



“WITH ONE VOICE AND ONE HEART”: CHORAL SINGING AS EMBODIED ECCLESIOLOGY

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“When we sing together, we create a community, a communion in sound.”

Alice Parker¹

Twentieth-century Orthodox and Catholic theologians have argued that the Eucharistic gathering is integral to the Christian life and the manifestation of the Church as the Body of Christ.² Much less explored is the ecclesial role of music in the celebration of the Eucharist and other church services. Patristic and liturgical sources suggest that liturgical singing can transform individuals and unite worshippers as one body. Several recent studies corroborate these patristic and liturgical sources, suggesting that singing together transforms individuals and builds social cohesion. Based on these studies, this paper argues that liturgical music is an embodied ecclesial act and raises pastoral questions about the inclusion and exclusion of individuals in liturgical music today.

Discussion of the ecclesial importance of the Christian gatherings and shared rituals dates to New Testament times, but achieved increased prominence in the twentieth century. St Paul emphasized the importance of the Eucharist for uniting Christian believers as a single body: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”³ In the twentieth century, several Orthodox and Catholic theologians built on Paul’s words to emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist in constituting the Church. The Russian theologian Nicholas Afanasiev coined and developed the term “Eucharistic ecclesiology,” which his student Alexander Schmemmann developed further, and which John Zizioulas critiqued in his work *Being as Communion*.⁴ Other contemporary thinkers such as

1 Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013), 115.

2 I am indebted to the participants of the 2019 ISOCM Conference and to those present at the October 2019 St Vladimir’s Seminary Faculty Seminar, who gave me feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

3 1 Cor. 10:17 (NRSV).

4 E.g. Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Vitaly Permiakov (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007); Nicholas Afanasiev, “The Church Which Presides in Love,” in *The Primacy of Peter*, ed. John Meyendorff (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 91–143; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985). See also Anastacia Wooden, “Eucharistic

John Erickson have sought to broaden the twentieth-century Eucharistic focus by considering the ecclesial importance of other sacraments, such as Baptism.⁵

Much less discussed is the role music plays in such liturgical gatherings, although it is present in virtually all Orthodox liturgical gatherings and the services of most other Christian traditions as well. The text of the Orthodox liturgy itself suggests that singing is an ecclesial act. As early as the late eighth-century Barberini Euchologion, the celebrant in both Basil's and Chrysostom's liturgies concludes the exclamation before the Litany before the Lord's Prayer with the phrase "That with one mouth [voice] and one heart, we may glorify and praise Thine all-honourable and majestic name..."⁶

This same phrase also appears in one of the fourth-century writings of St Basil the Great. In a letter to the clergy of Neocaesarea, Basil describes liturgical singing at a vigil service. He recounts his experience, noting how the people, "After passing the night in various psalmody, praying at intervals as the day begins to dawn, all together, *as with one voice and one heart*, raise the psalm of confession to the Lord, each forming for himself his own expressions of penitence."⁷ In his homily *On Psalm 1*, Basil explains that singing Psalms together creates "A bond...toward unity...joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir."⁸ For Basil, liturgical singing both inspires personal acts of penitence in the individual as well as uniting worshippers. Although these liturgical and patristic sources offer tantalizing early witnesses to the notion that liturgical singing is an ecclesial act, the remainder of this paper focuses on evidence from studies on the social and biological effects of group singing.

MUSIC AND SOCIAL COHESION

Recent studies seem to corroborate these patristic and liturgical sources, demonstrating that the communal act of group singing brings individuals together in profound and measureable ways. Interviews show that choral singers value the social benefits of singing as highly as the musical experience.⁹ Research demonstrates that participation in ensemble singing produces social cohesion by uniting singers in a common goal.¹⁰ Regular rehearsals and performances provide opportunities for "social interaction, social connection, bonding, and social inclusion."¹¹ There is a physiological explanation for this feeling of closeness: singing together increases

Ecclesiology of Nicolas Afanasiev and its Ecumenical Significance: A New Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 4 (2010): 543–60.

5 John H. Erickson, "The Church in Modern Orthodox Thought: Towards a Baptismal Ecclesiology," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 2–3 (2011): 137.

6 Stefano Parenti and Elena Velkovska, eds., *L'Eucologio Barberini gr. 336 (ff. 1–263)* (Rome: Centro Liturgico Vincenziano, 1995): 18, 38.

7 Basil of Caesarea, *Epistle 207.3* (PG 32:760b); English in Olga A. Druzhinina, *The Ecclesiology of St. Basil the Great: A Trinitarian Approach to the Life of the Church* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 89 (emphasis added).

8 Basil of Caesarea, *Homily on Psalm 1* (PG 29:212d); English in Saint Basil, *Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 152. Ignatius of Antioch similarly employs the choir as a metaphor for ecclesial unity in his *Epistle to the Ephesians* 4.

9 Stephen M. Clift et al., "The Perceived Benefits of Singing: Findings from Preliminary Surveys of a University College Choral Society," *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 121, no. 4 (December 2001): 248–56; Michael Brewer et al., "The Making of a Choir: Individuality and Consensus in Choral Singing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music*, ed. A. de Quadros (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 256–71; Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, "Exploring Student Experiences of Belonging Within an Urban High School Choral Ensemble: An Action Research Study," *Music Education Research* 12, no. 4 (December 2010): 339–52.

10 Robert Faulkner et al., "Men in Chorus: Collaboration and Competition in Homo-Social Vocal Behavior," *Psychology of Music* 24, no. 2 (April 2006): 219–37; Parker, "Exploring Student Experiences."

11 Hilary Moss et al., "Exploring the Perceived Health Benefits of Singing in a Choir: An International Cross-Sectional Mixed-Methods Study," *Perspectives in Public Health* 138, no. 3 (May 2018): 160–68.

levels of oxytocin, a biochemical referred to as the bonding hormone.¹² This means the bonds produced through choral singing can be observed at the biochemical level.

Singing with others in a choir requires a level of personal vulnerability, where individual and corporate processes intersect.¹³ Each voice is a critical component to the whole. Because singing is an intensely personal activity, people who experience negativity or criticism regarding their singing voice often bear emotional marks for decades.¹⁴ These individuals may feel afraid of singing, inadequate, embarrassed, and/or humiliated, especially if the critical moment happens in a public setting. A non-competitive, accepting choral environment creates a feeling of refuge for these singers, where creative risk-taking is possible and process is as valuable as product.¹⁵ Choral singers in these environments use phrases such as “supportive family” to describe their choir.¹⁶ In groups like these, choral singing reduces feelings of isolation and depression and contributes to community development.¹⁷

Regardless of the size of the ensemble, group singing requires individual musicians to transcend personal backgrounds, social status, and ethnicity to collaborate as a team.¹⁸ In a recent study, researchers observed smaller choral groups ranging in size from 20–80 members and a larger choral group of 232 members.¹⁹ “Feelings of inclusion, connectivity, positive affect, and measures of endorphin release all increased across singing rehearsals,” and even in the larger choir, where many singers were strangers, participants acknowledged a feeling of social closeness with one another.²⁰ Research also indicates that extra-musical social activities with choir members, such as sharing food, going on trips, and participating in games or other events, increase feelings of emotional intimacy with ensemble members.²¹

Although it may be argued that many of these ends can be achieved through other, non-musical social activities, Sharonne K. Specker’s interviews with ten community choir singers and two directors highlight the unique ways in which choral experiences fuse individuals together.²² Several participants describe singing as an embodied form of communication that defies verbal description, a physical “way-of-knowing” that cannot be translated into another medium.²³ Singers who create, hear, and experience sound in a group setting can feel “immersed in the sound” itself, creating a sonic interconnection between singers.²⁴

12 Christina Grape Viding et al., “Does Singing Promote Well-Being?: An Empirical Study of Professional and Amateur Singers During a Singing Lesson,” *Integrative Physiological & Behavioral Science* 38, no. 1 (2003): 65–74.

13 Liz Garnett, “Choral Singing as Bodily Regime / Zborsko Pjevanje Kao Tjelesni Režim,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 2 (2005): 250.

14 Helen Richards et al., “To Sing or Not to Sing: A Study on the Development of ‘Non-singers’ in Choral Activity,” *Research Studies in Music Education* 20, no. 1 (June 2003): 78–89.

15 Colin Durrant, “Shaping Identity Through Choral Activity: Singers and Conductors’ Perceptions,” *Research Studies in Music Education* 24, no. 1 (June 2015): 88–98; Parker, “Exploring Student Experiences.”

16 Terrell L. Strayhorn, “Singing in a Foreign Land: An Exploratory Study of Gospel Choir Participation among African American Undergraduates at a Predominantly White Institution,” *Journal of College Student Development* 52, no. 2 (March/April 2011): 137–53.

17 Betty A. Bailey et al., “Adaptive Characteristics of Group Singing: Perceptions from Members of a Choir for Homeless Men,” *Musicae Scientiae* 6, no. 2 (September 2002): 221–56.

18 Durrant, “Shaping Identity.”

19 Daniel Weinstein et al., “Singing and Social Bonding: Changes in Connectivity and Pain Threshold as a Function of Group Size,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 2 (March 2016): 152–58.

20 Weinstein et al., “Singing and Social Bonding,” 152.

21 Diana J. Parkinson, “Diversity and Inclusion Within Adult Amateur Singing Groups: A Literature Review,” *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 6, no. 1 (2018): 41–65.

22 Sharonne K. Specker, “Sounding the Social: The Sonic Dimension of Communal Bonding Through Choral Participation,” *Platforum: Journal of Graduate Students in Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (July 2017): 95–120.

23 Specker, “Sounding,” 107.

24 Specker, “Sounding,” 108.

Singing in harmony deepens this bond. As singers begin to hear various parts, there is a “sensation of support and solidarity that may be derived from the vocal, sonic basis of singing in synchrony.”²⁵ Singers practice interdependence as they tune a chord, listening and adjusting. This “tuning in” provides opportunities not only to appreciate the uniqueness of other voices, but also to understand how musical elements, such as pitches, work together to form a complex whole, leading to an increased “musical and potentially social awareness.”²⁶

Collective music making enables a unique, collaborative relationship to develop between musicians. Sociologist Alfred Schütz describes this synchronicity as a *mutual tuning-in relationship*, where participants interact and respond to one another in a committed and focused way.²⁷ Choral singers “tune in” to one another as they breathe together, tone together, and listen to one another. The acts of voicing and hearing are dynamically intertwined. This web of listening, trusting, and supporting becomes its own form of non-verbal communication, bonding the singers together sonically and socially²⁸.

Even in situations where a harmonized choral sound is not culturally normative, simply creating sound together can produce interconnection. Steven Feld’s ethnographic research explores group singing with the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, who have the practice of layering individual singing lines, creating a collective sound and shared sonic experience that produces a feeling of social closeness.²⁹ Vocal toning—the practice of creating a sustained vowel sound on a single pitch for the full exhalation of the breath—has been used by choral pedagogues as a nonthreatening way to encourage timid singers to create sound together and still benefit from the social aspect of singing with others.³⁰

The sense of belonging to a group with similar interests is significant and potentially life changing for many singers.³¹ In an ethnographic study of migrant youth in Norway, Anne Haugland Balsnes effectively demonstrates that the choral practice contributes to “community, empowerment and respect, integration and meaning in...refugees’ lives.”³² Because of the research undertaken by Balsnes and others, the European Choral Organization has recently spearheaded a project titled *Sing Me In*, which aims to use collective singing as a means for welcoming migrant youth into communities.

MUSIC AS EMBODIED UNITY

The very nature of Western choral singing requires group synchronization. In a well-publicized 2013 study, researchers observed that as choral singers coordinate their breathing to match phrase lengths with one another, their heartbeats actually begin to synchronize.³³ This confirmed an earlier research project, which examined

25 Specker, “Sounding,” 108–09.

26 Alfred Schütz, “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” *Social Research* 18, no. 1 (March 1951): 76–97; Specker, “Sounding,” 110.

27 Schütz, “Making Music.”

28 Sharonne K. Specker, “Communities of Song: Collective Musical Participation and Group Singing Experiences in Victoria, BC,” *The Arbutus Review* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 62–90.

29 Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

30 Tom Carter, *Choral Charisma* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2005).

31 Durrant, “Shaping Identity.”

32 Anne Haugland Balsnes, “Hospitality in Multicultural Choral Singing,” *International Journal of Community Music* 9, no. 2 (July 2016): 171.

33 Björn Vickhoff et al., “Music Structure Determines Heart Rate Variability of Singers,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 334, no. 4 (July 2013): 1–16.

the physiological synchronization between eleven singers and one conductor.³⁴ Results showed synchronization not only of the singers' heartbeats, but also their respiratory rates, bringing the words of St Basil vividly to mind. Interestingly, this synchronization was at its highest peak when the choir sang in unison, creating what researchers labelled a "superorganism," where individuals began to function not only musically, but also physiologically as one being.³⁵

Recent discoveries in how we understand the brain are further illuminating the experience of group singing. Emerging neurological research on mirror neurons offers a possible explanation for how nonverbal communication between conductors and singers operates. A mirror neuron is a type of brain cell that fires both when a person performs an action and when a person watches that exact action being performed by another person. In the case of group singing, this means that the brain distinguishes little between watching someone sing and singing, creating an empathetic bond between individuals in an ensemble. This can be observed in relationships between conductors and choristers: when a choral director employs a particular facial expression, choristers tend to respond with similar facial expressions.³⁶

Scientists have also sought to explain the ability whereby participants in a mutual kinaesthetic activity are able to identify, anticipate, and even predict one another's actions. This synergy has been described both through the idea of muscular bonding and joint action theory.³⁷ Muscular bonding is brought about by the visceral and emotional sensations of corporate movement.³⁸ Paul Filmer suggests that this rhythmic and physical synchronicity occurs when individuals participate in group singing.³⁹ Joint action theory, as championed by psychologist Michael Bratman, posits that an activity carried out between individuals with shared intentions creates a unique collaborative meeting point. When two or more people coordinate their actions in space and time to produce a joint outcome, they perform a joint action. The process of synchronizing physical movements, such as breathing or facial expressions, with a shared intention, such as singing an A440 at *pianissimo*, creates a subconscious empathizing in the complex joint action. While research in these areas is admittedly in its infancy, it implies that how conductors and singers act together impacts each other on a physiological level.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH SINGING

Although none of these studies deals explicitly with liturgical singing, they nevertheless suggest that the words of Basil and the Divine Liturgy that describe worshippers united in "one voice and one heart" are more than merely rhetoric or poetry. Singing really changes individuals and impacts how they relate to those around them, creating community and fostering feelings of belonging and closeness with others. This unification happens sonically, socially, and even on a physiological

34 Viktor Müller et al., "Cardiac and Respiratory Patterns Synchronize between Persons during Choir Singing," *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 9 (2011): e24893.

35 Viktor Müller et al., "Complex Networks Emerging During Choir Singing," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1431, no. 1 (November 2018): 85–101.

36 Gary B. Seighman, "Exploring the Science of Ensemble: Gestures, Emotion, and Collaboration in Choral Music Making," *The Choral Journal* 55, no. 9 (April 2015): 8–16.

37 Seighman, "Exploring the Science."

38 William McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

39 Paul Filmer, "Songtime: Sound Culture, Rhythm, and Sociality," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back (New York: Berg, 2003), 91–112.

level. Singers become unified in their breathing, the beating of their hearts, and the firing of their neurons.

Liturgical singing, then, cannot be minimized as mere ornament or accompaniment to liturgical texts and actions. Rather, the act of group music making is integral to the ecclesial gathering; it is an act of communion. It is no coincidence that the words of the liturgy similarly emphasize the unity of worshippers through their repeated use of the first person plural: “Let *us* pray to the Lord... *We* praise Thee, *we* bless Thee, *we* give thanks unto Thee, O Lord...,” etc. One might argue that what group singing does to our brains and bodies according to the abovementioned studies is also occurring semantically through the words we sing. Such language functions performatively, as “speech acts” through which a gathering of worshippers constitutes itself as a unified body, although this topic lies beyond the scope of this paper.⁴⁰

All of this has profound pastoral implications when churches consider whom to include in church singing. If liturgical singing is an integral element in ecclesial gatherings, then everyone—the very young, the self-proclaimed “non-singer,” the ill, the octogenarian, the illiterate, those with significant cognitive impairment, *and* the accomplished musician—all need opportunities to participate.⁴¹ In these moments of corporate praise, it is more important for the entire assembly to participate than to sing beautifully, for “everyone’s contribution is valued and considered essential.”⁴²

Churches must also carefully consider pastoral implications of excluding people from choirs. Anyone who has conducted a church choir has probably felt the tension between inclusivity and performance, between inviting everyone with a desire to sing and excluding some to achieve a more refined sound. Well executed singing is undeniably compelling. But the pursuit of a polished final product must be carefully weighed against potential damage to individuals, and collective damage done to the ecclesial body, when members are excluded from liturgical singing.⁴³ Indeed, none of the abovementioned studies suggest that the benefits of singing are contingent upon high levels of musicianship.

The question of youth participation offers a pressing example. Choir directors without an understanding of the young voice may feel they do not know how to teach children, and other choir members may not have the patience to mentor younger singers in the midst of services. But if the Orthodox Church does not bar infants or young children from receiving the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, on what grounds can it justify excluding them from the ecclesial act of singing? Rather, should not involvement in liturgical singing be considered a vital part of a child’s catechism and spiritual formation?

Another group to consider is senior citizens. Research has shown that older adults are more susceptible than the general population to feelings of depression and isolation. But this population also experiences a more positive outlook on life

40 Judith Kubicki, “Singing our Communities into Transformed Life,” *Pastoral Music* 43, no. 5 (September 2019): 28–36.

41 Recent research suggests that there are no “unmusical” people, but rather that every person lies somewhere on a musical spectrum and is capable of learning. See Colin Durrant, *Choral Conducting: Philosophy and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 141.

42 Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

43 Frank Stoldt, “No Assembly Required: Why Church Music for the Twenty-First Century is an Ecclesial Concern,” in *Musicians for the Churches: Reflections on Vocation and Formation*, ed. Margot E. Fassler (New Haven: Yale Institute of Sacred Music, 2001), 31.

and a feeling of connection and purpose when they sing in a choir.⁴⁴ Older adults who are emotionally involved in religious music feel closer to others.⁴⁵ Many of the physical deteriorations due to aging can be combated by engaging in the physical exercise of singing.⁴⁶

Once a director is committed to providing choral opportunities for the members of the parish, what is the best way to go about it? One popular approach is to form choirs for different age groups, which allows a director to address specific vocal health issues related to development. While this may streamline repertoire choices and pedagogical strategies for the director, it may also prevent potentially rich relationships from forming across age boundaries. Intergenerational choirs foster understanding and appreciation across age groups.⁴⁷ Older singers, in their role as informal teachers, experience feelings of usefulness when singing alongside children.⁴⁸ As children interact with fellow learners of a higher level of ability and experience, the potential for their musical growth increases.⁴⁹ Children can learn and practice their faith by actively worshipping alongside adults.⁵⁰

Musical choices, such as the style or difficulty level of repertoire, or even logistical barriers, may exclude potential singers without choir directors even realizing it. Individuals may not have the tools necessary to succeed in reading text or musical notation. Physical disabilities or other challenges may even prevent those willing to join the choir from climbing stairs to a choir loft or for standing for the duration of services.⁵¹ Choir members with young children may not be able to attend evening rehearsals. If liturgical music is an ecclesial act as this paper argues, then churches bear an ethical responsibility to examine how their practices and principles limit access to musical participation.

Because each parish inevitably has a distinctive musical culture, the process of musical assimilation for guests or new members may also present challenges. Communities by nature have defined borders; people are in or they are out. This social phenomenon is in tension with the concept of hospitality, which is a Biblical imperative found both in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament.⁵² What does it look like to offer an unconditional musical welcome to newcomers? Does musical repertoire and group singing offer multiple entry points for people unfamiliar with particular musical traditions? As new members attend services, they may struggle with a loss of familiar music.⁵³

44 Julene K. Johnson et al., "A Community Choir Intervention to Promote Well-Being Among Diverse Older Adults: Results from the Community of Voices Trial," *The Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* 10, no. 10 (2008): 1-11.

45 Neal Krause et al., "Religious Music and Health in Late Life: A Longitudinal Investigation," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 24, no. 1 (2014): 47-63.

46 Robert T. Sataloff, "Vocal Aging and Its Medical Implications: What Singing Teachers Should Know, Part 1," *Journal of Singing* 57, no.1 (September/October 2000): 29-34.

47 Judy Bowers, "Effects of an Intergenerational Choir for Community-Based Seniors and College Students on Age-Related Attitudes," *Journal of Music Therapy* 35, no. 1 (1998): 2-18.

48 Melita Belgrave, "The Effect of a Music Therapy Intergenerational Program on Children and Older Adults' Intergenerational Interactions, Cross-Age Attitudes, and Older Adults' Psychosocial Well-Being," *Journal of Music Therapy* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 486-508.

49 Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

50 Sophie Kouloumzin, *Our Church and Our Children* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 14.

51 John Chryssavgis, *The Body of Christ: A Place of Welcome for People with Disabilities* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing, 2002), 11.

52 Lee Higgins, "Acts of Hospitality: The Community in Community Music," *Music Education Research* 9, no. 2 (June 2007): 281-92.

53 Brian A. Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster

These are challenging questions for any church musician to answer. But these are not only questions for the choir director or the *protopsaltis*. If liturgical music making is an ecclesial activity, then it is as much a pastoral issue as a musical one. Pastors of congregations who understand the ecclesial importance of music may seek new ways to support and nurture parish music. They may encourage members of the parish to join the choir; they may support further education for their musical leadership. They may see singing not merely as liturgical ornament, but as a sacramental act in its own right, a manifestation of the very Body of Christ.⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ Edward Foley, "Training Church Musicians: What are the Appropriate Methods?" in *Musicians for the Churches: Reflections on Vocation and Formation*, ed. Margot E. Fassler (New Haven: Yale Institute of Sacred Music, 2001), 40–43.

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