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Women Conductors of College Men's Choirs – Redefining the “Brotherhood”

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Abstract

Collegiate men's choirs have unique and storied traditions dating back to the Civil War and the founding of many prominent colleges in the United States (Albinder & Jones, 2008). Historically, these ensembles created a place for fraternity, brotherhood, and social outlets for young men (Jones, 2010). Consequently, there are few documented instances of women conducting collegiate men's choirs (VanWeelden, 2003). The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women conductors of college men's choirs. This research was guided by the following questions:

1. How did women choral conductors describe their motivations for working with college men's choirs?
2. How did these conductors describe the rehearsal environment in their college men's choir?
3. And finally, how did these conductors define the challenges of working with male singers?

The following areas provided focus for themes that emerged from the conductor interviews: their motivations, the rehearsal environment, and the challenges associated with a lack of opportunity and quality literature.

Keywords: Gender, identity, men's choirs, rehearsal environment, women conductors

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A recent article about gender inequity data in the choral conducting profession by the College Music Society (CMS) indicates the percentage of women choral conductors at the collegiate level has decreased over the past 15 years (Farquar-Wulff, 2023). Men's and women's choirs have evolved and changed over the past 150 years in the United States, as society and social norms shift. Additionally, as adolescent gender identity expands to encompass non-binary forms of gender expression some music educators are beginning to examine their role in fostering an environment that is affirming of gender diversity (Cates, 2022; Palkki, 2016). In his survey, Gregory Graf's (2016) interviews with current conductors in the field unintentionally revealed deep-rooted biases and outright discriminatory views held by some notable men's choir conductors against women conductors of male choirs, specifically at the collegiate level. The camaraderie experienced in men's choirs, by men exclusively, was heralded by many of the participants in that study:

Choruses allow men to connect on an emotional level, and they do not need to worry about the presence of women in an all-male ensemble....[T]here are experiences unique to each gender and I have observed that many men feel able to show a side of themselves when interacting with other guys. Participation in a male chorus can offer a freedom for men to be fully who they are and express freely that individuality without any reservation. (pp. 13-14)

Additionally, one conductor emphasized the unique connection between a male conductor and a men's chorus, highlighting the rewarding aspect of shaping young men and the gender-specific aspects of the human experience (Graf, 2016, p. 14).

The most telling quotes in the survey came from participants theorizing about the low percentage of women conductors working with collegiate and community men's choirs. Eight participants blamed sexism in the conducting profession and society for the lack of women conductors in this area. Four others attributed it to women's lack of interest in men's choruses. Women's lack of vocal connection with the male singer was another reason cited, with one male respondent mentioning that “it may be intimidating to try and build an ensemble when you can't model the vocal technique” (Graf, 2016, p. 26). The final reason given for the smaller proportion of women conducting men's choirs related to the social connection with the ensemble members. In the words of this respondent, “My best guess is that men feel more comfortable and behave differently around a woman versus a man conductor.... [B]eing a woman in a room full of men may make some female conductors uneasy” (Graf, 2016, p. 26). This final quote by one of Graf's respondents is certainly problematic:

I think most men do not imagine themselves connecting in the same vulnerable way

to a female conductor that they are able to connect to a male conductor. I also think the environment that men's choirs usually create may in some ways be a bit unfamiliar to many women; therefore creating/fostering this environment may be difficult for some women. (p. 28)

Graf's survey had men speculating why more women are not conducting men's choirs and proposing that men may not feel as comfortable with a woman leading them. To date, there has been no study on women conductors of male choirs. In this study, voice was given to those women conductors who were currently working in the field and to their singers, documenting their experiences, and examining the themes connected to their stories.

When this study was initially conducted in the fall of 2017, conversations about ensemble singing, identity and its connections with gender were only starting to be documented widely in research. The body of research on collegiate glee clubs and choral singing in the United States was most often written about in binary terms. Additionally, gender gaps were also almost exclusively reserved for binary gender discussions. The focus of this study was to share the experiences of three cis-gender female conductors and their experiences working with college men's (TTBB) choirs. Through the process of this research, one thing became quite clear: how the conductors and members of their ensembles defined their ensemble varied greatly. One ensemble held on to an almost strictly binary identity as a male choir and valued a strong connection to their historical roots and traditions. The other two ensembles were more flexible with how they defined their group and what it meant to be a "men's" choir.

A Very Brief History of College Men's Choirs in the United States

The development of collegiate men's glee clubs in the United States began because of the cultural and political landscape of America during and after the Civil War (Jones, 2010). Today, glee clubs are still a vital part of the ever-changing landscape of choral ensembles, even as voice part-specific choral ensembles grapple with their place in a culture challenging historical gender norms and identities. Along with their music, some of the communal and bawdy characteristics of the European singing societies translated into academia as extracurricular, not for credit classes. Additionally, they were mostly student-run ensembles and historically known for being of very "low quality." Jones (2010) defined this low quality of music as "popular and college songs, appealing to collegiate life, as it was not popular for a social student organization to sing repertoire from the classical genre" (p. 24). When Archibald Davison started conducting the Harvard Glee Club in the early 1900s, he slowly began to change the culture of the group by incorporating more Western European choral repertoire from the art music canon.

One of the most important developments that helped spread collegiate glee clubs nationwide was the establishment of the Intercollegiate Musical Council (IMC) in 1913 by Albert Pickernell, a graduate of the Harvard Glee Club (Jones, 2010). The IMC established an-

nual competitions between glee clubs across the country. The competitions continued until the outbreak of World War I, when many of the men in the ensembles went to war and groups folded. At this same time, colleges of music were being formed at most universities, and some glee clubs became curricular classes providing students credit for participation. Conversely, many glee clubs were forced out of colleges to pave the way for more SATB (mixed voice) ensembles due to the increased enrollment of women.

To maintain their relevancy and support, prominent glee clubs like Michigan, Georgia, Yale, and Harvard traveled extensively overseas and in the United States. At the time of this study, glee clubs and men's choruses were still part of many collegiate choral music programs in the United States, but their prestige and presence varied. Many glee clubs had not maintained ties to their historical roots. For example, when women were admitted to Yale in the 1970s, the glee club changed its designation from an all-male ensemble to an SATB ensemble open to the newly accepted female students. Just like Yale, Harvard University's glee club was opened to anyone who sang the tenor or bass voice part (Graf, 2016). Additionally, many ensembles removed gendered terms from their group names for more gender-neutral or genderless titles.

Methodology

Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of female conductors of college men's choirs. Each case explored insight into the motivations for the conductors' work with collegiate men's choirs, observation of their rehearsal environments, and pedagogical challenges associated with women conductors working with the male voice. According to Merriam (1998) and Yin (2006), qualitative case study methodology involves an intensive examination of a specific phenomenon, striving for a close, in-depth, and firsthand understanding of the situation. Case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2006). Instrumental case studies provide insight into a particular issue, redraw generalizations, or build theory; the case study facilitates understanding of something beyond itself (Grandy, 2010).

In this case, the study of women conductors of college men's choirs was instrumental in that it gave a voice to these women conductors and documents their experiences working with collegiate men's choirs for the first time. There has been speculation about the effectiveness of women conductors of college men's choirs, but no one has yet studied the phenomenon. A collective case study involves the exploration of multiple instrumental cases (Yin, 2006). Through this instrumental collective case study, I explored themes that emerged from the following questions:

1. How do women choral conductors describe their motivations for working with a college men's choirs?

2. How do these conductors describe the rehearsal environment in their college men's choirs?
3. How do these conductors define the challenges of working with male singers?

Cases and Participants

To determine how many women conductors were actively working with college men's choirs in the United States, I sent an informal request for names through social media and online professional message boards. This search garnered 22 names. I examined the list of names; researched and compiled a database that included their rank, duties, length of time in their positions, size, type, and location of their universities; and made email contact with each conductor. Responses from the email garnered more specific data about the conductors' careers, work with men's choirs, and interest in participating in this study. I received positive responses from 11 of the 22 women. Based on the responses from the conductors, I felt that this study would not be fully realized by looking at a singular critical case.

According to Yin (2006), multiple or collective case studies allow for analysis within each setting and across settings, making the evidence more robust and reliable. To provide the most robust set of data, I determined that my research should include women conductors in different stages of college teaching with a men's choir—those in the first five years of their careers, those who had between ten and fifteen years of experience, and those with more than fifteen years of experience. I felt it was important to represent a variety of university sizes and locations across the United States to encompass many varied experiences. I believe saturation was reached with these three women conductors based on the differing locations and sizes of the universities and years of experience both in the profession and as conductors of men's choirs.

Case #1 – Lauren (Pseudonym).

The selected participant, Lauren, was in her third year of collegiate teaching. The university where she worked was a state-supported research university in a large city in the southern part of the United States. Lauren served as both a member of the choral and music education faculty. When she was hired at the university, Lauren was given the option to start a men's or a women's choir. Since she had worked successfully with high school men's choirs previously, Lauren decided that she did not want to pass up the opportunity to build and create a collegiate men's choir. In just three years, Lauren's men's choir had grown from 15 to 50 members and was sought after across the campus and in the community to perform for numerous events and audiences. In its second year of existence, the men's choir performed at a state music conference and made its debut at Carnegie Hall in 2018.

Case #2 – Wendy (Pseudonym).

The selected participant, Wendy, has been in her teaching position since 1979. Wendy conducted both the men's and women's choirs and served in a leadership position for the music department. The university where Wendy taught was a small liberal arts religious-affiliated school in a suburban midwestern town. Although Wendy had conducted the women's choir since her arrival at the college, she did not start conducting the glee club until 2000. At the time, the glee club was conducted by a member of the voice faculty and had been struggling to regain its sense of identity after its long-time conductor retired. When the voice faculty member decided to leave the university to pursue professional singing opportunities, Wendy petitioned the dean of the college for the opportunity to conduct the glee club. It went to the university's president for approval and was granted shortly thereafter. The glee club at this school had been an active ensemble since 1907 and has many traditions connected to its storied history. Before Wendy, the glee club had only three other conductors. Her tenure became the second longest in the club's history. The glee club thrived under Wendy's leadership, performing all over the world, including a tour of China in the fall of 2017.

Case #3 – Samantha (Pseudonym).

The selected participant, Samantha, was the Director of Choral Activities and conductor of the men's glee club at a medium-sized, state-supported land-grant institution in the western United States. Samantha had been in her position for 10 years and taught conducting and private voice as part of her faculty responsibilities. When she was hired, Samantha was given the opportunity to choose which ensembles she would like to conduct. She had never conducted a men's choir before and decided that it sounded like a good challenge and opportunity. While she did not start the men's choir at this university, it had only been in existence for about three years before she took over as conductor. Under her leadership, the men's choir performed at regional and state conferences and toured all over the region. It was a well-recognized and sought-after performing ensemble both on campus and in the community.

Procedures

Participant Consent and Engagement

After establishing written consent of their willingness to participate in this study from the three conductors, I set up week-long residencies with each conductor at her university. My goal was to spend a week with each conductor at the beginning of her school year to observe how she established the community and culture of her men's choirs. Additionally, I asked each conductor to identify three to four members of their ensemble who represented new members in the group; music majors, non-music majors, and long-time members in leadership positions. Interviews with the singers took place away from the music building at

their convenience throughout the week. Interviews were set up with each conductor during the week-long visit, along with videotaped observations of her rehearsals. In addition to the formal interview, numerous opportunities arose during the residency for informal conversations and observations of each conductor's daily schedule and duties.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure a thorough representation of each case, data were collected in multiple ways, as is customary in qualitative case study research (Stake, 2010). The first method was through direct observations of each conductor during her rehearsals and other teaching activities throughout the week. Video recording of the choral rehearsals was used to allow for a more in-depth analysis of the data after the fact. Semi-structured and open-ended interview protocols allowed for standardization of data and the flexibility for new data to emerge from informal conversations. To provide comfort and ease for the participants in the case during the interviews, students were met at a location of their choice, anywhere on or off campus, and at a time convenient to their schedules to allow for maximum flexibility. The conductors were also interviewed in uninterrupted two-hour blocks of time in a location of their choosing to allow for their maximum comfort. The purpose of the study was outlined for each participant, and they were allowed to ask questions to abide by the ethical principle of beneficence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each interview was transcribed diligently with the intent to represent each participant as clearly and authentically as possible. Along with transcriptions of each interview, member-checking, researcher's field notes, and reflective journaling were crucial to the triangulation of the data used to identify emergent themes.

Data Analysis

The data underwent analysis using the constant comparative method, involving a comparison of data sets to discern both similarities and differences (Merriam, 1998). Copies of the interview transcripts were sent to the conductors to establish credibility and validate the research (Stake, 2010). Additionally, all participants were given the opportunity to request that an alias be used to maintain their confidentiality. Audio transcriptions of interviews with all the conductors and singers were coded. I used in vivo coding for the first cycle of data coding (Saldaña, 2016). To better organize the array of in vivo codes collected, I cut and pasted them into a separate document. From this document, I utilized pattern coding for my second cycle of codes. Using these two cycles, the words of the participants were grouped into pattern codes and, ultimately, themes.

Theoretical Framework

This project was conceived and guided by a theoretical framework of liberal feminism. While more abstract in philosophy than other branches of feminism, such as radical or Marxist feminism, liberal feminism anchors its ideology on the absolute guarantee of free-

dom for everyone, including women. This view holds that in order for all women to have access to personal autonomy—or a life of their choosing—critical examination of the structures and mechanisms that maintain status quo gender hierarchies must be undertaken (Cudd, 2006). Limitations on women's agency are due to a gender system where patriarchal norms have been established and remain oppressive (Okin, 1989). The work toward liberation and freedom is to identify patriarchal traditions and dismantle them, thereby allowing autonomy for everyone (Cornell, 1998). In the 2009 book, *Wisdom, Wit and Will: Women Conductors on their Art*, conductor Sharon Hansen explains the positionality of female choral conductors:

Historically, women have been visible and well accepted as choral conductors primarily only within the realm of elementary, middle school, small high school, small college, or sectarian institutions...as children's choir directors (although not typically boy choir directors), as junior high and middle school choir directors, as women's chorus directors, and as training choir directors. (p. 214).

Uncovering systematic differences in gender representation may allow women to be less likely to self-eliminate from positions that do not align with societally accepted norms.

Trustworthiness and Positionality Statement

Demonstrating Trustworthiness

To demonstrate the trustworthiness of my research, every effort was made to document the processes and procedures employed for this project. Member checks were utilized with the interview transcriptions to ensure the validity and credibility of the data collected. Along with member checks, data in the study were also triangulated. By analyzing and crosschecking my data across a variety of sources—including but not limited to video recordings, interview transcripts, field notes, reflective journal entries, and firsthand observations—I worked to construct the validity for this case (Yin, 1994).

Researcher Positionality

As a former conductor of a collegiate men's choir, I acknowledge the possibility of my previous experiences casting an unconscious influence on my interpretation of the data. It was my goal to remain as unbiased as possible, and I made a conscious effort to be a silent observer during my residencies at each school. It is also possible that my gender as a female researcher could have limited some of the data collected.

Personal Background and Engagement

As a public high school choir teacher, I started a men's choir to help grow my choral program and provide better individualized vocal support for my male students. When I

arrived at the University of Washington and found out about the men's glee club, I knew that I wanted the opportunity to work with them. In my second year I was afforded that opportunity and co-conducted the ensemble for a year. As the first women conductor of the group, I was a little apprehensive that I would not be accepted into the club. But that quickly melted away after the first rehearsal.

As an early career academic, I was fortunate to be the conductor of a collegiate glee club. The specific glee club that I conduct was founded in the 1930s and had a strong connection to its alumni and traditions. We had singers of many backgrounds, gender expressions and levels of comfort with their singing voice. This had become my passion and mission, and I would not have had the confidence to lead and guide in this way without the hard work of the trailblazing conductors like those documented in this study.

Case Study Findings

Theme 1: Trailblazers in a Male-Dominated Choral Community

The three conductors studied had different backgrounds and paths that led them to conducting collegiate men's choirs. Trailblazing was the overall theme for the conductors' motivations for working with college men's choirs. A trailblazer is a person who makes a new track through wild country; a pioneer; an innovator. Subthemes encompassing their motivations included:

- **Challenge and Opportunity:** Lauren chose to start a college men's choir when given the opportunity to pick between a men's or women's choir. Wendy sought out the opportunity to bring back the prestige and quality of the historic glee club despite challenging the historical gender roles valued by her university. Samantha chose to conduct the men's choir over other ensemble choices because it was something new and "sounded fun."
- **Passion:** Despite varied motivations, all three women embraced the idea of tackling something different and challenging and, subsequently, found a passion for men's choirs and the communities these choirs built.

Theme 2: Embracing Challenges and Opportunities

Each conductor had unique circumstances that allowed for the opportunity to conduct the men's choirs at their universities. When I asked her why she chose to start with a men's choir, Lauren said,

Selfishly, I have always really been interested in men's choruses. I had a lot of successes with men's choruses from middle school, all men's choruses through high school and I had never really had the opportunity to do collegiate...and that's really the field that I kind of wanted to make my niche in.

By comparison, Wendy started conducting the men's glee club after she was a well-established and respected member of the faculty. When I asked her about her motivations for seeking out the position with the men's glee club, she stated, "I came here in 1979, and in 2001, I started conducting the men's glee club, and I look at that as part of the mission of saying that women can do this." Wendy knew she could make a difference with the men's glee club and increase the quality and sense of community for the male students. She earned their trust and loyalty because they were "feeling pretty good about how they were sounding."

Samantha's position at her university afforded her access to opportunities like conducting the men's choir because she was already in a top leadership position as the director of choral activities. When she was hired, Samantha was the only choral person on the faculty. She explained:

They were going to hire an adjunct to take over the choirs I couldn't have in my load, so the department head at the time said, of course we want you to conduct the collegiate chorale because it's the top mixed ensemble. It has the highest profile. And then you can choose whatever else you want to conduct. I thought, I've never done a men's choir, so that sounds fun. I'll do that. And it scared me, and I was like, ok, sounds good.

Each of these women embraced the potential challenge that came with conducting a men's choir and jumped at the opportunity, making them trailblazers.

Theme 3: Passion for Music and Teaching

All three conductors showed an immense passion for their profession. This passion was evident through their responses to the interview questions and in my observations of their rehearsals. The passion exhibited by Samantha was shown in her interview with me. She would light up every time she spoke about her men's choir. When I asked her about her own career goals and aspirations, she told me:

So, I think of men's choir as the highlight of my week, my three hours where we just have joy. Whether it's in music making or joking around or just being goofy, I love those three hours a week.... So yeah, I am completely passionate about it. And as far as the future, I always want it to be part of my future. Always, always.

These three conductors were not just passionate about their men's choirs, but also about their roles as teachers and mentors.

Theme 4: Authenticity is The Key Ingredient to Success

In Graf's (2016) survey of postsecondary and adult men's chorus directors, one of the male conductors stated that "female conductors of men's choirs that he has observed tend to be 'larger-than-life' people with exceptionally strong personalities" (p. 28). I found that while each conductor was successful with her men's choir, each had her own individual style. In fact, with both Wendy and Samantha, I had the unique opportunity to observe their work in front of two different types of ensembles—Wendy conducting the men's and the women's choir, and Samantha conducting the men's choir and mixed ensemble. In both cases, there was very little change in their demeanor and delivery of material between the two ensembles. Wendy's style was matter of fact, quick witted, and focused on delivering sound vocal pedagogy to her choirs. She allowed little time in either rehearsal for downtime to talk or socialize. This held true with both the men and women's ensembles.

The same was true for Samantha's choirs. One aspect of Samantha's physicality that positioned her to connect easily with her male students was that she was a world-class powerlifter. All the members of her ensemble interviewed referred to her physical prowess and the tradition of Samantha bench-pressing the smallest freshman singer at the fall retreat. While Samantha's physicality gave her a way to connect with her male students, it was interesting that she observed not all her students wanted to participate in strength challenges. It seemed that initially Samantha looked to relate to the men in her ensemble through a perceived value that her singers would have on competition and athletic prowess. This was based on prior success with similar activities and probably her own unconscious bias about what young men would find appealing. However, as she became more aware of the unique values and interests of all the members in her ensemble, Samantha's viewpoint expanded and changed. This change in understanding has fostered a deeper connection between the members of the ensemble and Samantha because she found ways to connect each individual singer.

Not only do women conductors have to confront questions relating to their personality and demeanor remaining authentic, but they also must navigate issues surrounding professional dress and appearance. In Anna Edward's (2015) dissertation, *Gender and the Symphonic Conductor*, she demonstrated that concern over what to wear for women conductors can be a daunting task. In her words, "women have had to concern themselves with deciding what to wear to avoid potential judgments such as too alluring, too feminine, or too masculine" (p. 70). In each interview, we discussed the stereotypes that women must navigate as conductors regarding their dress and demeanor. Lauren stated,

I'm part of their family; it's a partnership. I don't have a choir without them, and they don't have a choir without me. If I separate myself too much as the conductor, that family doesn't work. And so, I think that you need to stay true to who you are as well as what your look is and what your feel is, but also define what you want to be perceived on stage. I mean everybody knows I have my badass red high heels.

Similarly, Wendy explained, “I still wear my pearls when I’m on stage with the guys. I mean, I don’t wear a tuxedo. But I have started wearing a tie with that...so I can’t tie the tie, my husband has to tie it for me.” Samantha shared the following exchange with another female colleague:

When I first knew that I was conducting the men’s choir, I was talking with a female colleague, and I said I am a little nervous about this and she told me, all you have to do is wear short skirts and high heels and they’ll love you and I didn’t know what to say! I try to look feminine when I conduct, but I do wear pants when I conduct, because that’s a choice that I make...because I do feel more comfortable in that music, not in a skirt.

While these conductors had to contend with issues of dress and appearance, each woman found ways to represent herself in an authentic way that did not necessarily conform to gender norms. One of Wendy’s students commented positively about her attire saying, “She dresses up in the suits when we go places, and she wears the blazer and the tie...she makes a very good point of building rapport with us.” This observation points to the importance the singers placed on feeling connected to their conductor.

Theme 5: Rehearsal Environments Build Community

The themes that emerged from an examination of each choir’s rehearsal environment included community, novice singers, and empowering student leadership. Within the larger theme of community, subthemes of family, traditions, and acceptance permeated the language used by both the conductors and students.

Community of ‘Brothers’

An examination of the literature on the attraction of the all-male choral experience to male singers highlights the unique community of brotherhood and common identity that is found within these ensembles (Freer, 2009a; Graf, 2016; Ramsey, 2013). The community built by each woman conductor in this study shared many of the historical traits of a collegiate men’s choir.

The Importance of Family

The history of men’s choirs in the United States shows that most started as extracurricular groups. Lauren’s ensemble was both curricular and extracurricular. It was not required for music majors, which can make recruiting more challenging. She was very flexible with her schedule and expectations for rehearsals. In fact, to attract some of the instrumental music majors, she held extra rehearsal sections just for them outside of her weekly rehearsals so that they could participate. In short, Lauren’s mission was “to be as open as possible.

And still make fabulous music with wonderful musicians.”

The interviews with Lauren’s students echoed her definitions of community in the ensemble. One student commented, “It’s just really fun, and I’ve learned that it’s an extremely big family, a very dysfunctional family, but it’s a family.” I asked this student to describe the rehearsal environment in his own words, and he told me about “the circle. We always rehearse in a circle unless we’re setting up for an actual concert...but usually it’ll be in a circle, so she can hear in a more intimate setting.” I was able to observe the first rehearsal of the semester with Lauren and her ensemble, and I saw the effect the circle had on building the community in the ensemble. Lauren positioned herself as part of the circle. The piano was even part of the circle. The effect was subtle, but the results ensured that no one was left out and all members, including the director, were connected.

Connection to History and Traditions

Wendy’s glee club had existed since 1907 and came to her with community traditions and rituals. Her case provided a chance for me to observe the dynamics of a woman conducting a glee club that had held onto many vestiges of its history and celebrated them as part of its culture. When Wendy took over conducting the ensemble, she made a point to keep a lot of the traditions alive. Wendy understood the importance of the community of “old men,” and their connection to the current ensemble ensured continued support of the glee club in the future.

The rehearsal environment was full of these traditions, but none of the current members knew the stories behind their origins. Even Wendy did not know the origins of some of the traditions, except that they had always been a part of the culture of the club. For example, if someone grabbed the wrong number folder, they were to announce it in rehearsal and all the gentlemen yelled “Shambles!” in unison. While they could make the ensemble feel a bit more like a fraternity than a choir, one of the students shared what seemed to be the core mission of the ensemble: “It’s a great place to grow in relationship with each other and with God.”

Samantha’s students, many of them first-time choral singers, emphasized this tight-knit community in their ensemble. Said one, “There’s no judging or anything of that nature. It’s, you know, a safe place but at the same time, we’re very dedicated to getting the work done and making sure we’re prepared. And I think it’s a good balance of the two.” I asked one of the students to describe a rehearsal in the men’s choir. He told me, “I have four older sisters, so I never really had like a brother, and the men’s choir is kind of more like a brotherhood.”

Creating a safe place for novice singers

In response to the desire for more inclusivity of all-gender expression in the choral classroom, I have observed and personally been involved in the process of changing the names of men’s and women’s choirs from their gendered names to more gender-neutral titles. Lauren was purposeful in creating a community that encourages all expressions of gender

and not just archetypal “maleness.” The commitment to creating an open safe space was also reflected in the music she programmed for the ensemble. As she explained,

It’s not these sea chanties all the time. It’s not these “Yale Glee Club” series types of pieces anymore. I think that the topics we choose to discuss and the text we discuss is different now than it was twenty years ago. I think language is evolving and needs to continue to evolve. The openness and willingness not to shy away from the transgendered voice, and creating that environment needs to be ok...because they just want a place to feel, I hate to put quotes on it, but “normal.”

Across the three cases studied, the theme of novice played a vital role in the rehearsal environment of each men’s choir. Lauren’s mission to create a non-auditioned choir where everyone was welcomed to sing required her to create an environment that welcomed highly skilled and trained singers along with novices. Most of the singers in Lauren’s choir were non-music majors. Because of this, Lauren focused on selecting literature of varying levels and teaches by rote, especially at the beginning of the semester. One of Lauren’s non-music-major singers reflected on a moment such as this as the defining moment for his commitment to the ensemble: “We didn’t have sheet music, and I had never sung but by the end, it was all around me like this melody we had created, it was very beautiful. I had never been in something like that, so yeah, it was a big moment for me.”

Many of Lauren’s students commented on how much they respected her conducting and teaching abilities. One stated, “She is able to intertwine basics with musicality.” I asked all the singers in the study if they ever felt like their needs as male singers were not adequately addressed because their conductor was female. One of the singers stated:

The only thing I’ve noticed is that she can’t really model for us. And that is the most, like, that’s the thing that I understand for a lot of people can be an issue. But I notice that’s the reason why she is so much more creative with everything else because it’s very easy if you’re a man to be able to model and be, like, sound like this. Whereas, if her voice literally, physically, can’t do it, she must, like, plant that seed in other people. I think that fosters leadership within our group a lot more. I think it’s an opportunity, I don’t necessarily think that it’s a negative.

Both the novice and more experienced singers interviewed from Lauren’s choir expressed confidence in Lauren as both a conductor and voice teacher. They uniformly agreed that they never felt like their needs as male singers were not adequately met by a female conductor and reiterated that the community built in the choir provided a space where they felt safe and supported by their peers to explore their own voices and grow as singers and musicians. When I asked a student of Wendy’s if he thought it was a disadvantage for women to work with male singers, he had an interesting response:

I kind of like the opposite because I feel like she would hear stuff in our voices that if a male was singing and directing, you're kind of blind to how your tone is, and she can tell that our tone is so different from what she would sing.

Throughout the interviews, Samantha's students all spoke about the strong vocal technique they were learning and how important it was for them to sing with their whole body. When I asked the interviewees if they ever felt that their needs as a singer were not adequately met, they all quickly said no and went on to reiterate how knowledgeable Samantha was about the voice. The president of the men's choir told me that one of the reasons he joined the men's choir was to become a better singer. I asked him if he felt like he had achieved this goal, and he stated:

I hoped to become a better singer overall, but I didn't know just how much it would help me because she is so good at, like, finding the small things to work on with the whole ensemble...she knows how to get people to sing to their full potential.

It was interesting to observe that part of the strength of the men's choir communities at each university stemmed from the rehearsal environment, creating a safe place for untrained and insecure singers to explore their vocal potential. The rehearsal environments established by each conductor were unique and yet shared some common themes. Additionally, the students interviewed uniformly viewed their conductors as experts in the field and did not feel like their needs as male singers were not met due to the gender of their instructor. In fact, some described it as a benefit, an example of strength in teaching and adaptability.

Theme 6: Challenges of Conducting TTBB Collegiate Ensembles

Each conductor was asked her opinions on why there are so few women conductors of college men's choirs and to outline some of the challenges associated with conducting men's choirs. The themes that emerged and were explored include lack of opportunity and lack of quality repertoire. Lauren's answer focused on the divide between men and women in college teaching jobs:

I think that it's been a good ol' boys club for a long time. Most of the DCAs will conduct the top mixed choir and the men's chorus, and then the women get the second choir and the women's' glee. I think here, to be honest with you, if I hadn't started the men's choir, I don't know that I'd be conducting it.

Wendy echoed Lauren's sentiments about the lack of women conductors of college men's choirs. She felt strongly that there are two main reasons for their absence. She told me, "I think there's a bias against women conducting at the college level generally, except for wom-

en's choirs." I asked her if she had personally experienced this bias and she said, "I look back at jobs, you know, where I was as well qualified as men, and I didn't even get a chance. I've also been kind of told, well no, because this is your expertise [referring to women's choirs]." I asked Wendy what advice she would give a woman conductor and she said, "You gotta be good. You gotta be better than the men. I hate to say that you do, but you must be. You must be yourself, love what you do, and be good at it."

Samantha was able to overcome this potential bias because she was hired as the director of choral activities. She got to choose the opportunity to conduct the men's choir. I asked her what advice she would give to a female conductor that wanted to work with a men's choir. She said to "Do it! It'll be scary, but it will be the most rewarding musical, spiritual, and social experience." Her mantra was simple, yet poignant: "Good teaching is good teaching, good singing is good singing. If you teach them well and you teach them how to sing, that is valuable to the individual and valuable to the ensemble."

The three conductors interviewed for this study all had varying levels of time and experience working with college men's choirs, yet a consistent theme emerged when discussing some of the challenges they faced: repertoire. Wendy had worked with the men's choir and in choral music the longest of the three conductors. She was in her thirty-eighth year of collegiate teaching and admitted to still struggling with finding quality repertoire that works. The exploration of music with challenging texts and deeper meaning was changing the formulaic programming of historical men's choirs. Lauren's programming and ideas on appropriate repertoire were the furthest removed from the "men's choir shtick." In her opinion, "Society's changing. And I think topics that are being discussed and literature that's being written is changing. It's not these sea chanties all the time, not these Yale glee club series types of pieces anymore."

Because Lauren did not want to use some of these traditional men's choir pieces, she sought out composers and commissioned them. As society continued to evolve, some of the older pieces in the TTBB canon could be viewed as problematic. For example, one of the students interviewed told me that while he enjoys being a part of the men's choir, he also struggles with the perception of sameness and exclusion that an all-male group can inadvertently create. The singers and conductors interviewed were all in agreement that quality repertoire is one of the key ingredients to the appeal of a men's choir experience. However, the conductors in this study faced the challenge of finding consistently high-quality repertoire for their singers. The conductors suggested that more composers need to write music for men's voices that uses quality texts, embraces all expressions of gender, and consists of vocal lines tailored to bring out the beauty of the male instrument.

Conclusions and Implications

In this study I examined the experiences and challenges of three women conductors working with college men's choirs. As a conductor of a collegiate men's choir, I acknowledge the possibility of my experiences casting an unconscious influence on my interpre-

tation of the data. It is also possible that my identity as a cis-gendered female researcher could have limited some of the data collected. Another limitation of the case study was the duration of one-week residencies at each location. While I was able to observe multiple rehearsals and other events, such as informal meetings and social gatherings during these residencies, it was challenging to document a whole culture in such a short period of time. A longer observation would have been ideal and should be considered for future research. The findings of this study should not be generalized to other choral settings or teachers. However, it is my hope that the interpretations of the research questions may provide useful insights for other choral music educators.

The women in this study were motivated by the challenge that conducting a collegiate men's choir provided. Each demonstrated a drive and passion to overcome any perceived bias and sought out opportunities for herself. They also shared a strong sense of self, which gave them the confidence to (a) found a men's choir, (b) seize an opportunity to conduct a historic men's group, and (c) choose to conduct a men's choir when other options were available. Each woman demonstrated passion for different aspects of conducting their ensembles while maintaining a strong connection to authenticity. They did not change who they were to fit a stereotype of what women should do to be successful in front of a men's choir. All three conductors wanted to connect with their choirs while onstage through their dress and appearance. Each was able to do so without losing connection to their authentic self.

Each rehearsal environment and community created by the women in this study was different. However, they shared many commonalities with the traditions found and studied in men's choirs by Faulkner (2004), Freer (2006, 2009b), Ramsey (2013), and Williams (2012). The themes of community, brotherhood, family, and safe place were identified in each of the three rehearsal environments. It was interesting to discover through the interviews of the students that none of them felt like their needs as a singer were not met by a women conductor. In fact, many spoke of the strengths of their conductor's ability to find workarounds to overcome their inability to model. All the women felt strongly about the importance of understanding the voice. This proved to be especially important in these ensembles because all three women worked with several novice singers and first-time choral participants.

In conclusion, there were no perceived or verbalized negative feelings or concerns shared by the singers about the gender of their conductors. This examination of rehearsal environments challenges the concepts of community and brotherhood. Is it still a brotherhood when there is a woman present? In Ramsey's study, brotherhood was defined using words such as support, pride, and camaraderie (Ramsey, 2013). Not once was the term maleness used in relationship to brotherhood. If we then use a genderless definition of brotherhood, its benefits can be felt by all those who have experienced the support, pride, and camaraderie of any kind of community. The work of this study has shown that there is no magic formula for creating a rehearsal environment that will automatically invoke brotherhood. Rather, it is imperative that the conductor be authentic and true to their own strengths and passions and feel limitless when seeking out opportunities to conduct and lead, regardless

of their gender.

All three of the women in this study shared a strong sense of self and the courage to be trailblazers as conductors of college men's choirs. They created communities where their male students felt safe to explore their voices and express themselves through music. The singers spoke of the brotherhood and community in their choirs and how the ensembles were more like a family than a class. Their experiences mirrored those of other men's choir participants studied who had male directors. The only difference in their experience was that their brotherhood contained one sister. The challenge now is to not only empower women conductors to seek out all conducting opportunities, but to intentionally work to invite more women to conduct all types of ensembles.

Baughman's (2021) survey of women in collegiate choral conducting showed that, in general, men tended to be considered better conductors and were taken more seriously than women. McClean's (2023) examination of choral literature performed by all-state mixed choirs from 2000–2020 also revealed that only 23% of the guest conductors were women. McClean looked more intently at the data from individual states. Even more gender disparities emerged, including four states that had hired only one female conductor for an all-state mixed choir in 20 years. Another illustration of the gender disparities present in collegiate choral conducting was Amelia Nagoski's (2017) statistical analysis of the gender of conductors for invited choirs at the 2017 ACDA national convention. The data collected showed that, overall, 72% of the conductors were men (Nagoski, 2017). Additionally, only three percent of women conducted groups that she labeled as "non-conforming: women conducting an ensemble that is something other than youth, trebles, or women" (p. 2). In contrast, 26% of men conducted "non-conforming" ensembles, perhaps because "men are allowed to cross over and conduct choirs that tend to be associated with women...In fact, there are more men conducting youth, trebles, and women than there are women conducting at the conference altogether!" (p. 2)

For real change to occur, more women are needed in positions of power in the collegiate and professional choral world to ensure that future generations of women conductors see themselves represented in all aspects and types of choral ensembles and positions. Additionally, data need to be readily available from national choral organizations that track gender demographics as they relate to job title, work environment, pay, and education. Our profession needs to stop hiding behind tradition. Rather, we must thoughtfully reflect on the past and intentionally move forward with new ways of thinking about the profession. It should no longer be trailblazing for a woman to conduct a collegiate tenor bass ensemble anymore. If we are willing to expand our mindset on the singers in voice part-specific choirs, then it is equally imperative that we examine our bias toward the person on the podium.

While the interviews reported here were of cis-gender individuals who identify with their birth-assigned sex, it is my hope that this project opens to a more inclusive representation of the entire gender spectrum and its implications on the future of choral singing in voice-part specific ensembles. As stated by Lamb and Dhokai, "If we are to approach a world where

we embrace equity and equality with commitment and compassion, we must start with the recognition of actual people and experiences” (2015, p. 124). I hope that this research can serve as a bridge in the ongoing conversations surrounding ensemble configurations in choral music.

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