

*An Environment for People to
Feel Human:*

Multigenerational Choirs as Vehicles for Collective Belonging
and Lifelong Learning

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I walked into the tiny Latvian church for the first time on Sunday afternoon and the place was abuzz. There were children frolicking up and down the center aisle; there were grown-ups chuckling and socializing amid the pews; there was a duo at the keyboard harmonizing. A few moments later, the group settled from laughter into silence sitting in a large circle around the piano at the front of the church.

“Alright everybody!” One leader cheered. “Let’s get into our bodies and feel this collective energy. Take a moment to close your eyes, outstretch those arms, maybe move those fingers, careful of your neighbors, shake out your wrists, whatever feels good.” He lightly facilitated warm-ups, asking everyone to stand and shake and stretch and utter a bunch of silly sounds, pitches, and vocal exercises; the group happily obliged. I was slow and cautious in my participation, still trying to put a finger on what exactly was going on here.

“OK gang!” The other director hollered. “Let’s dive right into Put a Little Love In Your Heart. Altos! I’m excited to hear that part we worked on last week... nice and fresh! Kids, go ahead out and we’ll see you back here in a little bit.” Each choir member cracked open their binder while a group of young people simultaneously hopped up and shuffled into the next room for drum circles and games. (You know, the fun stuff.) A few hours later, after the full group reunited for some song run-throughs, the entire choir made their way to the upstairs of the church for an evening potluck.

My experience as a Children’s Music Director for a Boston-area intergenerational choir called Neighborhood Rocks can speak to the unique union of musicality and companionship that exists in the community choir space. Between busy schedules, daily commutes, soccer games, homework, grocery shopping, work, and many other other ups-and-downs of day-to-day life,

people of all ages gather for a few hours per week to sing together. This social, creative environment offers a poignant sense of joyful interconnectedness as is the case in many community music groups and settings that I will explore. The genre of these kinds of organizations speak for themselves: Community + Music = Community Music.

When I connected with some of these participants to discuss their experiences, their responses include sentiments like, “I love our chorus. I adore and admire its directors. The day/time of rehearsal is like my church or therapy of the week!” and “This program has given me so much. Personally, I find myself feeling more centered by music and I sing more in my free time. It brings me joy to be around the community and sing with a multigenerational group of people” (Neighborhood Rocks Survey, February, 2020.) In most instances, choir-goers feel that those two hours on Sunday are near the most special of the week.

In this essay, I want to pose the question, “Why do individuals participate in community music groups, and what motivates them to stay?” With that query in mind, I want to examine a wide variety of community music groups that exist and explore their greater impact. In particular, I will use Neighborhood Rocks as a case study to examine the purpose and meaning it carries for its participants. To guide this exploration, I carried out a series of interviews with choir-members, including the two co-directors, and conducted a “Soul Survey” that I posed to the community to inquire about participants’ experiences with Neighborhood Rocks. Finally, I’ll use this research and community feedback to offer a few ideas for how Neighborhood Rocks might continue to develop as a community and music-oriented organization and small business.

Historically, community music distinguishes itself as people-centered. In most traditional music-making settings throughout the 20th century and before, popular contemporary musicians

(and its admirers) valued product over process. This old-school concept is juxtaposed with the way that community art emphasizes the *makers* of art as much as the art itself. In his book *Community Music: In Theory and Practice*, Lee Higgins discusses this notion. He writes, “Community arts projects served the interest of the communities in which they were located, and in this way the work was *with* the people rather than *on* the people. The community arts enterprise reflected a broader emphasis throughout the performing and fine art world on the context of the artwork rather than just the content” (Higgins, 2012.) This sense of artistic collaboration uniquely positions community music as a vehicle to celebrate the total artistic potential of a neighborhood or community. In many ways, this pivot enabled music educators to facilitate creativity and self-expression as opposed to delivering predetermined knowledge. Higgins goes on, “This radical approach to teaching placed emphasis on creativity, expression, spontaneity, and cooperation -- attributes synonymous to what I think as community music” (Higgins, 2012.) Community music, by definition, gives license to all individuals, regardless of artistic background, to create in the company of others.

Relatedly, in more ways than one, community music has the potential to lift up the voices of its participants. In her piece, *The Diverse Communities of a Community Choir: Fostering a Sustainable System*, K. Rickard McCoy describes a choir from Southern Maryland that underwent a process to define its mission statement. The directors as well as each member of the ensemble collaborated to answer a number of questions including, why do we sing? Why do we continue to sing? What is the responsibility of the chorister? Who deserves music? What is our role in the community? McCoy writes, “The first two questions were meant to gather information based on the chorister’s personal opinions and motivations. The latter three

questions were meant to lay a groundwork for a discussion of the choir's role in the surrounding community" (McCoy, 2013.) This example highlights the potential for democracy that exists within some community music groups. When we think of music-makers, we often think of performance without considering the search for purpose and interconnection that takes place before the presentation of a final product. The choir that McCoy describes is a clear illustration of the possibilities that some choirs contain to nurture community and purpose among a group of music makers.

Community music's accessible and inclusive nature invites folks from a wide array of musical experience to participate. In his piece *Community Music as Music Education: on the educational potential of community music*, Constantijn Koopman (2007) describes the diversity of musical background that enables community music groups to thrive. In particular, there is a separation from traditional music teaching and learning that clearly distinguishes many community music groups. He writes, "Being flexible both musically and socially, community music does not require people to accommodate to some pre-existing format. It can devise tailor-made programmes addressing the needs and preferences of specific groups" (Koopman, 2007.) In this way, Koopman underscores a level of openness that can exist within community music learning. Much like the previous example from McCoy, Koopman serves to illuminate the people-centered or participant-centered motivation behind the experience.

A case for musical openness exists within LaSalle Secondary School in Kingston, Ontario through a music instruction initiative that recruits elderly and middle-aged adults to the school's student band program. Most of the adults start from scratch; they learn to read and apply music notation with adolescents as their guides. The "adult band" often performed alongside the

student band, and intergenerational learning was an integral characteristic of the experience.

Upon reflecting on the experience, most adult learners noted that age became less visible and less important while music learning alongside youth (Alfano & Beynon, 2013.) There are benefits here on a music education level, of course, and there are also significant social and interpersonal benefits. In their analysis of the case study, Alfano and Beynon elaborate: “Breaking down age stereotyping of one age group toward another is a significant non-musical but important social outcome of intergenerational association. These studies show that learning music in an intergenerational situation can be a great equalizer. In fact, some authors recommend that public schools be added to the list of sites where the participation and association through learning by multi-age groups takes place” (Alfano & Beynon, 2013.) Thinking outside traditional standards of teaching and learning is an essential feat of community music, and there it carries great potential for interpersonal successes, musical and otherwise.

Singing, as a form of communal musicking, is particularly accessible and inclusive. This is largely attributed to all humans having an instrument in their voice, and all humans having the capacity to sing. This artistic accessibility on an organizational level is clear in the data: singing is an extremely common pastime. A Chorus America survey indicated that twenty-four million Americans sing weekly in choirs, and the National Endowment for American Arts revealed that choral singing is the most popular public arts activity in the U.S. (McCoy, 2013.) It’s worth noting that community choirs might range in level of difficulty and commitment. Some choirs might require an audition to participate, others might welcome all. Some choirs might be free, others might require monthly dues. Some choirs might be targeted towards a particular sexual, gender, or family-status identity. In any case, the demand for community choirs is high and

growing, and if arts educators hope to do right by this enormous section of musicians around the country, it would behoove us to develop a sense of what makes many community choral spaces thrive.

As mentioned previously, an intergenerational choir is a particularly interesting demographic considering the blend of developmental differences among its participants. It is worth exploring an example of intergenerational music learning in the choir setting to consider its musical and communal benefits. Carol Beynon (2017) writes at length about a particular case study in her article, *Never Too Old: Establishing an Intergenerational Choir for Transformational Learning Through Singing*. In her words, the learning that takes place in these unique settings is “enduring and endearing.” Beynon observes that the most successful intergenerational choirs are fueled by interpersonal relationships. That relational accessibility is essential. She writes, “Elders and youth need time and opportunity during the program to develop a real relationship rather than just time to sing together. The real learning comes from the friendships developed when they have confident and shared access to each other” (Beynon, 2017.) Many rehearsals include social time at the beginning of each rehearsal with snacks and juice boxes, and some pair participants with an intergenerational “buddy.” Several participants echoed the sentiments from the intergenerational band program at LaSalle Secondary School: age difference diminishes in importance, and in several cases, intergenerational relationships boost trust, confidence, and self-esteem. Enduring and endearing indeed.

Evocative of Koopman’s assertion that the carrying out of community music requires flexibility and openness with regard to musicianship, Beynon notes that the most viable learning experiences within intergenerational choirs require “planned but flexible curriculum with

learning outcomes that suit and accommodate both generations and are monitored for learning achievement” (Beynon, 2013.) This adaptability nurtures an inclusive learning environment where all participants feel as though they belong. For aging adults in particular, a sense of belonging might mean that they take small breaks from singing or excuse themselves from rehearsal to take a respite. Beynon emphasizes that for some, the musical aspect might actually take a backseat compared to the sense of belonging that the environment provides. She notes, “There is no doubt that the creation, success, and longevity of intergenerational programs has a positive impact... while there are costs to such a program, the investments are all outweighed by the evidence of increased learning for all and the social and health benefits to society” (Beynon, 2013.) Beynon’s research, coupled with some of the other studies and observations described above, primed me to maintain a positive mindset while diving-in to my own research with regard to community music and intergenerational community choirs in particular.

It is interesting to consider the ways in which my own community choir, Neighborhood Rocks (NR), serves as a case study to compare and contrast the data and reflections above. As a brief overview, NR is a multigenerational community choir that exclusively sings contemporary music - mostly rock and pop, with some jazz and Broadway in the mix. Some of the recent selections include Don’t Stop Believing (Journey), This Is Me (The Greatest Showman), Nina Cried Power (Hozier), Rise Up (Andra Day), and Galileo (Indigo Girls.) There are two 15-week seasons per year: September to December and February to May. The choir varies from around 60-80 members, and about 25%-30% of the group tends to be children. The kids range in age from 3-10 years old. All choir members learn almost all the same repertoire; the adults may sing one or two songs with tighter harmonies without the kids, and the kids usually have their own

feature song that doesn't include the adults. They split up the group during rehearsals so that kids can get kid-paced activities and learning, while adults can focus on harmonies and go a bit slower. Each rehearsal (4-6pm) has two 30-40 minute sessions in which the kids leave the main rehearsal space to have "kids class."

The central question guiding my research is "Why do individuals participate in community music groups, and what motivates them to stay?" To get started on a response to this question, I leaned on Koopman (2017.) He outlines three central characteristics of community music: collaborative music-making, community development, and personal growth. These are the three primary categories around which I oriented my project and survey. It was fascinating to observe the ways in which choir members' personal understandings of each central characteristic overlapped and varied according to their subjective definitions. For some, for example, personal growth was directly intertwined with community development and the interaction with other choir members. For others, personal growth had more to do with their own musical journeys as individuals. Some aren't even seeking personal growth as an outcome. (One person wrote, "I don't expect NR to fulfill all my needs.") The subjectivity of this framework allowed for choir-goers to share about their experiences without hesitation. Participants provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experiences, and they also had ideas for how NR as an organization might improve the overall experience.

I sent out a Soul Survey to the entire choir in early February, and I received responses through early May. In total, I received 23 responses. 64% of survey participants are between 40 and 60 years of age. 61% of survey participants have been members in the choir for three years or less. 65% of survey participants have family members in the choir. With the exception of five

people, all survey participants identified as white or caucasian; one individual identified as Anglo Asian, one individual identified as Asian/white, one individual identified black, one individual identified as mixed, and one individual identified as “human.” In addition, I carried out four phone/Zoom interviews, which I will refer to during the analysis.

RESULTS

From this limited list, what motivates you to participate in Neighborhood Rocks?

Collaborative Music Making	Personal Growth	Community Development	And Other
22	16	16	12

On a scale of 1-10, to what extent does Neighborhood Rocks satisfy your soul as a source of:

Collaborative Music Making	Personal Growth	Community Development
8.5	7.9	7.7

Which of the following would you be eager to explore within Neighborhood Rocks with regard to singing and general musicianship? Check all that apply

More performance opportunities	Opportunities for member leadership	More weeknight sectionals	Guest artists/guest musicians	Opportunities to improve as a singer	Other
12	2	3	9	14	3

Which of the following would you be eager to explore within Neighborhood Rocks with regard to community building? Check all that apply

More social events outside of rehearsal	More social opportunities within rehearsal	More outreach to JP and Brookline communities	Opportunities to discuss the larger mission of the organization	Other
13	9	10	6	3

What might enhance Neighborhood Rocks as a source of collaborative music making?

Repertoire concerns	More musical skill development	More community involvement
4	2	5

What might enhance Neighborhood Rocks as a source of community development?

Community building during rehearsal	Community building outside of rehearsal	More identity diversity
2	6	2

What might enhance Neighborhood Rocks as a source of personal growth?

Individualized vocal training and feedback	Community time
5	1

ANALYSIS

The data reveals that all but one survey participant is motivated by collaborative music making. It's also the component that the majority of survey participants feel most satisfied with via NR. This is a meaningful reminder that amid all of this discussion and analysis of community organizations and interpersonal connection, music and song remains at the center. So many wrote

about the joy, self-confidence, and energy that singing provides. One person wrote, “I grow a lot [at NR] and feel pleasantly challenged.” Another wrote, “I have improved as a singer and advocate for myself.” Another said that they enjoy the “fun music with great arrangements” (Neighborhood Rocks Survey, February, 2020.) These responses indicate that NR provides a unique and enjoyable outlet for singing specifically.

In particular, several individuals mentioned the impressive musicality of the group’s leaders, Krissy and Michael, as a primary inspiration to grow as a singer. One written testimonial remarked that the high bar of musicianship that the leaders maintain encourages her to grow and develop as a singer. Another participant said that the “encouraging and joyful directors” have enhanced NR as a place of collaborative music learning. One interviewee (a music major with a focus in American Ethnomusicology and Vocal Performance) added that “what they’re asking for from us musically is just top-notch” (E. Seltzer, Zoom interview, April 28, 2020.) For many, the quality musicianship from directors coupled with their enthusiasm for teaching and supporting singers is a particularly special characteristic of their choir experience.

In addition, the data reveals that participants enjoy singing alongside others. One person said that “practicing art with others” is a key factor in their decision to continue participation with NR. Most notably, participants enjoy singing alongside their family members. NR’s unique ability to support children and families is a consistent theme across the surveys and interviews. One participant, Tim, shared that “child growth in a shared activity” was a primary motivator for his participation. Another participant shared that “family time, i.e. spending time together and sharing an interest with the rest of the family,” is a driving factor in their motivation to participate. Another, Amy, shared that “having a shared experience with my daughter” was a key

motivator in her decision to participate with NR in the first place. She elaborated in her interview that her daughter's (Lilly) participation inspires her to tag along. She says, "It's the main reason I participate. Lilly and I have something to connect on. We feel emotionally connected, we see our friends, it helps me say to my husband 'I'm going to leave you now with our 7-year-old,' who is going to want all of his attention for hours... I would want to go [to NR without Lilly] but if it caused any stress at home, it would make it hard to go" (Bollinder, A, April 24, 2020.) For this parent, the unique connection with her daughter is a motivator in her participation in the choir.

For parents with children in the choir, NR feels like a family choir. One participant, Kyra, spoke about how the rehearsal space offers a sense of belonging for each member of the family. During her interview, she said "... your kids can come, they can be on your lap, they can be downstairs. People are really buying into that model and it's unique. That's the thing that's so special about it... it's a chance to hang out with your family and you do something that's really special and your kids are able to be involved in a bunch of ways. No one else is offering that that I know of" (Fries, K, April 18, 2020.) The family-friendly nature offers a unique opportunity for families to connect and feel a sense of belonging. Another singer wrote, "NR brings such joy to our family! We've been immensely grateful for the opportunity to be part of this incredible community." Another said, "Very meaningful to be able to do this as a family (kids and parents.) Nice to get excited about the same songs and perform together." It's evident that for many, the family-oriented nature of the group is an integral piece of the experience .

A number of survey participants and interviewees voiced that NR provides a sense of spiritual fulfillment. Amy spoke at length about how her rehearsal experience feels like an exercise in mindfulness. After joining, she said, "I realized... it was a mindfulness exercise. No

matter where you were in your headspace, you could practice the song. Once a week, with a community of really nice people and you can just sit and sing.” For her, the connection with others doesn’t take place as much in human interaction, but rather in the shared experience of being in song with others. She continues, “It’s almost more connecting because you’re present instead of thinking about what you’re going to say or talk about, you’re just singing being present in the moment. And paying attention to the notes” (Bollinder, A, Zoom interview, April 24, 2020.) Another participant echoed this sentiment, noting that NR enables them to “center [themselves] before the work week.” Another testimonial compared NR to meditation. She said, “The two hours I spend singing and breathing feel like meditation. When you’re in that rehearsal space, you aren’t worrying about climate change or the death of democracy or the latest domestic or work dramas; you are entirely focused on the music and the other people who have come to sing with you. It truly feels like a fellowship.”

Kyra talked about how NR feels a bit like a spiritual community. She says, “I have not been historically a churchgoer. For me [NR] is a place where I can go weekly, and where I am going to be held. In that way, it feels like a spiritual community.... it has been a happy medium of, do we want to seek out a church, do we have time to seek out a church, and the answer has been, eh, we’re going to end up doing [NR] really, really faithfully” (Fries, K, April 18, 2020.) For Kyra, the reliability and tenderness of the NR community makes for a soulful experience.

The directors themselves described the foundation of the organization as spiritual to some degree. The transcription below details the originating vision for the choir, and displays the leadership styles that are at NR’s helm:

Michael: I was talking to [a choir member] yesterday because I was having some bread baking issues, and then I ended up checking in with him about how he thinks rehearsals are going on Sundays. And it was this reaffirmation that we are *still* bringing people together through music

which is the main idea. Even though our preference would be, let's do that in person, it's still a thing that's happening [despite COVID-19.] Bringing people together through music.

Michael: Getting people into a space where they can express themselves and sort of explore their emotions among other people.

Krissy: If we're going to take it from 0 - 1000, that is the sole overarching goal that I have for Neighborhood Rocks... to create an environment for people to feel human. To experience human emotions. In my opinion, it's a perfect vehicle to really get the whole gamut from A to Z. So it's never really been about perfect notes, perfect balance, and perfect intonation. Even though my academic brain strive for those, it's solely been about creating a container for people to experience themselves and life a little more fully.

Michael: It's sort of this idea of we just happen to be good at music. So that's what we're using to get people to do this. If we were writers, we would do something differently. But we're musicians so this is what we're doing to get people to experience humanity together. Like Krissy said, getting the notes right isn't the top priority, but it's important to us and we do work on it as well.

Krissy: ... well, because that is an important element of struggle and success and achievement and pride. It's an important part of feeling like a valuable member of your community.

Michael: And the idea of having goals, that's helpful with the songs. And typically when we have performance, it's a goal. It's hard to sustain a community that doesn't have any goals or things to look forward to.

Krissy: And that goes back to what it means to be human. There isn't a unifying purpose or unifying belief.

In many ways, this exchange is a meaningful display of NR's leadership and vision (Glasgow, M. & Skare, K., Personal Interview via Zoom, May 1, 2020.) This duo is thoughtful and free-flowing in approach while simultaneously goal-oriented and concrete. Many artists can likely relate to the elements Krissy mentions of struggle, success, achievement, and pride. And these characteristics are not unique to music-making. It's evident that music, while an essential

ingredient in the NR recipe, is the vehicle by which the directors steer the choir towards something greater.

With this sentiment in mind, perhaps the ultimate affirmation is from a choir-goer who wrote: “Honestly, outside of time with my family, [NR] feels like the most human thing I do each week. And for that, I am profoundly grateful.”

When it comes to the big picture, the data reveals that Neighborhood Rocks effectively satisfies the community’s general yearning for and interest in collaborative music making, community development, personal growth, and other personally meaningful motivators. It bears mentioning that a community organization is bound to encounter interpersonal misalignment and disagreement, and the survey did offer some recommendations for the choir moving forward. Of course, it’s impossible to satisfy an entire community in all moments. With that said, it is worth exploring some of those considerations as put forth by participants in the choir.

Some choir members are interested in developing more social connections with other members of the group. A theme of feedback appeared in which choir-goers feel that they don’t develop the level of interpersonal connections with other participants as they might hope, both in and out of rehearsal. Participants described that they would like more opportunities for socializing during rehearsal. One wrote that they’d appreciate “sharing personal activities with each other” and “more community time.” Another said they would like “more time to get to know the other choir members.” A third said that they craved “SATB pods to rehearse in” as well as some sort of “buddy system to rehearsal/hang out between rehearsals.” These connections are

important to consider as previous research demonstrates that for many choir-goers, interpersonal relationships deeply enrich the experience.

Some choir members expressed an interest in further developing individual musicianship. One of these thoughts was rather fundamental; NR distributes binders of traditionally notated music at the beginning of every season, and a participant mentioned that they did not know how to read music. It's worth considering that concern for inclusivity's sake. Other choir-members had more involved recommendations: "I don't expect one on one musical training in the context of a choir, but I wish I could have more personal feedback/guidance on how to grow as a singer... we could all benefit from a bit of personal instruction, as time permits." Three other individuals mentioned a desire for more personalized feedback for voice development.

Choir members voiced that they would like to be more involved in decision-making processes. In particular, participants want more say in repertoire selection. A number of individuals expressed that they feel contemporary pop music is overrepresented in the setlist. (Michael's direct response to this feedback was: "We are called Neighborhood Rocks, not Neighborhood Hallelujahs.") Generally, there were a few responses that detailed a desire for early music, folk, world, and classical music to be represented in the repertoire.

Michael and Krissy are keenly aware of much of this feedback. In response to some of these considerations, she considered the big picture. "It's easy to fall into the trap of wanting to check all of the boxes... we want to provide a social mission, we want to have a high-quality experience... and, and, and, and, and... it's helpful to take a step back and revisit [the larger goal.]" An advisory council exists to facilitate community input, and it seems to be held in high-regard by the choir community. Every community organization has its own particular set of

politics, and Neighborhood Rocks is no different. It's important to recognize that for the singers, Neighborhood Rocks is a two-hour weekly commitment on Sundays. For Krissy and Michael, as is true for other community choirs that are also small businesses, Neighborhood Rocks is (among other things) a source of income and livelihood.

CONCLUSIONS

Multigenerational choirs provide collective opportunities for individuals to authentically express themselves. There is something particularly sincere and special about a creative, age-diverse environment that welcomes singers from all backgrounds. Perhaps Susan Avery, Casey Hayes, and Cindy Bell (2013) describe it most effectively in their piece, *Community Choirs: Expressions of Identity through Vocal Performance*. They write that while community choruses vary in particular ways, they are united by a mission to nurture “a welcoming and accepting atmosphere, an enthusiasm for working hard and improving musical ability, and the importance of making friends and having fun in a social setting.” A particular level of inclusivity is built-in to the community choir experience by definition.

Relatedly, community choirs nurture and model lifelong learning. It's valuable for children to see that learning continues into adulthood and beyond. On the other end, it's particularly meaningful for aging adults to feel connected to a greater purpose. Music is a fantastic medium for this. Beynon further elaborates on this point: “Lifelong learning is much more than a buzzword; it is essential for life and quality of life because active learning influences not just brain stimulation and mental health but physical and emotional health. Singing provides an excellent vehicle for stimulating the brain for all ages” (Beynon, 2017.) In this way,

intergenerational choirs can build bridges to connect learners of all backgrounds, ages, and experience.

There is something to be said about the power of song in an intergenerational setting. In one testimonial, a participant shares their initial skepticism before joining: “For a while, as a very experienced singer I was under the false illusion that there wasn’t going to be much musical growth that I could get out of [NR] and it would just be for fun and my soul, but when I was able to go to a concert and really listen I realized I was very wrong about the quality of music and in joining have continued to grow.” Intergenerational choirs are uplifting demonstrations of the potential for transformation that can take place among a collection of singers and learners in community.

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