms between body/mind, nature/nurture, and thought/feeling are increasingly called into question as scientists and philosophers alike process data now generated with the assistance of sophisticated brain and body imaging, gene research, and new theories of intelligence(s) that include a focus upon how human beings develop and learn in particular contexts. As this research continues to evolve, choral singing, by virtue of its employment of the human body-mind as a musical instrument, may provide a particularly intriguing case study for data acquisition and analysis. Perennial questions about the characteristics and measurement of such constructs as talent, ability, aptitude, teaching, and learning as they pertain to choral singing are within the purview of these psychological and neuro-biological lenses as well.

Therapeutic perspectives view choral singing as a salutary means to affect human well-being, including physical, mental, and societal health. Choral singing in this sense can be an intervention or treatment strategy undertaken, either singly or as one ingredient in a multi-faceted plan, to remedy or restore certain abilities or attitudes compromised by other events, contexts, or disabilities. This continuing perspective has ancient roots, e.g., in the Pythagorean contention that certain kinds of music can affect certain other human behaviors or moods. Today, it informs the use of choral singing as a desirable practice in such institutions as nursing homes, mental hospitals, veterans’ centers, and prisons, and among such strata in the general population as at-risk youth and senior citizens.
While each of the perspectives briefly outlined above possesses sufficient particularity to designate it as a separate, discrete lens by which to look at choral singing phenomena, human thought and practice are rarely so tidy. These perspectives inevitably overlap and interact with one another at various junctures.

Two additional perspectives on choral singing are uniquely equipped, both by tradition and methodology, to consider and monitor the “big picture.” Historical and philosophical lenses, while defined methods of inquiry in their own right, necessarily pervade and contribute to the various methodologies and procedures associated with each of the perspectives thus far described. In this sense, they constitute meta-perspectives on choral singing and its pedagogy.

**Historical** perspectives on choral singing seek to tell true stories about past characteristics and practices of chorusing phenomena. Both “truth” and “story” are important, interactive variables in such undertakings (Arnold, 2000).

Location and intelligent use of primary source data assist in explication of situated truth by historical perspectives. Primary sources may include documents, manuscripts, journals, newspaper accounts, programs, statistical records, letters, recordings, photographs, or other artifacts. Historical data, however, very rarely speak for themselves. Just as important is the crafting of a story to weave these data into informed patterns of meaning, both for the past and for the present. Historical perspectives, above all, offer arguments, i.e., ways to understand alternative worlds and hence to think about other possibilities.

**Philosophical** perspectives on choral singing invite us to “think about our thinking” with respect to ideas, concepts, values, premises, beliefs, propositions, schemata, hypotheses, and theories as they impact chorusing and its pedagogy. In this sense, philosophers perform the necessary work of inspecting the blueprints and building plans employed by other perspectives for logical weaknesses and unexamined assumptions. Philosophers, however, may also generate new questions and theories amenable to exploration and testing in dialogue with other methodologies. In vernacular terms, philosophers serve dual roles: they are both (a) “crap detectors” whose task it is to expose and prevent “garbage in, garbage out” errors, and (b) weavers of potential futures and new theories, who perform thought experiments in order to analyze epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical matters that pertain to choral singing and its pedagogy. Very succinctly, philosophical perspectives on chorusing phenomena inquire primarily why such phenomena may exist and what they may mean both contextually and universally.

A very obvious, but sometimes overlooked, characteristic of choral singing is that, by and large, it is singing with words. Choral music has text. That fact presents a philosophical quandary for those perspectives argued primarily from the stance of absolute music, or “music alone.” As Peter Kivy (2002), a prominent philosopher of music and proponent of a music alone perspective, concedes “…………..” (p. ). Choral music professionals, therefore, probably need to exercise some caution when applying to a choral singing context certain arguments and analyses from those who do philosophy from a music alone perspective. The basic issue is this: Either one assumes that words sung chorally do what words generally do, i.e., carry or evoke referential and more or less specific meanings, or one assumes that, when words are paired together with music, music is such the stronger partner that it overcomes or supercedes any referential aspects of ordinary language. Teacher-conductors who adopt the latter assumption, of course, have less to worry about. Their work with choral diction can be confined to its effects on tone quality and intonation. Whether or not the words are actually intelligible as such would not
ultimately matter. (I have sometimes contemplated if that argument would fly with audience members or festival adjudicators who might take issue with my choir’s diction!).

Each of these perspectives, --sociological, physiological, psycho-acoustical, musicological, psychological, neuro-biological, therapeutic, historical, and philosophical--, affords important and revealing ways of looking at choral singing phenomena. Still, choral singing, at times, remains a rather fluid concept.

Think, for instance, about the possible permutations when attempting to distinguish between the sociological construct of group singing and the psycho-acoustical construct of chorusing. Through a sociological lens, choral singing occurs when any group of people comes together to sing. A psycho-acoustical lens focuses instead upon the presence of a chorusing effect. But, as we have seen, a continuing chorusing effect occurs with not just any group, but rather a group where certain variables are in place, e.g., a requisite number of singers per vocal part. One could, of course, suggest that chorusing is simply a species of a larger genus called group singing. But that might not always be the case, because reflected sound waves from the rooms or venues in which groups sing also play a role. Their contribution complicates matters when it comes to fixing a minimum number of voices necessary to produce a chorusing effect. To illustrate, consider the following possibilities.

**Particular Considerations**

**Consort Singing.** A solo quartet (four singers, one singer performing each of four vocal lines), although it is certainly group singing, is not typically a consistent illustration of chorusing. Only when these voices combine temporarily on unison tones does a strict chorusing effect occur. If one considers simply the original sound sources themselves, then chorusing would likely require three singers on a unison tone. However, in a very live room acoustic, two singing voices might suffice, because the room reflections themselves could tend to function as a third voice.

Similarly, under the right room conditions and dependent upon spacing and placement of the voices, a duet of two singers might conceivably achieve a chorusing effect. This circumstance would apply especially to those moments when the two voices were singing in unison.

**Fused Sound Singing.** Barbershop quartets with one voice per part, and also perhaps close harmony vocal ensembles with one or two voice per part, such as the smaller a cappella groups currently popular in school, university, and professional contexts (e.g., the King’s Singers), present still another case. When these ensembles have moments of unison singing by three voices (or perhaps two voices, depending on the room acoustic and other factors), there may be a passing chorusing effect. Generally, however, and even more importantly, the overall singing character of these groups, especially barbershop quartets, is such that the very precise tuning and more carefully controlled vibrato singing to which they aspire occasions a fusion that produces perceptually a unified, stable, and almost instrument-like sound. In other words, here is a case of group singing that purposely seeks to avoid the chorusing effect, even when this effect might otherwise be achieved.

**Solo Choral Sound.** Overtone singing by one vocal sound source, as in the case of Tuvan throat-singers, represents a particularly intriguing phenomenon. Even though they are produced simultaneously, however, such multiple sounds from one voice would likely not constitute a
chorusing effect per se, because two or more perceptually separate tones are produced. But add very reverberant venue reflections, and theoretically there could be perceived choral singing that involves only one human sound generator. In that case, chorusing occurs without group singing at all. The same principle might prevail with simply one singer who finds herself in an environment that produces multiple echoes.

**Distinguishing Between Choral Singing, Small-Group Singing, and Choir Singing.** Given such considerations, and in order to be perfectly clear in our thinking, a distinction between small-group singing and choir singing may be helpful. Group singing occurs whenever two or more people sing together. Both consort and fused sound ensembles such as barbershop quartets are examples of small-group singing. Choir singing, on the other hand, transpires when a group of people produces a chorusing effect. Typically, that would require a minimum of three singers per part, though as we have seen, sometimes less than three singers will do, depending upon venue acoustics. For the sake of convenience and in deference to common usage, we can say that “choral singing” and “group singing” are synonymous, umbrella terms, but that choral/group singing includes both small-group singing and choir singing. Indeed, those who serve as directors of choral activities in schools and churches frequently find themselves working with small vocal groups as well as choirs, and often with soloists as well. The reason for exploring these distinctions is that acoustically, and, to some degree, physiologically, small-group singing and choir singing tend to require somewhat different approaches.

To summarize: Ambiguous terminology may sometimes represent conceptual perplexity, which can lead, in turn, to confusion in methods and techniques. “One size does not fit all” is an apt reminder in this respect. Choral or group singing is a conceptual umbrella that embraces both choir singing and small-group singing. But there are empirically demonstrable differences in sound and vocal technique between choir singing and many forms of small- group singing, including vocal consorts and fused-singing ensembles. One would not, for example, cultivate the sound of consort or barbershop singers in precisely the same way one builds choir sound, because the continuing chorusing effect inherent to choir singing introduces a new variable whereby the whole is inevitably more than the sum of its individual parts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHORAL SINGING GROUPS</th>
<th>Number of Voices on a Part</th>
<th>Chorusing Effect Without Considering Room Reflections (yet not assuming an anechoic chamber)</th>
<th>Chorusing Effect in Partnership with Adequately Reverberant Room Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small-Group Singing:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocal Consorts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Solo quintets, quartets, trios, duets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No**</td>
<td>Negligible***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fused-Singing Groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbershop quartets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller <em>a cappella</em> groups</td>
<td>1 (sometimes 2 on some parts)</td>
<td>No**</td>
<td>Perhaps. There are too many variables with this sort of group (e.g., same gender or mixed gender, style of music, vocal techniques employed, etc.) that preclude generalization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Larger-Group Singing:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choirs, Choruses, Glee Clubs, Chamber Ensembles, Regular Congregational Singing etc.</td>
<td>3 (sometimes 2*) or more</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impromptu Sing-a-longs, Caroling, Campfire Singing, Group Serenades, Assembly Singing of National Anthem, etc.</td>
<td>3 (sometimes 2*) or more</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**In moments of temporary unison singing (depending upon how many singers are in unison), choir singing occurs; thus, for that moment, there may be a short-lived chorusing effect.**

***In extremely reverberant environments, however, depending on spacing of singers, there could be some continuing chorusing effect, even when not singing in unison. Barbershop quartets, for example, would not fare well in vaulted stone cathedrals.

*Dependent upon the character of room or venue reflections

Figure 1.3: Types of Choral Singing Groups and Their Propensities Toward a Chorusing Effect.

**Computer Generated or Engineered Choral Sound.** Listen to the background vocals on a recent movie soundtrack. Chances are those /u/ and /a/ sounds are not produced by human beings, except indirectly, i.e., by sound engineers. Such background chorusing is the product of
increasingly sophisticated voice syntheses. Those efforts have not yet succeeded in completely synthesizing a realistic sounding choir, but achievement of that objective will likely occur in the not too distant future.

This development raises a number of interesting issues. In terms of research, for instance, the painstaking efforts to create mathematically and electronically a choral sound capable of generating a realistic performance of any choral literature, whether composed or even improvised, affords enormous insight into the complexities of choir singing. By the same token, eventual ability to manipulate in a controlled fashion the multiple variables of choral sound will be a boon to choir acousticians and other researchers, because it is difficult with live choirs to coordinate and control such research.

There are issues of preference and prejudice as well. Some choral musicians will undoubtedly rail against “machine music” or rally ‘round cries about the demise of the choral art as a distinctly special characteristic of humanity. To some extent, of course, they will have a point. One of the notable characteristics of choir singing, particularly amateur choir singing, is that just about anyone can participate in it and participate well with a moderate amount of time and dedication. The enjoyment and satisfaction therefrom derived are no small matters.

Because of that factor, however, and given previous history with respect to music and technological innovations, it is plausible to conjecture that some accommodation between live and synthesized choir singing will eventually become commonplace. As Braun (1999) points out, music-making and technology have always enjoyed a bi-directional relationship. Each has influenced the other. Choral musicians have long accepted as commonplace, even integral to their craft, such inventions as the piano, portable risers, accompaniment tapes for either learning or performance, microphones, and not least, the choral music score, itself made possible by the inventions of graphing, mapping, and printing.

The late Fred Waring admitted to enhancing the bass section of the Fred Waring Singers with a string bass for many of their radio broadcasts. In so doing, he was merely following a centuries old tradition of using whatever worked to the larger end of a desirable choral sound. Ancient Greek choruses wore acoustic masks. Renaissance performance practice allowed, even encouraged, the doubling of any or all vocal lines by instruments or, if there were not sufficient voices, letting instruments alone take the unpopulated choir parts. Recordings of choral performances today take advantage of the ready availability of editing, mixing, and other enhancement procedures. It is not that large of a stretch to imagine that someday synthesized choir voices, for use in real-time and capable of being manipulated to fit the blending requirements of particular choirs, will be commonly available. These sounds might be used to augment weaker voice sections, permit any size ensemble to study and perform multi-voiced literature that would otherwise require additional troops, or to provide occasional special effects.

Readers of this book who may now be in college or university preparing for a career in choral teaching, take note. Acquiring skills to use synthesized voice technologies and to participate in decisions about defining best practices with respect to their employment will likely be expected of you at some point during your careers.
DEFINITION OF CHORAL SINGING

A Matter of Relationships

Choral singing, at heart, is all about relationships. These relationships, moreover, are interactive and context dependent. Two broad sets of such relationships are especially important. The first set includes acoustic relationships among the sounds made by a choir as a whole and between the individual voices and voice sections that comprise its ensemble. Both of these phenomena, of course, exist in necessary partnership with particular venues. The second set encompasses the interpersonal relationships among people who participate, whether immediately or more indirectly, in the propagation and celebration of choral sounds.

Only a few very general characteristics describe choral singing in a universal way. Choral singing involves some kind of aggregation of voices, either literally or perceptually. It continues to involve large numbers of people as participants, audience members, and support personnel, whether in formal or more informal contexts. And choral singing, by and large, entails the unique and direct use of human bodyminds as instruments in music-making, doing so in ways that distinguish it from solo singing, some forms of consort and barbershop singing, and ensembles of orchestral, band, or folk instruments, whether real or synthesized.

It has been convenient heretofore for methods and conducting manuals to treat choral singing as a monolithic, unitary construct. The fact of the matter is that things become rather complex once we peek beyond generalities. Choral ensembles are composed of varying and often uneven numbers of singers of different age levels, different voicings, and unlike prior experiences, who sing in a surprising variety of acoustic environments. They also sing in a vast array of styles and function in diverse ways within particular social contexts.

Given these situated, relational characteristics and the eight lenses previously discussed, this book proceeds from the following working definition of choral singing. Choral singing encompasses an enduring, interactive set of associated phenomena in human societies that engages multiple voices in simultaneously acoustical and interpersonal relationships in both formal and informal contexts, for such purposes as edification, enjoyment, human development, and human ritual.

Names commonly applied to choral groups reflect some of the rich history of chorusing. Chorus and choir are two of the most common appellations applied to a company or aggregation of ensemble singers. The shared etymology of both words points to the roots of choral singing in ritual, religion, and music theatre. The Greek word χορός, for instance, refers to the place or enclosure (“dancing ground”) where the Greek dramatic chorus spoke, sang, and danced. Its Latin cousin chorus denotes a choral dance. In Western Christendom, that place in the chancel of a cathedral occupied originally by a group of lesser clerics who were seated in proximity and sang together is called the choir.

The word choir, partly because of this sacred association, can be reserved for exclusively religious contexts, while the term chorus can describe singing by an aggregation of voices in more secular places and contexts. However, even though they may possibly retain some utility in distinguishing types of literature sung, once meaningful distinctions between sacred and secular have become increasingly blurred as discrete descriptors of a company of singers. The appellation concert choir, for instance, reflects this transition and melding. It literally fuses
together the overtly religious construct “choir,” an ensemble whose purpose was to participate in divine worship, with the decidedly more secular construct of “concert.” Use of the latter term to describe a public performance where one simply listens to music for its own sake was not common until the latter eighteenth century. This book uses the terms chorus and choir interchangeably.

Other terms, such as glee club, choral society, choral union, and symphonic choir originated in comparatively more recent times. Glee club emerged in the eighteenth century as a description of popular gatherings of male singers to perform usually unaccompanied and relatively short part songs, or glees. Choral society and choral union originally refer to civic or working people’s choruses, which gained popularity in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

DEFINITION OF CHORAL PEDAGOGY

As used in this book, choral pedagogy is the “deliberate, sustained, and systematic effort to transmit or evoke attitudes, skills, and sensibilities” with respect to choral singing, in both formal and informal contexts. This definition incorporates Cremin’s (1970, p. xiii) fine definition of education. Indeed, other terms for choral pedagogy are “choral music education,” or simply “choral methods.”

The use of “pedagogy,” in some ways a more quaint term, instead of “education” or “methods” is deliberate. There are two major reasons for this decision. Primary among them, as ably underscored by Durrant (2003) and others, is an apparent reluctance by some choral conductors to think of themselves as educators. As will be seen in Chapter Two, there may be some historied reasons, largely associated with the early nineteenth century emergence of the choral conductor as an essential interpreter of musical works who stands apart from the chorus and in authority over it, that inform such reluctance. Perhaps egged on by the specialization now rampant in academe, an artificial division between choral conductors and choral music educators today approaches in some quarters the status of a turf war replete with separate credentialing, and, if left unchecked, I fear separate knowledge bases. It is my hope that by using the word pedagogy, perhaps a more neutral term than education, such silliness can, at least for the duration of this book, be put aside. One of the acknowledged biases of this book is that all choral conductors should be knowledgeable choral singing pedagogues and that all choral music educators should be well skilled choral conductors. Moreover, teaching is a sine qua non whether one thinks of herself primarily as a conductor or an educator. Accordingly, the words conductor and teacher will be consistently linked by hyphenation throughout this volume.

A second, related reason for use of the term pedagogy is its etymology. The Greek word pedagogicos (pedagogue) refers to a servant. In this sense, choral pedagogues are persons whose working lives are given to the service of nurturing and caring for those temporarily entrusted to them. While engaged in their essential roles as choral pedagogues, choir conductor-teachers are foremost and primarily servant leaders, whatever the particular contexts in which they serve.

Unpacking Assumptions

Another tool of mindful practice is an ability to identify assumptions, including our own, and the roles they can play in our behaviors and thinking. As this book progresses, we examine how to cultivate and practice this ability by detecting some assumptions and schemata in choral
practices that remain unacknowledged, but nonetheless mischievous. For now, here is one, freely acknowledged assumption that operates throughout this book: Good choral pedagogy begins with, focuses upon, and continually values an accurate, working knowledge of the attributes and functions of choral singing. Succinctly put, this assumption asserts that when we commence mindful thinking about anything choral, we should begin by focusing our attention upon the choir.

That contention, casually considered, may appear self-evident or even frivolous. Yet, upon reflection, there exist numerous other starting points for an exploration of choral pedagogy. In fact, many books and articles on this subject adopt one or the other of these alternatives. We could, for example, start by attending to the conductor-teacher, the music score, the solo human voice, or some philosophy of music or education. Each of these other starting perspectives has its merits. Each of them, moreover, will likely reference the choir in some manner. Indeed, it would be rather silly of them, as explications of choral pedagogy, if they did not. But including the choir and starting with the choir are two different matters.

Consider, for instance, a choral rehearsal. Where one chooses to be situated in the room can be revealing. A perspective from the conductor’s stand may tell us one thing. Evaluating things from where the choristers sit may divulge a different tale. If the composer of the composition being prepared were present, perhaps sitting at the piano, there would be still another vantage point. Where we initially choose to observe potentially colors the way we perceive the phenomena associated with choral singing and its pedagogy.

Although this book is addressed primarily to choir leaders, it chooses to frame various discussions and explications by starting with and continually referencing the choir. The reason for doing so is quite obvious: Good choral singing can and does occur without a conductor, without a music score, and even in the absence of a necessarily a priori rationale. In fact, during much of its very long history choral singing has depended on none of those things. Choral singing, however, does not happen without choirs of some sort.

Choosing this starting point by no means entails exclusion of such things as conducting-teaching, score-based information, individual voices, or systematic philosophical and social perspectives. But it may suggest that we will perceive those concerns in somewhat different ways than had we started someplace else.