

Presentation Summary for the 9th Simm-posium

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Introduction

My name is Yonatan Volfin, and I'm a musician, music educator, and music researcher, currently in my second year of PhD studies at Ghent University as part of Chair Jonet and the CESAMM research centre. Today, I'll be sharing my research outline and some preliminary findings from the first phase of my study.

My research focuses on exploring the unique characteristics of LGBTQ+ choirs and their role in fostering a sense of belonging. This research employs a mixed methodology through the investigation of four LGBTQ+ choirs located in Amsterdam and Brussels.

Theoretical Background:

Sense of belonging

The primary concept I am exploring is "sense of belonging," an innate feeling that, as Rofey states, "is shared by all human beings" and is considered a protective factor that positively impacts our well-being.

That being said, there is no universally accepted definition for this term or a consensus on how it should be measured.

While almost all participants in music-making ensembles experience an enhanced sense of belonging, members of vulnerable groups or minorities are found to benefit even more from participating in these musical activities.

In an ethnographic case study from 2014, 16 new members of a southwestern gay men's chorus in the USA rated their participation in a gay men's choir **as the social activity that contributed most to their sense of belonging.**

LGBTQ+ choral movement

The LGBTQ+ choral movement emerged in the mid-1970s as a continuation of the civil rights movement, the Stonewall riots, and the gay liberation movement.

This musical intervention addresses not only artistic and social needs but also political needs, **servicing as a form of activism, or as one choir member of one the choirs I'm following explained to me: "This choir is a political act simply by the fact that we are 100 gay men standing on stage together, singing our hearts out."**

This is probably also one of the largest music interventions with more than 500 choirs spread worldwide, having its own network, music associations, festivals and seminars.

Gaps

While it feels as if this music intervention is well established it seems like we are still missing **extensive research on the distinctive characteristics that differentiate LGBTQ+ choirs from heteronormative ones, and professional training programs for practitioners who would like to work in this field.** These gaps resonate with Pannetta's research on Music Education training programs, that reported that "we are missing training programs to better prepare preservice teachers to provide more enriching, meaningful, and equitable educational experiences to this invisible minority."

I think that the quote that summarizes the best these gaps is by Charles Beale's and it's taken from the Oxford Handbook for Choral Pedagogy: **"Directing an LGBTQ group definitely involves a specific and different set of skills and understandings, both of the inclusive and activist values** that motivate and underpin the musical

processes, and of **how those values impact musical and educational decisions in practice**” (The Oxford handbook of choral pedagogy, 2017, p. 367).

He then continues by saying:

(...It’s an) “**unexplored research area** that has the potential to reveal new questions, both for LGBTQ choral singing and for choral pedagogy as a whole” (p. 363).

Academic problem statement

After reviewing most of the literature in this field, here are the four main academic problem statements, that basically served as the foundation for the following research objectives.

1. While 'sense of belonging' is recognized as a significant need, particularly among marginalized populations it remains a vague and poorly theorized concept, with limited intellectual understanding of its contributing components and parameters.
2. There has been almost **no credible research** conducted on the positive socio-mental outcomes of participating in LGBTQ+ choirs.
3. **Distinctive characteristics of LGBTQ+** choirs which could later be translated into pedagogical guidelines to enhance the sense of belonging among its members, **have yet to be identified**.
4. There is high demand for professional training and curricular resources for practitioners in this field.

Study objectives

1. Identifying the unique characteristics that I believe can be linked to an accumulated sense of belonging.
2. Inquiring into practitioners and board members' perceptions of the importance of these characteristics.
3. Inquiring the choir members and perception of these characteristics which is in my opinion the most essential objective.
4. What kind of distinctive pedagogy can be developed in this practice as a consequence of the findings revealed in the first three objectives

Work Packages

WP1: observations of five to eight visits to rehearsals over the course of one year. Leadership members = Musical directors, choreographers, board members, accompanying pianist.

WP2: document analysis of the repertoire performed by the choirs to further explore the unique traits of LGBTQ+ choirs.

WP3: a survey to collect demographic information, as well as investigate the characteristics previously identified as catalysts for LGBTQ+ choir members to acquire a sense of belonging.

WP4: interviews with selected choir members **to delve deeper into any irregular results that may arise from the survey.**

Shared characteristics

- Musical directors demonstrate **flexibility** in dividing the singers into sections, prioritizing considerations such as the members' gender identity over their vocal range.
- **Auditions:** Favoring candidates with social challenges regardless of their musical level, or as one of the board

members of a choir I'm following told me, "We have around 80 people on our waiting list, and there are some amazing singers wanting to join the choir. However, I prioritize those I believe needs the choir the most at this point in their life."

- Carefully considering the music pieces to be part of the repertoire. while maintaining a **collaborative and constructive approach**, where both participants and board members contribute equally to choosing the repertoire.
- I In the Amsterdam Gay Men's Chorus, there is a dance group, and one of the dancers told me that he can now afford to be part of this ensemble while, as a teenager, he could only dream of joining the school choir or dance group, as it was perceived as a feminine activity and could have exposed his sexuality.
- **Campy**: This sudden transition from a song with such deep meaning, like "It's a Sin," to "Vogue" by Madonna in the video you've seen, demonstrates how you can address your values and the choir's mission statement while not taking yourself too seriously at the same time.