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Facilitating Musical Expression in School Choirs: Honoring Individuality, Seeking Unity

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Abstract

Expression is a critical component of musical experiences for many educators and students and some studies show that the most common goal of a musical experience is to influence emotion (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). However, the role of emotion in musical expression, and effective approaches for developing musical expression, remain unclear (Brenner & Strand, 2013; Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Meisner, 2021; Pavlou, 2013; Reimer, 2009; Woody, 2000). Unique considerations for singers, including facial expressions, vocal timbre, and lyrics, make choral settings rich environments for exploring how conductors and singers work toward an expressive ensemble performance. This study explored how American high school choral directors and singers conceptualized and practiced musical expression. Data were generated through rehearsal observations, video-stimulated recall interviews (SRI), and semi-structured interviews with conductors and student focus groups. A shared conceptualization of musical expression was constructed through data analysis which served as a working definition for the study. Specific approaches for facilitating musical expression are discussed in the following categories: (a) orienting ensembles toward musical expression, (b) approaches for facilitating musical expression that honor the individuality of singers, and (c) approaches toward a unified ensemble musical expression. Implications for choral directors who wish to facilitate musical expression with singers are described.

Keywords: *musical expression, singing, music and emotion, school choirs, video-stimulated recall interview*

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Expression is a critical component of musical experiences for many educators and students and some studies show that the most common goal of a musical experience is to influence emotion (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). However, the role of emotion in musical expression, and effective approaches for developing musical expression, remain unclear (Brenner & Strand, 2013; Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Meissner, 2021; Pavlou, 2013; Reimer, 2009; Woody, 2000). Some studies have found that music teachers and students consider expressivity the most important characteristic in performance and rate it significantly higher than “stage presence,” “technical skill,” and “theoretical knowledge” (Lindström et al., 2003, p. 31). Until recently however, there have been few attempts to synthesize existing literature related to teaching musical expression across disciplines such as psychology, voice science, and even aesthetics to understand how one might facilitate musical expression, particularly in ensemble settings (Meissner, 2021). Researchers have described musical expression as a musician’s technical response to printed music, an emotional response to music, and the translation of musical ideas through technical skills, interpretation, creativity, and personal experiences (Brenner & Strand, 2013; Woody, 2006). Singers have additional and unique resources for cultivating musical expression including facial expression, vocal timbre, and the use of lyrics (Livingstone et al., 2009; Nápoles et al., 2020; Woody, 2000). Vocalists are also more likely than instrumentalists to recommend teaching techniques that encourage “felt emotion or extra-musical meaning” (Woody, 2000, p.19). Additionally, Juslin (2003) outlined five distinct factors related to the musical piece, the instrument, the performer, the listener, and the performance context that may influence expression in musical performances (p. 278). He further asserted that it may be impossible to model each of these factors simultaneously, posing an enormous challenge to research in musical expression.

Perceptions of Musical Expressivity in Performance

Perceptions of musical expression make up the most significant body of work regarding the subject, largely focusing on observer or audience responses to musicians’ body movements such as conducting gestures or ancillary movements during instrumental performance. Many studies employ the use of imaging and movement analysis technology (Broughton & Stevens, 2012; Dahl & Friberg, 2007; Luck et al., 2010; Nusseck & Wanderley, 2009) which allow for a clear understanding of how performers respond physically to particular stimuli, including the application of technical skills and emotional intentions. Although larger, upper body movements have been reported as more expressive (Luck et al., 2010), facial expression and gestures have been found to be inextricably linked regarding perceptions of expressivity (Nápoles et al., 2020). Livingstone et al. (2009) reported that facial expression differed depending on singers’ emotional intent and communicated emotion during musical performances. Since facial expression and other movements of the face and mouth are unique and complicated elements for singers, it is important to consider the role they play in choral singers’ experiences of musical expression.

An Interdisciplinary Perspective

An interdisciplinary review of literature examining musical expression in psychology, voice science, and aesthetics helps one understand the complicated synthesis of events that culminate to form human expression in and through music. A leading researcher in music psychology, Patrik N. Juslin (2003), described musical expression as “a set of perceptual qualities that reflect psychophysical relationships between ‘objective’ properties of the music, and ‘subjective’ (or, rather, objective but partly person-dependent) impressions of the listener” (p. 276). He argued that expression is a “multi-dimensional phenomenon” (p. 280) and resides in both the acoustical properties of music and in the mind of the listener. Juslin’s GERMS model of expression (see p. 281) integrates five specific components: (a) generative rules, (b) emotional expression, (c) random variability, (d) motion principles, and (e) stylistic unexpectedness. This model aimed to provide a psychological approach to support music educators teaching expressive skills. He argued that emotional expression may be the most crucial of the components for performers, and listeners may perceive an expression in such a way that it evokes an emotional or aesthetic response (Juslin, 2003). Juslin strongly believed that a psychological approach to musical expression could go beyond the study of mechanisms to look more deeply at the “nature of the person *behind* the performance” (p. 281).

Juslin (2013) later developed his seminal framework for music and emotions—BRECIVEM—to include the additional dimension of Aesthetic Judgement, now BRECHEMA. The addition of this dimension contributes to the author’s aim to understand the process by which a performer or listener might infuse sound with meaning. He argued that this is a critical component in reconciling the relationship between an artistic object and biological events in the form of human emotions.

Juslin and Laukka (2003) embraced the notion that music is a means of emotional expression and suggested that this may be difficult to explain due to intersections with vocal expression of emotions. Drawing from studies such as Scherer’s psychological theory of emotion (1987, 2009), Juslin and Laukka confirmed that musical expression, with its physical components, and with special emphasis on the face, are part of a human language of emotional communication. This is particularly relevant for pedagogical practices in choral settings which rely heavily on vocal and facial factors.

Although vocal expression had previously received even less attention than facial expression (Scherer, 1987), studies in this field offer perspectives critical for singers to consider (Juslin & Laukka, 2003). Bachorowski (1999) argued that the ways humans express and perceive emotion through speech acoustics is a key component to communication. Research in vocal expression enabled choral directors to understand the relationships between emotional experiences and acoustical properties of vocal production which could express discrete emotions (Bachorowski, 1999). Findings by Strait et al., (2009) indicated that one’s response to emotionally salient vocal sounds was shaped by life-long, multi-sensory experiences with sounds. The authors reported that a musician’s training may enhance their

auditory response and ability to detect “vocally expressed emotion” (p. 667). These studies suggest that both musical training and extra-musical experiences of performers may impact musical expression.

As suggested by Juslin (2013), implications for musical expression may also be drawn from the body of literature discussing aesthetics and aesthetic education which are grounded in processes of making meaning through interactions with works of art (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995, 2001; Hubbard, 2008; Jorgensen, 2001; Reimer, 2003, 2009; Woody, 2000). Aesthetic philosophers such as Bennett Reimer and Maxine Greene suggest that when we engage with the arts it is possible to make a personal connection, imagine an alternative perspective, and recall previously lived experiences (Greene, 2001; Reimer, 2009). Bennett Reimer (2009) asserted that music allows the formation of meaning and requires an engagement of emotional states that has the potential to “transcend” beyond oneself or a musical work (p. 26). In her 2008 study, Hubbard employed Iser’s theory of aesthetic response to explore the ways in which five high school students interacted with a visual artwork to make meaning of the object. Her findings supported the notion that a meaningful experience may emerge as a reader interacts with a work of art. Woody stated, “As music teachers become more committed to providing ‘aesthetic education’ to their students, greater insight into the process of learning expressive performance is crucial” (2000, p. 22). Given Juslin and Laukka’s (2013) argument that emotions are a key component of expressive performances, and that understanding how performers construct meaning is key to understanding music and emotion, studies such as Hubbard’s (2008) may provide insight toward approaches for music educators to facilitate expressive performances.

Pedagogies Toward Musical Expression

Scholars suggest that intentional instruction and knowledge about expression benefit the teaching of performance expression (Juslin, 2003). This is complicated by research findings that describe a variety of reported practices by music educators and students for teaching musical expression including movement, self-reflection, figurative language, felt emotion, and teacher modeling. Music teachers reported the use of movement with students as an effective tool for communicating expressive qualities of music (Daley, 2013; Jordan, 1996; Kilpatrick, 2020). Barefield’s (2006) findings suggested that the self-analysis of movement as a practice with young singers can go beyond improving techniques to enhancing expression. Others have examined the effects of metaphors and felt emotion (Lindström et al., 2003; Woody, 2006), figurative language, and imagery (Bishop et al., 2013; Sheldon, 2004) in educational settings. The music teachers in Brenner and Strand’s (2013) study reported that they developed expressiveness through a combination of technical skills plus interpretation or creativity. Despite students’ valuing of such approaches, aural modeling remains the most commonly used strategy by teachers toward musical expression (Brenner & Strand, 2013). Students also suggested that it is necessary to feel the emotion personally

to convey a message successfully to the listener (Lindström et al., 2003). Without the personal experience of the emotion, the audience can tell it was disingenuous and insincere and, it “won’t be called expression” (p. 34).

Broomhead (2005) offered three suggestions for increasing individual student expression during choral rehearsals including small group work, phrase shaping and problem solving. To his surprise, he found that after “years of great training,” watching “an expressive conductor and interpreter,” hearing “countless verbal explanations regarding musical expression” and even demonstrating “an ability to shape a phrase,” students were still not independently expressive (p. 64). The author concluded that they were relying on him to show them expressiveness and needed to follow him. He felt he nurtured “expressive dependence” (p. 64) implying that these approaches did not foster the skills singers needed to be musically expressive independent of a conductor. Broomhead’s statement, “They had become excellent followers, but not artists” (p.64) suggested that there is artistry in a students’ ability to cultivate their own musical expression and begs the question of how music educators might facilitate such a process.

Some scholars have suggested that making meaning through democratic and collaborative approaches— such as dialogue and collaborative knowledge construction—can be a catalyst for self-expression by individuals within an ensemble, potentially leading toward a more inclusive, individualized, critically aware, and empathic musical experience for all students (Allsup, 2003; Jorgensen, 2001; Perkins, 2019; Wolfe-Hill, 2017; Younker, 2003). Younker described such approaches wherein the voices of the singers are heard through collaborative decision making and dialogue which contribute to the meanings that are constructed and expressed. She observed that “choral members are engaged in reflective discussions and demonstrations while exploring the expressive possibilities of a piece of music” (p. 193).

Purpose of the Present Study

Despite attempts to conceptualize musical expression and identify strategies for teaching and learning musical expression, it remains difficult to understand how choral directors facilitate musical expression with singers. This study explored the ways four American high school choral ensembles conceptualized and practiced musical expression to understand approaches for facilitating this work in school choral settings.

The following questions served as a guide throughout this study:

1. How do high school choral directors and singers conceptualize musical expression?
2. How do high school choral directors and singers practice musical expression?
3. How do individual singers unify toward an ensemble expression?

Method

Methodology

A phenomenological approach to this study permitted me to explore the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It allowed for the exploration of complex meanings— in search of common meanings— through the embodied, lived-experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2009). Van Manen claimed that, “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (1990, p. 36). I used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of choral directors and singers as they worked toward musical expression in high school choral ensemble settings.

Design

Semi-structured interviews, video-stimulated recall interviews (SRI), and researcher observations were used to gain a comprehensive understanding that addressed notions of what musical expression is and how it takes place in choral singing. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. I applied descriptive and in vivo coding over four phases, using a pragmatic approach to identify and construct (a) significant statements, (b) meaning clusters, (c) emergent themes, and (d) textual and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). I then analyzed the data against Van Manen’s framework of body, time, space, and relation to others (van Manen, 1990) to understand the ways participants fully experienced this phenomenon.

Participants

Following Institutional Review Board approval, Protocol 15-423, I employed purposive sampling (Berg & Lune, 2012; Patton, 1990) to identify four experienced choral directors recommended by peers as those who prioritized or exemplified a practice of musical expression with their ensembles. All participants were located within American high schools. “High school” in the United States typically refers to grade levels 9-12. The student participants of this study were 14-18 years old. The school choirs that participated in this study functioned as courses that were set in the daily school curriculum. While these courses were elective in nature—meaning, not required—they took place during the school day and were not considered extra-curricular.

Additional criteria for identifying participants included (a) a minimum of 5 years teaching experience in their current school, (b) a diverse representation of educators reflected by gender identity, culture, and/or race, and (c) programs located in different regions of the U.S. representing a variety of community types and sizes: rural, suburban, urban. Following written consent, each choral director assisted in assembling a focus group of 4-6 students who had sung in their choir for at least one year and who were willing to speak on their experiences regarding musical expression. Student participants represented diverse

cultural, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. They self-identified their gender as 11 females and nine males. A total of 24 participants (four directors and twenty singers) contributed to this study. All names used in this article are pseudonyms chosen by participants. School names are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the character of the institution. Narrative descriptions of settings and participants in the form of school profiles can be found in the original study manuscript (Maas, 2016, pp. 71-79). Table 1 outlines the relationships between choral directors and focus group singers in this study by school.

Table 1
Relationships Between Choral Director and Singer Participants by School Site

School Name*	Choral Director Names*	Singer Focus Group Participant Names*
Dean Union High School	Sam	Noah, Drew, Madeline, Marie, Seth
Patriot’s High School	Phoebe	Gabrielle, Charlotte, Ash, Cloud, Lawrence, Faith, Frankie
Patagonia Preparatory School	Sebastian	Craig, Matthew, Joseph, Ginny, Angelina, Hermione
Helen Hayes High School	Celeste	Lilou, Alphonse, Luce, Zenya

Note: All participant and school names are pseudonyms to protect the individuals’ anonymity

Data Collection and Analysis

Figure 1 outlines a three-phase collection of data that took place at each school. Data were collected at four high schools (grades 9-12) in different regions of the United States during a single school semester. Choral directors and singer focus groups were interviewed separately during each visit and completed three interviews each. A total of 24 interviews took place.

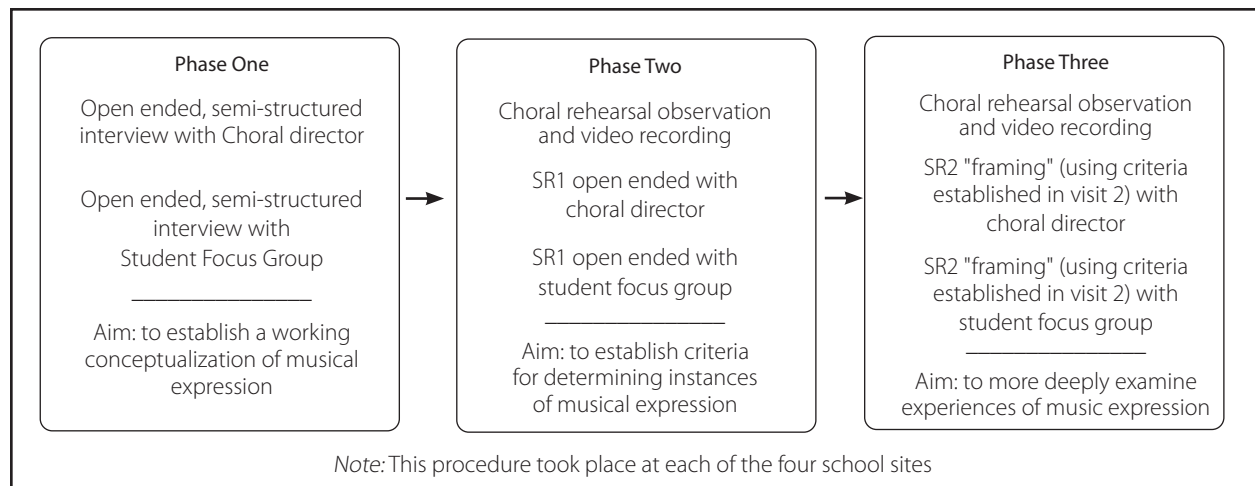


Figure 1
Three-Phase Data Collection Procedure

The first phase included an open-ended interview with participants to establish a working conceptualization of musical expression that was unique to those participants' experiences. Subsequently, two different approaches to video-stimulated recall interviews (SRI) were employed. SRI allows participants to review media—in this case, video and audio of choral rehearsals—in order to recall specific details of their experiences. “The technique of stimulated recall gives participants a chance to view themselves in action as a means to help them recall their thoughts of events as they occurred” (Nguyen et al., 2013, p. 2). As choral directors and singers reviewed the audio-visual recordings of their rehearsals, they were able to recall specific aspects of their experiences. Initially, they were surprised by what they observed and commented that they had not noticed everything that had taken place in the moment. Watching the video gave them an outside-in perspective which they were then excited to explore and reflect upon.

Phase two engaged participants in SRI using an open-ended approach to the media (video of their choral rehearsal) to identify expressive moments and establish criteria as evidence of musical expression. These criteria became an important framework for how the participants recognized and analyzed musical expression in their own work and played a critical role throughout data collection and analysis.

The third phase employed a framing approach to the SRI, using the previously established criteria to present specific clips of the ensembles' rehearsals for review. This allowed participants to analyze these moments more deeply and recall nuanced aspects of a particular moment (Colprit, 2000). Before analyzing each new frame, participants were asked to verify whether or not they felt the frame aptly reflected an expressive moment. If the response was unanimous, the interview continued. If it was not, that clip was not used, and we continued to the next frame. This study revealed the potential value in the use of SRI in phenomenological studies as well as performance and rehearsal assessment. The multi-faceted approach was critical to understanding the nuanced aspects of what, why, and how participants of this study experienced musical expression in their school choral ensembles.

Descriptive and in vivo coding were applied to all interviews revealing keywords and phrases as well as other emergent themes within and across sites. A pragmatic approach allowed for a deeper analysis of the experience as it became clear that participants struggled to separate their conceptualizations of musical expression from practices. Subcategories of practices revealed the need to orient an ensemble toward musical expression through the cultivation of environments that nurtured “safety, risk-taking, self-awareness, and personal responsibility” (Broomhead & Skidmore, 2014, p.35) before employing specific approaches. As categories were identified, keywords and themes were consolidated with the help of the participants until there was a consensus for how each group identified and understood musical expression. Observation notes and researcher memos were generated following each visit making reference when possible to specific emerging criteria and themes.

Validity

As a researcher, I acknowledged the potential impact of my own experiences as an educator and performer on the ways meaning may be construed from data. I wrote a researcher bracketing memo (Finlay, 2009; Maxwell, 2013) prior to data collection to gain clarity of my own preconceptions, allowing it to be part of the process toward understanding. An iterative process took place in which I could observe and acknowledge my own assumptions, then consider participants' experiences from a disencumbered position.

Following data collection, participants performed member checks of interview transcripts and textual descriptions as validity measures to confirm and clarify meanings and intentions. Two researcher colleagues in the field performed a cross-check of meaning clusters and emergent themes during the initial phases of analysis.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. Student participants represented richly diverse backgrounds in race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. However, the choral directors who ultimately participated, self-identified as White. A last-minute medical emergency for a participant identifying as Black, led to a recommendation of a peer to replace them in the study and, due to issues of feasibility, I needed to accept this opportunity to continue the study. While these educators represented diverse gender identities and cultures, as well as a wide range of ages and professional backgrounds, they were not racially diverse. This limits our understanding of perspectives and experiences by choral directors of color and assumably, the experiences of their students as well. Additionally, teacher and student participants were all located within high school choral ensembles. Exploring the experiences of musicians in other settings may provide additional insights as expression may manifest differently across diverse cultural settings or when applied to different musical styles or genres. Additional research should take place to further explore the nuances of these experiences and findings should be considered appropriately.

Findings

The findings of this study will be presented in tandem with a discussion of how I contextualized them to arrive at their current meanings. I will first present a working conceptualization of musical expression as co-constructed by study participants. Secondly, I will present strategies for orienting ensembles toward musical expression and describe approaches for facilitating musical expression used by the choral directors and singers in this study. This will be followed by a discussion of issues and approaches pertaining specifically to fostering ensemble musical expression. The article will conclude with a discussion of implications for choral directors who wish to facilitate musically expressive experiences with singers.

Conceptualizing Musical Expression

Participants of this study described musical expression as realizing or conveying meaning through music. Musical expression, as described by these participants, often included emotional intent, or eliciting an emotional response, and it manifested in intentional and unintentional ways. Drawing on descriptions of expression from the literature as a guide, I constructed a working definition for this study from an analysis of the complete study data, including all interviews and researcher observation memos, through and across participating school sites. While there were many nuanced differences between the ways the choral directors and singers of this study developed musical expression, a thorough analysis of emergent themes and meanings revealed common descriptions by all participants of the nature and function of musical expression in their work. Participants felt strongly that musical expression could be experienced outwardly—with, and among, ensemble members and audiences—but it could also be experienced internally, alone, and without an audience. Some scholars might equate this inward realization of meaning with an aesthetic experience where one understands themselves or the world through the construction of meaning with an artwork, oftentimes eliciting an emotional response (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Jorgensen, 2001; Reimer, 2003). Throughout this study, participants found intersections between what they understood to be expression, aesthetics, communication, and art. They believed that musical expression could be a synthesis of these endeavors in and through music.

Descriptions of musical expression ranged from simple statements to complicated interwoven processes. Sam, a choral director with a background in musical theater, referenced the need to bring meaning to the printed score saying, “[musical expression is] a connection between the little black dots on the page and trying to convey some kind of message.” Celeste, a veteran teacher from Helen Hayes High School, described musical expression as “the ability to turn notes on the page into something that evokes emotion from the performer and the listener.” Sebastian, a choral director at Patagonia Prep, said, “When the composer's meaning and your sensual experience line up, to me you have [a] 100% successful expressive moment.”

Students in this study focused more heavily on emotional arousal than their directors. Lawrence, a senior at Patriot's High School, began by saying confidently, “It's the ability to convey your emotions through your voice and your singing.” Alphonse's description was similar, explaining that musical expression is “emotion through music, and just bringing out what you're feeling, and using music as a vessel to do that.” Angelina clarified the ideas of intent and outward portrayal in her description: “It's all the intent that you put behind a song and the way that you outwardly portray the intent and emotion in your mind through the music.” Drew, a sophomore from Dean Union High School, described expression as an infusion of self into the artistic object when he said, “A lot of people look at music and just take it as it is ...but when you put yourself into [it] that is when it becomes musically expressive.”

Orienting Ensembles Toward Musical Expression

The choral directors and singers in this study described the ways they each contribute to cultivating environments where musical expression can occur. They discussed the critical conditions that must be in place before effectively engaging with specific approaches, which I observed and corroborated throughout data collection. In this section, I will describe the ways the participants oriented themselves toward musical expression through four common themes: (a) building relationships, (b) designing warm-ups, (c) selecting learning materials, and (d) organizing the physical space.

Building Relationships

Singers in this study reported that feeling valued, accepted for who they were, and safe to explore creative ideas and take musical risks, was critical to unleashing their expressive potential. Noah from Dean Union High School said, “In chorus you’re allowed to be yourself and who you are... that’s why it feels so safe and that’s why you can be musically expressive.” Phoebe, the choral director at Patriot’s High School, suggested that creating such “safe spaces” where students are willing to be vulnerable, is paramount for expressive freedom. She described establishing an environment for ensemble musical expression “where people, students, like them can be who they need to be without fear of judgment or repercussion...where they feel honored for being who they are.” She said her role is to help cultivate this space and establish relationships by “setting norms, and expectations for the class and for the way we interact with one another.” Hendricks et al. (2014) describe “safe musical spaces” as “learning environments in which students will be more likely to freely express themselves” (p. 38). Broomhead and Skidmore (2014) posited that students could be taught to shift their mindset toward one that is conducive to musical expression. The authors suggest that the first step is to establish an environment that nurtures “safety, risk-taking, self-awareness, and personal responsibility” (p. 35).

The choral directors in this study began to cultivate such spaces by building relationships with and among their students through meaningful dialogue. I observed the use of carefully crafted questions followed by thoughtful responses that acknowledged and validated students’ values, experiences, and beliefs. The choral directors integrated their knowledge of students’ skills, preferences, cultures, and values into the curriculum. Conductors provided singers with the space and time needed to experiment musically, reflect, revise and refine their work. These actions influenced relationships with and between singers, allowing them to take risks and reach their expressive potential.

Designing Warm-Ups

The “warm-up” segment of a choral rehearsal was seen as playing a critical role in the success and growth of the singers. It was used by the participants of this study as a time for students to prepare the instrument for producing sound as well as preparing mentally for the work that was about to take place. All four choral directors described the importance of

bringing awareness to the potential meaning of each vocal warm-up regardless of the presence of lyrics. As noted by Bachorowski & Owren (1995), vocalizing could elicit or imply specific emotions and meanings that may be expressed by singers. While reviewing video footage of rehearsal, Celeste remarked,

There—the mechanics are working, but is their mind with it? Is their spirit with it? For example, this exercise, [sings] “Ah thoo,” it can be an ecstatic kind of thing or full of wonderment as you roll over the top and come back down.

Participants asserted that an acute awareness of mind, body, and the response to the musical, physical, and emotional demands of a performance significantly impacts their musical expression. The choral directors in this study emphasized the importance of creating the time and space during rehearsal to develop this level of awareness and believed that modeling the expectations for students was critical to facilitating musical expression. They designed specific exercises and chose materials for this purpose. Mindful engagement with the warm-up was key to developing a heightened awareness of aural, physical, and emotional responses. Vocal warm-ups presented opportunities to discuss isolated elements of a specific piece of repertoire to help construct meanings expressed later in the music-making process.

Selecting Learning Materials

A mindful selection of materials with the students’ experiences, needs, and interests at the forefront is critical to their potential success (Dewey, 1902). In this study, relevance and preference often reflected experience and, students such as Angelina, described these as significant factors for musical expression:

When you really like a song, it’s easier to get into it. When it's something you care about, you could put yourself into it more, and it's easier to sort of ... get into the head space to express that.

Preference, enjoyment, and students’ perceived abilities to successfully perform repertoire were reported by many students as critical conditions of optimal expressive experiences and were also indicators of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Custodero, 2002; Tan & Sin, 2020). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p.4). With these conditions in place, students often described losing awareness of time and space during rehearsals. External distractions diminished, allowing them to realize their expressive potential.

Organizing the Physical Space

The ways in which ensemble members were physically oriented in the rehearsal space had a direct impact on their ability to share expressive ideas in both intentional and unintentional ways. For example, the ensembles participating in this study often stood in arrangements that favored eye contact with one another over attention to the conductor. The singers at Patagonia Prep stood in a large circle with no chairs. They used music stands to keep the hands and arms free to move. Helen Hayes' choir sat in one or more smaller circles. When ensembles were subjected to fixed, seated risers, conductors did the best they could to remove or reconfigure the chairs in a U shape. Students reported that eye contact and the ability to “hear across the ensemble” allowed for singer collaboration and were key factors in their ability to be expressive. When singers were physically configured so that they could see one another more directly, body movements, facial expressions, vocal timbres, and emotional response had the potential to be passed on through contagion (Juslin & Laukka, 2003). This became a stimulus for eliciting unintentional responses that could influence and help shape musical meanings throughout the rehearsal.

Approaches for Facilitating Musical Expression: Honoring Individuality

The previous section described how choral directors in this study cultivated environments conducive to musical expression. Once such an environment is established, directors may then facilitate opportunities for students to construct meaning during musical encounters. The construction of meaning through sound “requires an amalgam of mind, body, and feeling” (Reimer, 2003, p. 11), as well as the incorporation and clarification of values obtained through prior experiences (Leddy, 2020). Numerous studies of musical expression have measured perceptions and responses to musical stimuli and make associations with emotional responses; however, little is known about the underlying mechanisms for making such connections (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). It is also unclear how musicians draw on these meanings, and how they are applied toward musically expressive performances. The findings of this study suggest that singer-centered approaches, used to foster interactions with a variety of musical elements, are effective strategies for bringing musical objects to life in a way that honors the individuality of each singer.

The following section outlines the various singer-centered approaches toward musical expression used by the choral directors and singers in this study. Participants described the ways they applied these approaches toward constructing meaning for expressive purposes. The elements identified by participants for constructing meaning include: (a) embodiment—body movement, facial expression, and vocal timbre, (b) imagery and imagination, (c) context and background, (d) formal elements of music, and (e) lyrics. In addition to the intentional efforts of participants to convey meanings using these elements, participant accounts and my own observations also revealed the manifestation of musical expression in “spontaneous” ways (Juslin, 2003; Juslin & Sloboda, 2011). In these instances, meanings were constructed and conveyed through a variety of interactions that occurred without

conscious effort or planning. Singers described emotional and physical responses to music as visceral responses. Participant reports also echoed research findings that described contagion between singers affecting body movement, changes in vocal timbre, and changes in formal elements such as articulation, diction, phrasing, or dynamics (Cochrane, 2010; Juslin, 2003; Tan & Sin, 2020).

Embodiment

Researchers have found that musicians adopt gestures and use their bodies in a variety of ways to express a musical intention (Dahl & Friberg, 2007, p. 433). These gestures were considered a distinct “language” that has the ability to express “musical attitudes” (Nusseck & Wanderley, 2009, p. 351) and to convey emotion and intention (Nápoles et al., 2020; Rodger et al., 2012). The findings of this study reveal the embodiment of ideas, meanings, and intentions as a critical factor in the way musical expression manifests for conductors and students in school choirs. For the singers in this study, movements that reflected everyday gestures of verbal communication including those of the head, shoulders, chest, arms, hands, and hips, played a large role in conveying musical meanings and impacted the production of vocal sound. The singers used movement in intentional ways to add meaning, emphasis, or intention to a lyric. Their body movements conveyed unique ideas and emotions and supported vocal technique through an increase or release of energy or tension. Celeste explained,

Moving could make a difference in the way they sing it. I had them move their shoulders, their hips and it changed the sound. It’s something that may not necessarily be in the articulation or the dynamic marking, phrase marking.

The singers of this study described embodiment as a reflexive or sensory response through changes in heart rate, the triggering of an emotional state, or as some described as a visceral response they called “chills.” Participants and I observed the embodiment of music in the form of head movements, swaying, bouncing, and foot tapping as unintentional responses that frequently indicated an expressive moment. Gabrielle, a student at Patriots HS, said,

There will be times in a piece of music where it may call for a sense of stillness and your body wants to reflect that... and there are moments of extreme joy and you want to shout because it’s beautiful, and it’s exciting, and we’re happy, and you can’t stand still!

Singers and choral conductors in this study described facial and vocal expressions as critical embodiments of musical expression. While watching rehearsal videos, students emphasized the power of facial expressions describing “bright eyes” and “inside smiles” and changes in facial features that revealed a thought by the singer, but which also seemed to af-

fect their vocal production. Noah noticed, “The bright eyes!” inspiring Drew to comment, “It’s the eyebrows. All about the eyebrows.” Lilou described a moment in rehearsal when she felt they were being particularly expressive, “Everything came to life in our faces, and you’re moving a lot more as a group and individually.”

Throughout this study, each of the choral directors emphasized the manipulation of facial structures to assist vocal techniques such as vowel formation, intonation, and resonance which may influence the perceived intention of the music. Participants and I observed that the manipulation of these structures for technical purposes affected facial expressions as well. The student participants reported that facial expressions also occurred as an unintentional, emotional response to music, often triggered by an association or “re-living” of an experience in relation to the musical or textual ideas. I observed changes in facial expressions by both the conductors and singers throughout the study, which often took place without discussion or explanation.

Sebastian, the conductor at Patagonia Prep, suggested that the voice is intimately connected to the mind and intentions of the performers.

It can just be a whisper or a yelling bellow, but when every part of you is working together to make that certain specific sound... there is nothing about what you're doing at that moment that would betray what you're feeling and what you're trying to express.

Singers and conductors in this study reported that associations between lyrics and speech habits could affect vocal expression. These associations, based on meanings learned through life experiences, informed intentional choices to infuse a phrase with a specific vocal timbre and could trigger spontaneous changes in a singers’ tone quality.

Imagery and Imagination

Choral directors in this study often made “imagine if” and “as if” statements when coaching singers, especially when developing vocal techniques which seemed abstract and intangible. Singers described how they formulate images, scenes, characters, and storylines based on musical elements, contextual information, or spontaneous responses. Nina from Dean Union HS said, “It's identifying with that person who is singing the song, who wrote the song, who is identifying with the soldier overseas who may never get home.”

Nina’s reflection is consistent with the approaches identified by her conductor Sam, who relied heavily on the interpretation of text and character development. Sam facilitated this approach toward musical expression by designing open and guided questions to spark the imaginations of the singers. The use of figurative language played a key role in the ways that the choral directors of this study evoked their singers’ imaginations. This approach was most successful when prompts were open enough for singers to derive their own meaning and find personal connections. This required the conductors to relinquish some control

over the expressive intent and honor the artistic choices and musical responses of the singers. The singers made associations between the figurative language, their personal experiences, and the imagery conjured in their imaginations, which often resulted in an outward portrayal of an intention or emotion. These reports echoed findings from the literature describing figurative language as useful for “conveying musical meaning among conductors, teachers, performers, and listeners” (Sheldon, 2004, p. 358).

Context and Background

Choral directors in this study often used historical contexts and biographical information about composers to help construct meaning for their students around the cultural settings and intentions of a piece of music. Charlotte, a student participant, suggested that gaining knowledge or insight in this way helps one construct meaning, “Sometimes she will explain the background of a song, which makes it a lot easier to connect with because you understand the meaning behind why it was written.” Her choral director, Phoebe, described her role as “helping them discover the background, or give them some sort of a deeper understanding of the musical work that they are struggling with or they’re trying to find a connection to.” Sebastian, another conductor, drew on his background as a musicologist to inform expressive choices influencing vocal timbre, articulation, and dynamics with the singers,

If I was doing a Renaissance piece, I would probably keep the tenors in the head voice or mixed voice the entire time. They should not sound operatic. No self-respecting Renaissance composer will give them octave leaps at fortissimo that they have to sing like they do in the Randall Thompson either. There isn't that kind of climactic expression in the piece. We don't make it histrionic.

Sam presented the context of “Irish Blessing” to her students and posed questions, giving them room to discover additional meanings for themselves:

We talked about who might have written this song and when, and the kinds of things they might have been writing about at the time based on what might have been going on around them. When we talk about the general ideas, they realize that first, they might have more in common with the music and the composer than they thought and second, they are able to ask themselves what they might know about that situation, and what does it mean to them.

Formal Elements of Music

In this study, contextual information often augmented and informed decisions regarding the implementation and manipulation of the formal musical elements. Singers and directors also derived meaning through change and contrast of formal elements, particularly dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. One singer, Hermione, reflected on their rehearsal of

Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*:

For something like *Alleluia*, you're literally saying one word, but the reason it's not boring is because it can have so many meanings and the dynamics are what creates those different meanings. At the very start, it seems quiet and internal, whereas at the end it's like "alleluia!"—you're excited and being loud about it.

Conductors and singers made nuanced decisions about the interpretation of musical elements and expressive markings, particularly in the form of change, contrast, and intensity, describing a "push and pull" or release of tension. Expressive choices were also made in the absence of specific expressive indicators by seeking meaning in the openings or spaces between what is known (Greene, 1995). Sam is a choral director with a background in musical theater who used questions to elicit imagery and character development through the interpretation of lyrics. Her students often found deeper meanings in what was left *un-said* throughout the lyrics. They sought connections between the words and the notation and considered the meanings that existed in the gaps.

...some students picked up on the fact that there's so much silence. [sings "Send in the Clowns" by Stephen Sondheim] dah dah dah dah, isn't it rich? [spoken] rest – rest – [sings] dah dah dah dah, aren't we a pair? [spoken] rest – rest, and they started talking about what that means and wondering why there is so much silence—maybe that means you're feeling conflicted. You know, maybe you're not sure of what you're trying to say, so you're being quiet.

Lyrics

Singer participants attempted to deliberately make meaning of words and phrases in order to understand the intention or message to be conveyed. They drew on rules of speech and diction for clarity, emphasis, and affect. They applied literary devices to the text to provide added meaning, irony, or humor to the lyric. Zenya and Alphonse explained how their director, Celeste, encouraged them to manipulate their diction to affect the lyrics and meaning: "She [Celeste] uses an emphasis on consonants to help us give that message of excitement and joy, [reciting the lyric with emphasis on the consonants] "Gosh, it's cold out here!" Simply understanding the basic meaning of the words impacted the singers' delivery. Hermione, of Patagonia Prep, reflected on a moment during the second SRI when the tenors and basses were singing alone: "Obviously, according to the words, it should be a lullaby. It seemed much more natural once Doc pointed it out, like, 'You're aware what you're singing, right?' Then they just kind of fell into it—softer, sweeter, lighter."

Their conductor, Sebastian, believes having an intention behind the text is critical, "Get inside the words. Sing about something all the time. I don't think people should open their mouths to sing without having some kind of expressive subtext." Throughout this study,

adding intention, meaning, or attempting to convey an idea often evoked the unintentional deployment of speech-related devices. For example, moments described as urgent or of high stakes often resulted in more articulated diction such as stronger attacks on consonants or a richer, more energized vowel sound without directly discussing their application.

Ensemble Musical Expression: Individuality & Unification

The previous section outlined the distinct components that ultimately combine for a complex synthesis of musical and extra-musical factors contributing to expressive, musical encounters. Body movement, the analysis and interpretation of musical elements, lyrics, historical contexts, a singer's skills, techniques, imagination, and personal experience all converge to construct meaning for the individual. The interaction becomes increasingly complicated in ensemble music making where choral directors and singers interact with one another in an attempt to share a unified ensemble expression.

The Role of Dialogue

The choral directors in this study attempted to honor students' individuality while working toward a unified ensemble expression. As discussed earlier, the cultivation of environments conducive to musical expression was central to establishing a physical setting and rapport of mutual respect among singers that fostered flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking. Throughout this study, where environments of trust were clearly established, the facilitation of dialogue during rehearsals acknowledged and validated ensemble members' experiences, values, and beliefs. When conductors invited singers to contribute perspectives toward meanings and take musical risks, they opened the door to a wider range of possibilities, including the unification of individual meanings. In this study, choral directors used generative prompts to engage singers in dialogue and begin to develop a discourse of musical expression. They asked questions such as: What is this piece about? What do you imagine the composer is trying to express? Can you describe the wants and needs of the character singing this piece? What do you know about the historical, social, and cultural context during which this piece was written? What do you imagine when you hear or perform this music?

During this dialogue, an iterative process of questioning and experimentation unfolded. Of particular importance to ensemble expression were the actions initiated by a single individual, which elicited expressive responses from others in the form of eye contact, contagion of energy through movement, timbre, and rhythmic entrainment (Juslin, 2003; Juslin & Sloboda, 2011). This process often led to collaborative, collective understandings for the ensemble members. However, participants of this study did not believe it was necessary for all members of an ensemble to interpret and convey meaning in exactly the same way or to have the same life experiences in order to share a common understanding. Phoebe, a choral director, said, "There is usually a generalized idea but if you were to go deeper everybody probably has their own interpretation of what it is." According to Zenya,

Having these democratic discussions makes us feel like we're all on the same playing field and we're all in it and working towards a performance rather than Celeste having an interpretation that she wants us to match. We all feel like we're in it together.

For many students like Ash, the dialogue is what enabled the ensemble to collaboratively understand a collective intention. He explained, “It matters not as much the difference between people's interpretations, but as long as there is an idea of one underlying sense of purpose—that’s what brings everyone in together.” Noah said it most poetically before running out to soccer practice,

It is like notes on a piano— like there is one note but then when you make a chord there are notes playing at the same time which makes it sound better than just this one note so everyone has these different emotions and when they all come together it sounds like really kind of beautiful I think.

Implications for Choral Directors as Facilitators of Musical Expression

This study substantiates and builds on the body of literature addressing conceptualizations and pedagogies for musical expression by offering insight into the experiences of school choral singers and conductors as they worked toward expressive performances. It aimed to “capture the rich, personal and piece- specific ways in which musicians tend to approach their work artistically” (Juslin, 2003, p. 296).

Through careful review and analysis of their own work using SRI, the singers and choral directors in this study were able to identify and describe nuanced elements of their expressive experiences, including distinct components and the nature of the performers’ behavior (Juslin, 2003). The approaches used by choral directors and singers in this study to cultivate musical expression in their choirs included the use of body movement, facial expression, interpretation of musical elements, assimilations between vocal timbres and life experiences, and carefully designed questions to construct meanings individually and as an ensemble. While there were spontaneous, unintentional acts of expression reported, expressive experiences benefited from “explicit instruction and knowledge about expression” (Juslin, 2003, p. 296) as choral directors facilitated the construction of musical meanings using a variety of approaches.

The current study demonstrates that these choral directors modeled student-centered approaches to collaborative meaning-making to foster individual and ensemble expressive potential. Despite the complexity of the numerous, potentially immeasurable factors which contribute to this work (Juslin, 2003), this study revealed three primary implications for choral directors who wish to facilitate musically expressive experiences with their students. To begin, fostering a rapport of mutual respect, trust, and validation, leads to rehearsal en-

vironments conducive to musical expression. Secondly, a process-oriented mindset toward performance might help to prioritize constructivist approaches and create the space and time needed for exploration, experimentation, and imagination throughout the rehearsal process. Finally, singer-centered approaches for constructing meanings may honor the individuality of singers while developing a unified, ensemble expression.

Cultivating Environments Conducive to Musical Expression

In this study, the conductors' backgrounds and experiences had a significant impact on the classroom environment each cultivated, and the ways musical expression manifested for their singers. For example, Sebastian, a musicologist, emphasized historical context, composer intent, and era-specific performance practices as a means of achieving an expressive performance. Whereas Sam, who studied musical theater, emphasized character development, connections to personal experiences, and physical movement. Each conductor's background, coupled with their philosophical stance regarding music teaching and learning, had a direct impact on their approaches to facilitating musical expression.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that the extent to which choral directors effectively facilitate collaboration between singers can impact the manifestation of musical expression in a group setting. Both conductors and singers in this study reported that when trust and mutual respect were established, singers were more willing to experiment, take musical risks, and allow themselves to be vulnerable with their peers. Ensemble configuration implicitly and explicitly informed singers of how ideas were shared, thus influencing the development of trust and relationships necessary to take risks and be artistically vulnerable. These findings build on O'Toole's (2005) notion that singers' perceptions of whether their musical ideas are welcome can facilitate or deter participation necessary for expressive work. Choral directors might consider the ways rehearsal configurations influence singers' perceptions of power and authority and lead to environments either inhibited or liberated as spaces for musical expression.

Furthermore, developing rapport and establishing trust begins with working diligently to know the members of the choir, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, and ensuring that all singers have the potential for success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Choral directors of school choirs might look toward culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies, inquiring about students' musical and personal backgrounds, assets, and cultures beyond the classroom to provide singers with a path to success (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). If conditions conducive to musical expression are met and expressive inquiry is encouraged, opportunities for constructing, realizing, and conveying meaning will present themselves.

Process-Oriented Approaches

This study demonstrates that facilitating musical expression requires time for constructing meaning and is inherently process-oriented. As such, it is possible that choral directors

who wish to facilitate expressive experiences might consider incorporating this work earlier in the preparation period. They might also reconsider emphasizing product-oriented, outcome-based goals of accuracy and proficiency that are driven by standardized achievement levels. Meissner & Timmers (2019) support this notion suggesting that a focus on technicality over musical communication could limit expressiveness in young musicians. Meissner later proposed a framework for dialogic teaching and learning of expressive musical performance in which he suggests that open questions, a central component to dialogic teaching, support the students' learning of expressivity by "stimulating thinking about the interpretation and may serve to connect musical ideas to the embodied experience of the learner" (2021, p. 1). He positions questions and dialogue about musical character, structure, and expressive tools, along with aural modeling to shift the focus from "technicality to musicality," leading to expressive musical performances (Meissner, 2021, p. 13). This approach reflects the work of choral directors in this study who created openings for students to construct meanings and make critical personal connections in and through music, resulting in expressive musical performances.

When reflecting with the choral directors of this study on their work toward musical expression, they each described a tension that occurs as they attempt to balance perceptions of limited concert preparation time, the desire to get the notes and rhythms right, and an impulse to control the ensemble's expressive intent. However, these conductors also described a shift in perspective as they gained confidence and experience that allowed them to incorporate expressive approaches earlier in the rehearsal process. Singers and choral directors in this study agreed that familiarity and competency with a piece of music rendered the confidence and the cognitive space—in the form of attention—required for making expressive choices. However, the ability to accurately perform a piece of music did not mean that the music would be necessarily expressive. "Being too focused on the technical aspects detracts from being immersed in the music because it creates such a huge barrier between what's on the paper and what you're singing in your mind," explained Matt, a student participant in the current study. Furthermore, participants also agreed that music does not need to be perfectly accurate to explore expressive possibilities.

Certainly, choral directors must be able to imagine an educative setting in which ensembles are able to go beyond the "process/product binary" (O'Toole, 2005, p. 24) with the sole focus landing on the product. The content and format of school concerts and other performing events might change to feature fewer pieces and provide more information about the ensemble's artistic process. Conductors must be humble enough to allow singers agency in their own expressive choices and then be willing to pull back the curtain for audiences, revealing the curiosity, imagination, and hard work that took place. Such encounters may lead to more singer involvement in designing culminating performance experiences that are rich in meaning with long-lasting, residual effects for singers as thoughtful, independent, and expressive musical beings.

Honoring the Artistic Lives of Singers

Philosopher of aesthetic education, Maxine Greene positioned music as an open-ended art unto which the viewer can enter with her own agenda (Greene, 1995). She suggested that an individual's reading of an artwork is an opportunity to find new, unique meanings through that work. This study sheds light on the ways in which choral directors acknowledged the unique, lived experiences through which individual singers engaged with musical works and thus honored those singers' artistic lives. Trusting singers to realize their individuality through their own expressivity frees conductors to focus on facilitating a unified, ensemble expression through co-constructed meanings and the collective, shared experiences of the ensemble. Echoing previous studies (Hubard, 2008), students made their own meaning through close interaction with works of art and one another—not despite the differences in readings among the group, but because the collective contributions produced an even richer reading of the piece. As musicians, the participants of this study then applied their reading of musical texts to develop an expressive performance of the work.

Navigating new approaches in an environment laden with tradition and expectations can be daunting for both teachers and students (O'Toole, 2005). However, the conductors of this study described a confidence that came with time and experience in implementing these approaches and experiencing their success. Throughout the study, I observed their ability to craft questions and prompts that facilitated a creative, singer-centered, and collaborative rehearsal process, leading toward a unified ensemble expression. Choral directors facilitated opportunities to expand on their singer experiences using a “what if” or “imagine if” approach to encourage curiosity and inquiry, reminiscent of John Dewey's description of the imagination as the “gateway through which meanings derived of past experiences find their way into the present” (Dewey, 1934, p. 272).

Furthermore, to work toward a “correct” or “authentic” performance regarding musical expression is to assume that there is one. Understanding composer intent, stylistic nuances, and era-specific performance practices are useful, but ultimately the composer has created a work of art—a piece of music to read, interpret, and perform. Maxine Greene was inspired by learning spaces that dared to provoke thoughtfulness and critical consciousness where “teachers and learners find themselves conducting a kind of collaborative search, each from her or his lived situation” (Greene, 1995, p. 23).

Opportunities for shared, musically expressive experiences have become significantly challenged during the Covid-19 pandemic due to restrictions on group music-making. The inability to make music with others has highlighted the importance of particular qualities associated with expressive experiences, such as expression of emotion, individuality and self-identity, and interconnectedness. Scholars have described the importance of expressive experiences, particularly as we move through and beyond the current Covid-19 global pandemic, for establishing a sense of self as an individual (Stark, 2020). However, Schiavio et al., (2019) illuminate the importance of musical collaboration which “allows for an essential negotiation between individual and collective subjectivity” in which musicians experience

a “sense of community and develop their identity as a group” (p. 712). While this study did not originally aim to address these issues, the implication for how choral directors might facilitate more meaningful opportunities for individual and ensemble expression will be of critical importance as ensembles transition into a post-pandemic landscape.

Juslin (2003) argued that it would be useful to study the nature of the personal behaviors and actions of performers to better understand how musical expression manifests and suggested that an event or interaction occurs between musical properties and the minds of musicians. Attention to these actions and interactions throughout this study shed light on how musical expression took place for these participants in a school choral setting. Although Elliott (1991) criticized aesthetic education as a passive way to experience music without necessitating the act of making music, the act of expression as Dewey (1934) reminded us, requires thoughtful actions. In his book, *Art as Experience*, John Dewey described an act of expression as a qualitative, “transformation of energy into thoughtful action, through assimilation of meanings from the background of past experiences” (Dewey, 1934, p. 60). Continued research in musical expression would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach and might examine the specific ways in which it manifests and is fostered across various cultures, in person and online, with individuals, and ensembles.

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