

**Show Choir as a Vernacular Ensemble in Secondary Schools:
A Topical Literature Review**

Andrew A. Seuferer

Department of Music Education, Kent State University

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Introductory Essay

I decided to write a topical literature review on show choir as a vernacular ensemble in secondary schools because while many educators consider show choir a valid ensemble, many music experts widely contest the popular music used and their validity in music curriculum. I witnessed the evolution of show choir as a secondary show choir student within the last decade. When I was a freshman in high school, the state of Nebraska held only two show choir competitions: “The Midwest Cup” at The University of Nebraska Lincoln, and “Southwest Showdown” at Lincoln Southwest high school. Costume changes were so rare at the time that I remember the seniors saying, “Only tacky show choirs that cannot sing have costume changes.” By the time I was a senior, there were dozens of show choir competitions across the state, and most competitive show choirs completed not one, but two costume changes. In stark contrast to concert ensembles, it was unclear what our directors had been taught about show choir; the pedagogical practices of this ensemble type were clearly changing.

As an undergraduate student, I witnessed the debate of show choir and popular music in schools by professors and practicing music teachers. The common points of discussion were: financial resources, healthy versus unhealthy singing, and retention of students. As a music education major, there was no show choir 101, no marching band theory class, no study of popular music, but these art forms are still being heavily utilized. The question became what benefits were we gleaning from vernacular music in our education? Entering my first job, I knew I would be working with popular music, show choirs, and musicals, but I was unsure of the best practices or how to prepare to educate my students in the vernacular realm.

At the beginning of my sixth year of teaching, and fourth year of directing show choirs, the topic of the use of vernacular music and popular ensembles like show choir still held so many

unanswered questions for me. What is the right way to direct a show choir? Was show choir helping students grow? Was popular music able to help improve student musicianship? Should show choir even be offered as a curricular ensemble? What should the role of popular music look like? I felt like I had witnessed the music department grow as a result of popular ensembles and music. I desired to understand why in a profession where rules and practices have been clearly defined, there could be such a significant lack of consensus on an ensemble approach found across the country and the whole world. I resolved to explore the role of show choir and vernacular music to be able to more accurately reflect on my own practice.

My interest in this topic led me to research show choir as an ensemble, and the possible effects that this ensemble type can have on student performance and development. After contacting the American Choral Directors Association, and reviewing several scholarly sources, it became clear what my first point of research needed to be: What is show choir? The history, function, makeup, and elements of this ensemble are defined differently by multiple experts based on both musical and nonmusical elements.

My exploratory research on the evolution and elements of the ensemble continued to point to the use of vernacular music as both a defining factor, and a point of pedagogical contention. I learned about the possible benefits and barriers that can present themselves in the choral singing of popular music. While repertoire choice may be contested, a repeating theme constituted the suggested focus on good basic singing technique regardless of the style or genre.

Another point I explored during my research included the multitude of possible effects from the other elements of the show choir ensemble. As both a visual and aural art, show choir often prioritizes synchronization with other students. Many possible benefits, both musical and nonmusical, could present themselves. One such effect includes entrainment, which is the

interaction and coordination of movement, sound, and the brain when music is combined with structured movement. Several sociological factors as a result of vernacular music, competition, and group uniformity also could be possible benefits resulting from show choir participation. The combination of benefits and mindsets from suggested show choir structure could lead to students working together, viewing themselves in the music being used, and a kinesthetic exploration of the music's form and meaning. As a result, it is possible that a show choir could lead to changes in an adolescent's musical ability, perceptions of themselves, their peers, and the world around them.

The knowledge I gained from writing this literature review will help me further understand the musical interests and developmental processes of my students. Although the topic of show choir and its implementation would benefit from further research, I feel like I now possess a better understanding of what could be seen as, "more or less effective" with show choir in music education. I learned that show choir, by its very nature, may evolve into different music and looks ten years from now. This means I must continue my study and research into how to make this ensemble meaningful to students. This research also equips me to be more confident in using a multitude of styles and genres with my student musicians. I am hopeful that in time, music education in the United States will develop a healthier opinion of the use of vernacular music and popular music ensembles. Throughout American history, new music validity has been questioned. I strive to be a teacher that will introduce students to the fine art in music; not just introduce the "fine art" music.

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the possible benefits of show choir as a vernacular music ensemble in the secondary school setting. The history, elements, perceived barriers and potential benefits of show choir will be discussed. Numerous literary sources suggest the use of vernacular music as a common defining element for show choir, and as a point of pedagogical contention to be unpacked. As a visual, aural, and kinesthetic art form, show choir, with the use of popular music, harnesses the potential to foster socialization and increased musicianship in secondary students.

Keywords: show choir, vernacular music, popular music, secondary choral music education, recruitment

Show Choir as a Vernacular Ensemble in Secondary Schools

Statement of the Topic

As music education practice moves forward in the United States, a discussion on modernization of ensembles and curriculum suggests a continued review of vernacular music offerings for students. Inclusion of vernacular music, or music of the current culture and time may be a step toward modernizing music education. Kratus (2016) asserted that, “music education must find ways to both keep up with the changing musical culture, and preserve the best of our musical past” (p. 42). Kratus (2016) explained that our nation clings to an outmoded nineteenth-century model of training classical musicians. As a result, many teachers feel unprepared for the use of vernacular music, and the preparation of show choirs. The pressure for fine art music in United States music education may be part of the reason that there is such a divide between American in and out of school music (Kruse, 2016).

While the lack of understanding surrounding the proper implementation of show choirs and popular music grows, so too does the push for utilizing these mediums. Farmer (2009) reported 77.9% of 239 student respondents, from seven different high schools across the country, strongly agreed that they would prefer to participate in a show over a concert choir. Cumulatively, 93.2% of students indicated they wanted a show choir in their music program (Farmer, 2009). This increase in desire for popular offerings in the music curriculum has been growing for some time. A study in the state of California from 1999-2004 reported a decrease of student participation in traditional ensembles at the high school level by 50% (Kratus, 2016). Kratus (2016) suggested that similar patterns have been seen more recently, and around the country. In the music education community, some believe that declines in music participation are a result of a lack of funding or testing requirements. However, researchers indicate that some

students are no longer being personally fulfilled in school music, and find it educationally invalid (Kruse, 2016). These findings pose that music education suffers due to the lack of modernization in curricular offerings.

The use of popular music and dance in show choir can pose potential benefits to a student's musical development. The use of structured dance in tandem with vocalization in a group can result in a positive association with social skill development. Such skills may include: empathy, social affiliation, and prosocial behaviors that can continue all the way through to adulthood (Ilari, Fesjian, & Habibi, 2018). However, the wide spectrum of sounds implemented in popular vocal production, and the manipulation of breath, tone color, and vowel placement has resulted in discussion of potential vocal damage in show choirs (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Still, others argue the job of the director is to safely shift what was composed as a singular vocal product into a larger ensemble setting. Mack (2011) stated that thanks to shows like American Idol, Glee, and America's Got Talent, show choir is here to stay, and if the ensemble is to be seen as legitimate, it needs to be done legitimately.

Rationale for Investigation

Managan (2010) reported that the known number of show choir ensembles in American high schools numbered over nine hundred; many of which were offered as an academic subject. However, Ryder (1983, as cited in Tiboris, 1983) outlined how the makeup, function, standards, and curricular implications of the ensemble and its music remain fluid. Show choir is often defined differently based on a particular director or community from which the ensemble is from. The various interpretations of show choir could be a contributing factor to those who either praise, or demonize the popular music ensemble in secondary schools.

The show choir ensemble evolved from years of vernacular music practice, and it has continued to evolve rapidly over the last fifty years. This continued change has made research on proper show choir practice limited (Kindle, 2019). Alder (2016) stated that readiness for the nearly four thousand people graduating annually with degrees in music education are heavily studied, but virtually no literature on preparedness for show choir exists. The lack of an agreed upon common pedagogical approach to show choirs suggests that the gap in understanding with popular ensembles will only continue to grow.

“As our society changes the educational needs of its citizens change” (Abeles & Custodero, 2010). Understanding show choir is a critical need in music education, because it is a music approach that changes as our society changes, and the interest in the ensemble is clearly growing. Show choir can be used as an ensemble offering that utilizes the current music culture of current students to teach musicianship. However, the use of vernacular music and ensembles like show choir may still be heavily contested by educators simply because of the lack of exploration, and the lack of understanding surrounding them. Ryder (1983, as cited in Tiboris, 1983) commented that if anyone is going to be able to have a sensible dialogue on the subject of show choir, or its possible benefits, then first a common basis of understanding on what show choir is must be discussed. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the possible benefits of show choir as a vernacular music ensemble in the secondary school setting.

Research Questions

The following questions will be examined in this literature review:

1. What is the show choir ensemble?
2. What perceived factors may limit show choir as a valid vernacular ensemble?
3. What possible benefits could be obtained through show choir?

Review of Scholarly Sources

The Show Choir Ensemble

A true definition of what show choir is has yet to be agreed upon, and an agreed upon approach to directing such a group can be just as difficult to define. Few really can understand show choir without acquiring first or second-hand experience (Weaver & Hart, 2011). Alder and Mulvihill (2016) reported that often show choir and its resources, due to a lack of understanding, are “lumped” with vocal jazz or acapella groups even though those are different ensembles altogether. From European glee singing, to the risqué practices of gypsies and burlesque shows, to vaudeville, to television variety show ensembles, to swing choir, to show choir; history suggests that vernacular music singing has been a cultural practice throughout time, whose validity has often been questioned. Music educators should strive to understand the trends and history that evolved the show choirs that are present in schools today. By doing so they may be able to expand their musical understanding and that of their students.

History of Vernacular Ensembles

Weaver and Hart (2011) stated that the history of show choirs should be viewed as an evolutionary progression from many vernacular singing practices rather than an exact singular time line. This is due to the fact that what has been termed modern show choir did not truly begin to present itself until the 1970’s (Weaver & Hart, 2011).

Show Choir is a singing group that performs popular or Broadway literature. Dancing is choreographed for this group and singers usually wear some form of costuming. There are also, usually, different heights used in the choreography whether on platforms or other objects such as props, to create levels (Kindle, 2019, p. 7).

The glitz, shiny dresses, and jazz hands found in school ensembles did not necessarily have their upbringing in one place, or from one type of group. In order to understand show choir and the discussion surrounding it today, the progression leading to its current form should be explored.

The first vernacular choral ensembles which influenced modern show choir included the Glee clubs of London. Around the end of 1795, with multiple factors including the departure of Haydn from the area, the concert life in London had begun to diminish. In order to salvage the decline in concert attendance, small societies began to form. They played and sang popular music with one another in an informal setting such as a pub or coffee house. One such group was the Philharmonic Society (Weaver & Hart, 2011). Glee clubs and societies made the “concert” a term that did not subscribe to sitting quietly in a concert hall. Chapman (2022) reported that a performance was a music “happening” that included the male community. Performances by men’s Glee clubs could be a public or private event, a benefit, or simply a pleasurable gathering of friends to enjoy singing the popular music of the day. Despite the popularity of the Glee club, the fact remained that men were gathering where alcohol was consumed, and content of the songs were often the subject of sinful vulgarity. “Irresponsible male leisure time, spent out of reach of the demands of women and children. Their words are usually on such subjects as drink, tobacco, music, different trades and their shortcomings, poor service in taverns, and especially sex,” (Chapman, 2022, p. 17). So, the glee club had an uncertain standing and acceptance by the socially elite in Europe (Chapman, 2022).

After seventy-one years of the practice of glee clubs in London, the male singing ensemble moved to the United States in 1858 with the Harvard University Glee club. The social standing of show business and popular song was not seen as family-friendly in the United States either. Sequins and popular singing were the art of cliques, thievery, con games, prostitution, and

in essence the devil (Weaver & Hart, 2011). The negative association of popular music performance in show choir may find its origin at this early stage in American history.

Despite the negative perceptions, vernacular music performance was popular, and changing its bad reputation was the next evolutionary step toward modern show choir. P.T. Barnum was one of the first to meld education in with popular entertainment, “mine is a highly intellectual entertainment, and none but refined and educated persons can comprehend it,” (Barnum, 2020, p. 83). Barnum presented well-dressed performers executing one act plays and singings that were deemed “Edutainment” (Weaver & Hart, 2011, p. 2). Barnum’s success led to the art of clean popular performance without alcohol consumption to spread. By the end of the 1800’s, theater owners Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward F. Albee followed Barnum in transforming vulgar theater and singing into respectable middle-class entertainment. Keith called their new movement “vaudeville” to stand them apart from what had been termed “burlesque” entertainment (Weaver & Hart 2011).

Popular song and dance now appealed to a wider audience including women and children. This led to the structuring of popular vaudeville performance for venues, which later influenced show choirs. The term *vaudeville* is rumored to have come from the French “voix de ville” meaning the voice of the city (Cassidy, 2013). In keeping with its name, vaudeville acts combined the skills of many local performers: jugglers, magicians, animal trainers, singers, and dancers in a themed structure that created a climactic but predictable template (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Weaver and Hart (2011) asserted that modern show choir competitions have unknowingly adopted the vaudeville method of presenting multiple traveling acts back-to-back in a family-friendly format at a modest price. Entering the 1900’s, American parlor music, and the common household purchase of the pianoforte, led to a new market of popular sheet music

(Abeles & Custodero, 2010). Music pluggers from New York City's Tin Pan Alley sold pop sheet music arranged from vaudeville acts for ten cents a sheet. This shift in popular music perception and consumption may have led to the fall of Vaudeville in the 1930's and 1940's (Weaver & Hart, 2011).

The introduction of movies and television were the next tools used to standardize popular music performance in tandem with dance that would lead to show choir. In 1927, Warner Bros Pictures produced the first talking motion picture, "The Jazz Singer," which essentially killed the silent cinema and burlesque genres (Weaver and Hart, 2011). With the growing popularity of television, audiences could now see the groups they fell in love with on the radio (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Live acts such as Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians began to grow in popularity for their popular music performed with visual elements. Many consider Fred Waring the early leader of the show choir movement, but he only received this credit within the last fifteen years (Weaver & Hart, 2011). The Pennsylvanians, known as a "jazz band riot," played instruments, sang and danced to love songs, folk music, and Broadway showstoppers - all while wearing suits and dresses and incorporating the use of props (Mountford, 1992). In 1948, Sunday night shows such as "The Fred Waring Show," "American Bandstand," "The Ed Sullivan Show," and "The Lawrence Welk Show," launched Vaudeville stars to the big screen and television.

In the he 1950's, vernacular music performance and dance were utilized by not only adults, but by children and students also. New performance schools were created in the United States which taught children, such as the famous Shirley Temple, from an early age to sing and dance in order to find careers in film. Cassidy (2013) reported that less than a year into the Sunday night show broadcasts, rural high schools began developing similar ensembles called

“swing choirs.” By the 1950’s, the job and training of choreographers came into demand in order to facilitate higher quality entertainment for American consumption (Brannigan, 2022). School madrigal groups, chamber choirs, and swing choirs in the 1960’s began including new popular arrangements, and introduced elements such as amplification, staging, lighting, and basic choreography which mirrored what was staged from the original productions (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016).

Swing choirs constituted the vernacular school offerings that directly evolved into show choirs. One of the main differences between the two includes the use of choralography over *choreography*. Mack (2011) explained that choralography, used by swing choirs, includes singers performing simple movements with their body while singing, but rarely moving their feet. Show choir choreography involves energetic staging and movement often utilizing hip-hop dance styles (Mack, 2011). Ensembles such as The Kingston Trio, The 5th Dimension, and the Young Americans pushed the evolution of swing choir in the 1970’s into the show choirs of the 1980’s and beyond. Popular music became more beat driven, and lyrically aggressive; as a result, show choir now used more advanced dancing and stylistic vocal distortions. This is where vocal technique for popular singing entered into conflict with what was taught in private voice studios (Mack, 2011).

Alder and Mulvihill (2016) commented that it was not until the late 1990’s that some educators decided that the guttural growls, glottal onsets, and releases were not simply “bad singing,” but could instead become skills taught with control and accurate tone production to the musical style. Hundreds of show choir competitions now exist all over the nation including: The Show Choir Nationals, FAME, Walt Disney World, The Grand Ole Opry, and numerous local events. Show choir presentations vary every year, and as a result the learning curve and the

amount of “show” added adapts with each ensemble and season (Mack, 2011). While the show choir continues to change in form and appearance, it has acted as an ensemble that reflects the popular music performance culture of the given time.

Fundamental Needs for Show Choir

Show Choir is a singing group that performs popular or Broadway literature. Dancing is choreographed for this group and singers usually wear some form of costuming. There are also, usually, different heights used in the choreography whether on platforms or other objects such as props, to create levels, (Kindle, 2019, p. 7).

The definition provided by Kindle gives a basis for what is seen in many varsity mixed show choirs. However, depending on several musical and non-musical factors, show choirs can look and be structured a bit differently. To understand what show choir is, the common essentials should be explored to understand what is required to create a show choir. Randall (2020) outlined eight major elements that are present in most show choir ensembles: Singers/dancers, instrumentalists, rehearsal plans, money, music, choreography, costumes, competition, and performance. Robinson (1994) outlined modern show choir with the template of the “Three T’s:” time, talent, and treasure (p. 3).

Show choirs may in fact, at their core, demand less than what has commonly been thought of as needed. Mack (2011) commented that show choir elements such as the type of accompaniment, costuming, props, and staging will never be constant because they are based on the ensemble, school district, and decisions of the directors and choreographers for each competitive season. The identification of these show choir “variables” suggests that the fundamental basics of a show choir’s construction could include: the student membership, a structured template for show design, and the use of popular music arrangements.

The student makeup of a show choir ensemble is an issue faced by many directors when selecting the ideal number and gender composition of the group. Ryder (1983, as cited in Tiboris, 1983) stated that it is unclear when it comes to auditioning for a show choir if ensemble membership should be limited, as show choirs are particularly attractive to students who are not otherwise involved in traditional music groups. Ryder asserted that a smaller number of students, 8-15, would make the group's touring ability more flexible, and allow for the needed time to focus on creating a quality sound. In contrast to Ryder's ideal number, Tiboris (1983) argued that a show choir ensemble should contain 20-30 performers for a balanced sound, while Mangan (2010) reported more recent ensembles contained as many as 60 performers. Randall (2020) suggested that the number and composition of the group should be dependent upon the desired function of the group, competitive division of the ensemble, and what student population is available to pull from.

Enrolment numbers and diversity of students in the music program are critical to maintaining a show choir ensemble however, many schools have begun to discuss the validity of show choirs because of the lack of enrollment in traditional ensembles. Elpus and Abril (2019) reported national data from American high schools, representing the class of 2013, which showed that only 24% of students had enrolled in at least one year of a traditional music ensemble of any kind. Since show choirs are often supplemental to the traditional ensemble offerings, continued recruitment for show choir may become difficult as the pool of students in regular ensembles shrinks.

Another point of discussion is the unspoken standard that a varsity ensemble is a mixed SATB ensemble (Kindle, 2019). Filling the roster for students in a mixed ensemble can prove to be difficult. Of the 24% of students in traditional music ensembles, 60% were female and only

40% were male (Elpus, & Abril, 2019). This data suggests that male performers in particular would be more difficult to recruit for show choir. An average ratio of 140 girls to 40 boys in show choir is common (Mangan, 2010). Randall (2020) commented that small or relatively new show choir programs should strongly consider beginning with a unisex group, and then eventually grow into a mixed ensemble if that is the long-term goal for the show choir.

Once students are selected and enrolled, the next fundamental need for a successful show choir experience is a structure for the show choir show design. Robinson (1994) proposed that the structure for a fifteen-to-twenty-minute show choir show design consisted of five to six arranged pieces. First, an up-tempo opener consisting of big visual choreographed movement. Second, a swinging tune with a slower tempo that highlights harmony. Third, an optional novelty number that may advance a story theme or use props for entertainment. Fourth, a mini-medley combining two to four songs. Fifth, a ballad usually sentimental featuring vocal talent with an a cappella section. Finally, a closer which is fast, fun, and features the ensemble's full sound.

More recent reviews of the fundamental show choir show structure are quite similar to that of Robinson.

Openers are meant to inspire awe and are generally up-tempo... The middle songs can be quick or used for costume changes... A closer has to be very high intensity and needs to finish the show on a memorable high moment. Keeping your show at or under fifteen minutes is such a good idea (Randall, 2020, p. 134).

Randall (2020) stated that the show choir structure that has come to be expected is five songs, no more than three minutes each; an opener, two middle songs, a ballad, and a closer. The length of time that this similar structure has endured suggests that it has become the template for creating a show choir ensemble show.

Another fundamental practice found in a majority of show choirs is the selection of quality custom or published popular song arrangements (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Each of the songs, used in the five-song structure outlined by Robinson and Randall, should be appropriately adapted to the particular ensemble who will use them. For instance, an all-women's show choir, depending on enrollment numbers, may not be able to sing an SSAA score. The range of a commercially arranged popular piece could also be in a key that is not suitable for student voices, and would need to be transposed (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016).

Popular music arrangements, especially in digital format, have started to become easier to find. Szeto (2018) commented that a large majority of printed music has become digitized, and new scores and arrangements are readily found and created online. Cassidy (2013) outlined how the use of compositional software programs like Finale have made the quality of custom arrangements increase. Arrangers are now able to play back music so they can determine if the harmony for the arrangement creates the general effect desired from the original music lead sheet.

While popular arrangements are becoming more available, a thorough examination by the show choir director is still needed. Kindle (2019) stressed the importance of show choir directors selecting music that will challenge the group, but also lead to students' musical success. Moving a solo or popular work into an SATB setting can alter the key, tempo, dynamics, lyrics, instrumentation, voice leading, overall difficulty, and texture. A director who takes note of these changes before using an arrangement should be able to spot the difference between well-arranged versus less effective music scores (Mack, 2011).

Cassidy (2013) reported successful show choir arrangements move from a simple texture to more complex later on (see appendix A). The arrangement structure posed by Cassidy begins

with a one voice texture which progresses to the adding of voices in the chorus. Only toward the end of the piece does counter polyphony in the chorus appear, leading the ear from simple to more complex. Randall (2020) stated that finding success with a show choir often comes from keeping things simple at first, then moving into the more advanced. This arrangement structure leads the singers and the audience into the known melody of the song, and progressively increases the difficulty of technique and listening required for a more complex art form.

Perceived Limiting Factors for Ensemble Validity

Debate of Vernacular Music

The preparation of show choirs to sing popular music is a point of contention because while many teachers may strive to diversify musical offerings, popular music is not usually seen as academic (Abeles, Weiss-Tornatore, & Powell, 2021). The confusion regarding the academic standing of popular music stems from far before the first show choir. The preparation of vernacular music in secondary ensemble curriculum has been a subject of debate since 1914 (Abeles & Custodero, 2010). During the years of World Wars I and II, there was a massive deficit in the number of college trained music educators. As a result of this shortage, community music performers were hired to teach in schools. This shifted the focus of secondary music education from classical training to modern performance practices with popular music (Abeles & Custodero, 2010). Since that time, the validity of vernacular singing and vernacular ensembles in schools has been debated. “What does the show choir movement have to do with education?” (Pain 1983, as cited in Tiboris, 1983, p. 25 & 26). “However, entertaining a piece may be, it must also be appropriate. There are a number of popular songs that have adult themes, vulgar language, or that promote poor values” (Cassidy, 2013, p.16). “Comprehensive musicianship is to appreciate all types of music in all types of genres, it only follows that the show choir would

be a natural component of a well-rounded choral program” (Farmer, 2009, p. 3). “It is imperative to incorporate all styles of music not only for the students, but also for the audience. A diet of cotton candy alone is not a good thing, but neither is a diet of strictly steak and lobster” (Mack, 2011, p.1).

Updating music curriculum to include vernacular music could seem questionable, but most academic subjects in the United States have curriculum that has received radical updates over time (Kratus, 2016). At one point the Latin language was taught in all American schools, but the arguments that were once used to support Latin lost credence as priorities shifted to more modern languages (Kratus, 2016). It is interesting that what is seen as good singing curriculum has remained Western European classical tradition, rather than updating to also include vernacular practices. Both classical and popular music have similar roots, forms, and harmonic structures that could benefit US music curriculum. McPhail (2013, as cited in Mercado, 2019) suggested that the use of both classical and vernacular music could be viewed as a differentiation of knowledge validating the teaching of both in the United States. Theoretical knowledge and music skills can be developed with classical music, while socially contextualized knowledge can come from popular music. O’Flynn (2006) outlined the common trends of music consumption and production (see appendix C). O’Flynn reported an inflexibility in the use of popular and classical music as a participatory medium in the U.S. These findings suggested that vernacular and classical music both require training in order to engage as a participant (O’Flynn, 2006). In contrast, the study suggested that traditional music could be used by any participant regardless of skill. If indeed both popular and classical music require a set of trained understanding to perform properly, then perhaps the pretense that classical music is the only academic music for curriculum is flawed.

The use of popular music curriculum for show choir could also help encourage a more student-centered pedagogical approach. The autocratic model used in music education in the United States has no parallel in any other academic subject (Kratus, 2016). This autocratic model could be why many music teachers are not referred to as teachers, but directors. A director will pick the music, make decisions, and set learning targets alone, but a teacher guides, scaffolds, and observes. Mack (2011) stated that if you ask students for music input, they may at first just name their personal likes not thinking of the group as a whole; this is where a music teacher can use their understanding to guide a group to success. By exploring the form, structure, and harmonies with students in popular repertoire selection, they could be taught to identifying musical qualities in the music they listen to each day. The goal in popular music preparation should be to respect the tastes of the kids and include their voice; even if the teacher does not always agree (Mercado, 2019).

While the use of vernacular music in United States curriculum has been debated, popular music and ensembles may have a more natural acceptance in secondary ensembles within the international community. May et al. (2020) asserted that while the United States continues to work on validating the inclusion of popular music and ensembles; most European countries have already agreed upon its importance, and are adapting curriculum. PK-12 popular music curriculum has been established in a democratic model in the United Kingdom, several Nordic countries, and beyond (May et al., 2020). This democratic model of music education encourages popular music, popular ensembles, input and direction from students. Hauge and Hebert (2019) stated that the Nordic Network for Music Education has agreed upon: democracy, sustainability, and universality of music as the goals for the future of music education in Northern Europe. While this may seem like a drastic change to be implemented, many countries are taking smaller

steps toward the democratic approach. Finland, for example, has taken steps to adapt their approach by now requiring music teachers to go beyond their traditions to what music students will value, and every teacher is required to be trained in popular music (May, Broomhead, & Tsugawa, 2020).

The implementation of vernacular music and show choir elements like dance in schools are finding a foothold not just in Europe. In high schools in West Africa, music is an elective, but it includes dance preparation which is required for the West African senior school certificate examination (Petrie, 2018). Petrie (2018) outlined that Ghanaian music and dance are taught in six spheres for students: Traditional, neo-traditional, Western art, New-Ghanaian, Western popular, and neo-Ghanaian popular. While the term show choir may not be used in this setting, each style is studied with vocals, dance, and cultural performance elements. This is required in many African music programs as it is understood that music paired with dance significantly increases students' practical knowledge of music (Petrie, 2018).

The continued use of popular music, and even the show choir ensemble itself can also be seen in the school curriculum of Indonesia. Widodo, Tjaroko, and Setyawan (2019) created a concept map (see appendix B) outlining the modern structure of show choirs that have been implemented. These groups were started from an exploration of the ensemble in American culture, then brought back to Indonesia by music educators. The hope is that these show choirs will help sustain enrollment, engage students in modern music, and broaden cultural understanding (Widodo, Tjaroko, & Setyawan, 2019). Their structure map focuses on four main elements to an Indonesian show choir: popular music, membership, costume, and dance. "A voice guided performance followed by body movements according to vocal techniques with the use of costume can be termed as a show choir," (Widodo, Tjaroko, & Setyawan, 2019, p. 123).

Indonesian music educators, like the European and African examples above, have decided that universality in music exploration is a must for their students; both classical and popular can have a place in schools.

Improper Popular Vocal Production

Another perceived factor that can limit the validity of show choir as a vernacular ensemble offering for student singers is the reality of unhealthy versus healthy singing. Concert choir is generally focused on a dark blend, and show choir often focuses on bright soloistic singing (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Students need to be taught and understand the differences between them (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). If students have not learned the fundamentals associated with tone shifting, then singing popular music, especially in a new venue for each competition, can present risks (Cassidy, 2013). After studying 45 singers from two high schools; Sielska-Badurek, Sobol, Olszowska, and Niemczyk (2017) reported 22% of the students had developed vocal nodules after two months of popular singing. Despite this hazard, the students reported that their speaking and singing voices were normal. Not understanding proper production associated with the brighter tone of most popular music can have a tendency for vertical space that leads to over modifying the vowel. Over modification often leads to a swallowed or woofy vocal production that can be unsafe due to prolonged vocal strain (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016). Over long periods of time this could cause serious damage to a student's vocal cords.

In order to prepare show choir students to sing popular music in a healthy way, students must internalize the feeling that comes with healthy vocal distortion (Kiuza, 2018). Kiuza (2018) commented that vocal warmup workshops, like the ones offered in Brazil, can help teachers learn skills for more than 20 types of proper popular vocal distortions. These distortions are generally

divided into three groups: “glottic, produced at the vocal folds; supraglottic, produced above the vocal folds; and composite, which engages both vocal folds and upper structures” (Kiuza, 2018, p.806). By slowly introducing and practicing these sounds with students, an awareness of muscle tightness, and contraction can be built to avoid strain and fatigue. Wiggins (2015) stated that the concepts of music are so abstract that to teach it, teachers need to make its qualities more accessible and evident to learners through repetition. This suggests that proper building of fundamentals, just like with classical singing, are the key for show choirs to sing safely.

Alder and Mulvihill (2016) echoed the process of helping students sing popular music in a healthy way by starting with simple popular sound basics. Built into daily warmup exercises, unified vowel placement at a soft dynamic can build proper popular vocal tone production. Alder and Mulvihill (2016) suggested a progression from darker vowels: [u], [o], [a], to brighter vowels: [e], [i] (see appendix D) over time in vocal training. The progression could begin by simply using one vowel and having the group practice different articulations and mild crescendos. A next step then could be to divide the choir by octave. Finally, changing between vowels and building complexity as sounds are mastered. By progressing slowly, the group will be able to develop the kinesthetic sense of muscle movement to match pitch and vowel shape before adding volume or text (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016).

After healthy vowel production is taught to popular singers, the next step is application to the show choir music. Weaver and Hart (2011) stated that Robert Shaw developed a neutral syllable approach, that is commonly used with show choirs, from watching Fred Waring and his ensembles. This adaptation of added ending syllables helps avoid intonation issues, volume diminution, and unhealthy vocal strain. As an example, Alder and Mulvihill (2016) explained that a final singing of the word “God” can often lead to a vocal inflection down, “Go-duh” this

can create strain on a crescendo which is often found at the end of show choir phrasing. To avoid harm to the voice, Robert Shaw's method would suggest the change of the word God to "Go-dih" inflecting upward with space.

Several valid concerns surround healthy vocal production in show choirs, due to the use of popular singing, exist. However, findings suggest that proper preparation and practice could result in popular music being sung just as safely as any other genre in schools. Robert Stoll (1983, as cited in Tiboris, 1983) stated that the potential for error and vocal abuse is present in much choral music. Voices driven to shout either to Beethoven or the Beatles is criminal; the vocal director must understand the human voice in any genre.

Lack of Show Choir Training for Directors

A major barrier in confident show choir implementation could include music educators not possessing training in popular music or vernacular ensemble pedagogy. Wang and Humphreys (2009) reported that the entire population of undergraduate pre-service music teachers from a university in the southern United States had devoted only .54% of their educational tenure exploring popular music. Similarly, Springer (2016) surveyed 160 members from two regional chapters of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association, and found that 90% of the teachers had zero courses that included pedagogy for popular music. These findings suggest that the system for preparing music educators in the United States has placed an overly prominent value on the Western European fine art tradition of the nineteenth century. This approach can be problematic as educators are being hired to teach not only the past emphasis on Western classical tradition, but the music and ensembles of the 21st century. Wiggins (2015) commented that music education training in colleges are filled with tradition that may not be compatible with the way to foster conceptual understanding of music in others. When it comes to

directing a show choir, the lack of training can lead to several concerns in ensemble preparation: how to design a show, how to choose a choreographer, how to pick costumes, how to use sound amplification equipment, selecting the type of accompaniment that will balance with the voices, fund raising, budgeting, touring and competing, how to host a competition, and how the ensemble should fit into the scheme of the overall music program (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016).

In order to address this lack of preservice training, directors can utilize multiple resources to fill the gaps in their own knowledge. Abeles, Weiss-Tornatore, and Powell (2021) stated that teaching popular music ensembles requires a change not only in commonly used repertoire, but also pedagogical approach and understanding. They surveyed a group of over 600 New York music teachers who reported that professional development and collaboration was the best way to improve skills in musicianship, pedagogy, and leadership involved with popular music teaching. Modern instrument playing, arranging, supporting music learning by ear, and an acceptance of informal music culture and learning could be goals found in a vernacular ensemble (Petrie, 2018).

Finding professional development for show choir could require extensive research into areas of music education that are uncomfortable and unknown to the teacher. In order to find meaningful and impactful professional development the learning could be chosen by the teacher, occur over a sustained amount of time, and use reflection by the music educator on their own progress and current questions (Hewitt, 2018, as cited in Abeles, Weiss-Tornatore, & Powell, 2021). A few places that show choir directors could find useful development would be state conferences, national conferences, community musicians, colleagues, and even their students (Randall, 2020).

An often-overlooked element in show choir director preparation is how to teach and clean choreography. Tyson (2020) stated that show choir is a cohesive blend of all of the elements involved, so one element, such as the choreography, can directly affect another. For instance, repertoire selected can impact the choreography, which may impact vocal production. At many show choir contests, 60% of the judges ballot is on singing techniques, but choreography execution is also scored at a high value (Mangan, 2010).

The approach to teaching choreography to students is an area that many educators learn on the job, but being taught how to approach dance in a layered fashion may be the best way to help prepare directors. Betteridge et al. (2014) reported that the type of approach used to combine choreography with music affected the rate of memory, and performance accuracy in novice dancers. Betteridge et al. (2014) found that beginning by isolating choreography to rhythmic counts alone found the best results for dancers. Once choreographed movement has transitioned from working to long term muscle memory, with the use of vocalizing counts, then music can be introduced. When this system is followed, novice dancers showed increased performance accuracy, and were able to focus on adding style that fit the genre (Betteridge et al., 2014). Their study also suggested that since most show choirs are made up of novice dancers, the use of popular music over classical, contemporary, or folk actually helps preparation as it can lead to faster skill mastery. Novice dancers are often required to begin by leaning on classical music understanding, which is unfamiliar (Betteridge et al., 2014). This suggests that the required use of classical, folk, or even popular music from previous generations could be problematic in the realm of show choir. If a director asks students to dance for the first time with music that is completely foreign, this would be pushing them to learn both a new motor skill, and an unfamiliar music genre simultaneously.

Possible Show Choir Benefits

Musicianship Through Performance

Show choir as an ensemble in secondary schools has the potential to offer increased musicianship to students through entrainment. Ilari, Fesjian, and Habibi (2018) defined *entrainment* as the human capacity to detect regularity in an acoustic stimulus and synchronize body movement and or the voice to internalize a deeper understanding and expression of that stimulus. Show choirs have the unique ability to develop entrainment skills due to the kinesthetic application to musical understanding which is not found in most traditional ensemble offerings (Soykunt & Gorgoretti, 2021). Soykunt and Gorgoretti (2021) commented that psychomotor activity in music for the second tier of education is extremely sparse; this can make student musicianship uneven as movement in music classes during grades 1-8 is considered common practice.

Soykunt and Gorgoretti (2021) reviewed many approaches to music education and found that entrainment was a component in each. Dalcroze held the belief that musical knowledge and skills are learned best by responding to music with movement (Burton & Reynolds, 2018). Kodály pointed out that when music is experienced through movement, skills are more permanent than through theoretical knowledge or just singing alone (Burton & Reynolds, 2018). Orff noted that rhythm is learned best through physical experiences (Burton & Reynolds, 2018). Nijs and Bremmer (2019) stated that regardless of the age of the student, musical learning is not all theoretical, and sensory engagement through physical entrainment is a key component. Entrainment is an effect resulting the synchronization of mind to rhythm through music and dance (Nijs & Bremmer, 2019). If entrainment is properly developed in students it can lead to heightened musicianship and accuracy.

When exploring the benefits of entrainment in show choirs, it is important to know that there are two different types of entrainment that have been identified. Basic or Delta-theta entrainment, which deals with the music synchronization to movement of an individual (Doeling & Poeppel, 2015), and Interpersonal or Sensorimotor entrainment, which deals with the synchronization of music and dance with multiple participants (Maróti, Barabás, Deszpot, Farnadi, Nemes, Szirányi, & Honbolygó, 2019). The various cognitive rewards are a result of the different pairings of brain segments based on movement, phonation, and cognitive music understanding by the individual and the ensemble (Nijs & Bremmer, 2019). Ilari, Fesjian, and Habibi (2018) commented that some of the building blocks of basic entrainment can be in place at infancy, such as the ability to extract beat from a rhythmic pattern. However, show choir goes beyond just finding a beat in the rhythm of a tune.

The individual form of entrainment that can be developed through show choir instruction is Delta-theta phase entrainment. This form of entrainment is developed by pairing the use of the frontal and pre-motor cortex simultaneously (Doeling & Poeppel, 2015). These portions of the brain deal with movement, language, and rhythm, and in show choir using them in tandem can mean an increase in accuracy of beat decoding. Doeling and Poeppel (2015) reported that pairing music with choreographed movement resulted in students demonstrating higher accuracy in keeping steady beat, and improved detection of tempo deviations as an individual.

Delta-theta phase entrainment may also improve memorization of vocals and choreography for a show choir student. This could be accomplished as a result from training the brain to learn dance using hierarchical compression of encoded material. Betteridge, Stevens, and Bailes (2014) outlined how in dance each recall attempt of material is divided, labeled, and then reconstructed in a simpler form for higher memory retention by the brain. For example:

step, cross, step again, hold becomes simply a grapevine. Over time, in show choir practice, features in the vocal music may also become encoded in this way because they will be timed to dance. For instance, step, crescendo, first sung lyric, cross, step, rest, step again, hold, fermata becomes simply the grapevine (verse one). These findings suggest that proper musical training through the use of both singing and dancing can result in less variation in interpretation amongst individual singers, and higher memory retention of taught content. These are benefits that could not only help the student learn music for the show choir, but also learn content quickly and accurately for a concert ensemble as well.

The group form of entrainment that can result from participation in a show choir is sensorimotor entrainment. Sensorimotor entrainment deals with longer exposure to music and regular practice with synchronized movement with others. Maróti, Barabás, Deszpot, Farnadi, Nemes, Szirányi, and Honbolygó (2019) commented that at the neural level, this is a rhythmic entrainment involving the adaptation of brain oscillations to a common phase resulting in a group being able to perform in sync with one another. This form of entrainment is developed specifically as a result of students internalizing the physicality of performing together, and understanding how they fit into the bigger picture. A different way to view this form of entrainment would be to consider it as a physical manifestation of the interplay between the SATB voices in building the polyphony in a score. By not only learning their voice part, but also their movement's place in the performance, students can discern ensemble strengths and weaknesses in order to improve the musicianship of the whole group.

Maróti et al. (2019) reported after an eight-month study that students who sang and danced synchronously to the same planned material demonstrated improved pitch discrimination, working memory, phonological processing, and long-term music memory. Maróti et al. (2019)

also stated that a similar group, studied over the same eight-months, sang and danced synchronously to unplanned movement. The second group had slight improvements in the above skills, but less consistent results. These findings suggest that show choirs in particular can maximize the effects of sensorimotor entrainment as their music and choreography is planned and remains constant during the competitive season. This allows time for the music skills to move from working to long term memory so that they can be utilized in other contexts. Mack (2011) stated that the use of synchronized choreography in a classroom setting helps retain lyrics, develop posture, create confidence, and increases listening for even the slightest variation amongst students.

The development of both types of entrainment can help improve memory, accuracy, and musical understanding through the internalization of musical concepts in a kinesthetic form. “Engagement of the mind, body, and voice produces a more conscious singer,” (Jordan, 2008, p.426). Show choir participation has the ability to produce multiple benefits toward musicianship over time as it brings an understanding of the physical to the musical.

Outreach, Leadership, & Socialization

Show choir could potentially benefit a program by increasing not only the number, but diversity of students engaged in school music making. Ilari (2015) asserted that music offered in a school holds the potential to impact the construction and transformation of the set social realities. Music education in the United States currently has been constructed around Western European tradition, and this is mirrored in student participation demographics. Between 2009 and 2013 58% of students participating in school music programs were white, 13% identified as African American, 17% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, 8% two or more races, and under 1% American Indian (Elpus & Abril, 2019).

Show choirs could be adapted to benefit a diverse student demographic through pedagogy and repertoire choices. Kruse (2016) commented that even in schools where a vernacular ensemble may be offered, often it is assumed that pop and rock will reach all students. Mack (2011) stressed that show choirs have the ability to incorporate all styles of music to reach students. This suggests that show choir directors could take demographic data from their student populations to program popular music, bring in community clinicians, and choreographers who more accurately represent the community at large. Betteridge, Stevens, and Bailes (2014) commented that music and dance are present in virtually every culture and the two are linked. This being the case, programming a show choir show that utilizes cultural music and brings in culture bearers from the community is an opportunity to engage more students in an authentic cultural music experience. This approach would also support a wider range of popular music arrangements.

Show choir could also further benefit students by encouraging student leadership and ownership in the ensemble's success. Wiggins (2015) stated that in a productive music learning community, individuals take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of their peers. Show choirs offer unique opportunities for student leadership in their learning that is not always utilized in traditional choral ensembles. The use of dance captains creates an atmosphere where student leaders can teach and correct their peers to maximize rehearsal efforts (Alder and Mulvihill, 2016). For example, while the director is working on a vocal section with the treble voices, the bass voices could go with their dance captain and clean up the choreography. This approach limits student down time, and encourages a layered and continuous rehearsal.

Show choir can further benefit student leadership by utilizing dance captains in the audition process for the ensemble as well. "If you have dance captains who will have teaching or

choreography cleaning responsibilities throughout the course of the year, then you may want to allow them to have a role in the process as well,” (Alder and Mulvihill, 2016, p. 49). The importance of mindset and work ethic could be stressed in the audition process for show choir by having returning members, or dance captains, interview the potential new members. The dance captains could encourage intrinsic motivation by asking:

How do you see yourself in the fabric of this organization?

What kind of off-stage contributions could you make to this organization?

Why have you decided to audition for this organization?

What do you expect to gain from being a part of this organization?

Have you seen one of our performances? If so, what did you like most about it?

Was there anything that surprised you? (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016, p. 57).

These serious questions can help assess a student’s preparedness, and can help set up an expectation of intrinsic motivation for the program. The benefit from this show choir technique is that the standard for expectations is set by and for the students.

Show choir also has the potential to encourage social musical connection between students and the audience. Ergen (2019) stated that if a choral experience is able to foster a place to socialize and gain identity through leisure, then the wellbeing of the individual and the community increases. The vernacular music, healthy competition motivation, the theatrical interaction between student performers, and the raucous cheers and participation from the audience take the theoretical learning to a personal interaction. Ilari (2015) stated that students and audience members rely on facial expressions and body gestures when singing, listening, and dancing to create meaning. Nijs and Bremmer (2019) commented that interacting with music appeals to the human urge to evoke expressive response from others to establish an interaction

that rewards both. Show choir performances encourage student social interaction, as well as audience engagement with the students. All who are present are interacting with a story or thought put to music. Cheering, moving to the music, and singing along is common at a show choir performance. The opposite is found in traditional performance templates where the audience is expected to sit quietly in a concert hall, and appreciate the cognitive complexity of a performance.

Show choir also benefits the social interactions between students in their own ensemble, and ensembles from other places by traveling to perform. Widodo, Tjaroko, and Seyawan (2019) asserted that competitions or festivals allow for groups to actualize their abilities through experience and establish friendships between individuals, groups, or even nations. This suggests that the best mindset to encourage for all attendees at a show choir event is that of celebration, rather than competitive aggression. If students are able to take on this mindset, then regardless of the final results, students can build each other up and make constructive comments for improvement.

Show choir students can gain improved mindsets and positive social interactions by understanding why the judgement process can be subjective. This perseverance can then apply to processing perceived failure. If the goal of the show choir has been set to win above all else, then there is the potential for negative social interactions, but proper teaching and encouragement can counter this phenomenon. Kratus (2016) commented that vernacular ensembles like show choir must use caution in competition as the popular music from the everyday use of students can build adolescent relationships, but it can also become deeply personal when receiving feedback. Tyson (2020) reported that a need for standardization in show choir judgement is needed to address bias that can hinder the benefits of a positive performance atmosphere. The proposed Tyson rubric

addresses vocal performance, visual performance, and show design with vocals weighted as the most important factor. This suggests that the choir aspect should be the focus of students and directors when receiving feedback. However, not all competitions use this rubric, and standards for what is successful at one competition may not be the same at the next.

If students are taught proper expectations for social responses, and if they have an understanding of what defines true success, then show choir will benefit students regardless of standard discrepancies. In 1998, dialogue about drafting show choir standards began in the American Choral Directors Association to address inconsistencies (Kindle, 2019). A first draft was released in 2001 with revisions in 2006, but are not currently available as the organization believed that it was the responsibility of the director to educate and promote excellence by using the Nafme national music standards. “I vow to keep kids at the center of what I do and the moment I can’t do that, I will hang up my concert stilettos,” (Randall, 2020, p. 72). If properly encouraged, show choirs can improve musicianship, engage more students, encourage leadership, and support healthy student interactions.

Conclusions

Show choir is an ensemble that is becoming more common in the United States and around the globe. However, research, standards, and definitions of what show choir is are still evolving. Show choir comes from centuries of vernacular music singing practices that have not always been seen as socially acceptable. Even though show choirs can look different, and can have varying levels of theatrical elements, there are a few fundamental requirements. These elements include participating students, a fifteen-to-twenty-minute set using five songs, and the use of arranged popular music for repertoire.

Several perceived factors may limit show choir validity as a vernacular ensemble in

secondary schools. Vernacular music in the curriculum, improper popular vocal production, and a lack of show choir director training could lead to hesitancy in implementing show choir. Proper training in these areas can be found, but must be sought after based on the gaps in a music teacher's own knowledge. Risks exist in unsafe music production regardless of the genre, but several benefits can present themselves through implementing a show choir ensemble.

Development of both individual and group entrainment through music and dance can result in higher musicianship and expression from students. The cognitive development that can result from a consistent show choir approach can lead to accuracy and transferable memorization and expression skills. Show choirs can also further benefit students by helping them socially connect with each other and audiences. Developing these skills can result in a healthy mindset when it comes to competition, and keep the focus of show choir on "choir" rather than just "show." Thanks to shows like: American Idol, Glee, and America's Got Talent, show choir is here to stay, and if the ensemble is to be seen as legitimate, it needs to be done legitimately (Mack, 2011).

Continued research is needed regarding the unspoken rules of gender composition of a competitive show choir. The current unspoken expectation of a competitive program seems to require an SATB varsity mixed group. While gender composition of groups continues to evolve, programs seek to be more inclusive and involve more students. As a result, the costuming of show choirs, suits and dresses, may eventually need re-examination.

This completed research regarding show choir as a vernacular music ensemble can be implemented by music educators to address concerns related to healthy singing of popular music, elements required to maintain a show choir, and how to start a group. Music educators can make the choice to address gaps in their own knowledge in order to offer a show choir that directly

relates to their students' own musical cultures and interests.

By establishing show choirs with a healthy mindset and defined structure, students, administrators, parents, and the community will know what to expect and be able to support the program. By establishing legitimacy to show choirs what is defined as good singing can be expanded. Show choirs can be a first step to exploring a larger more current musical world.

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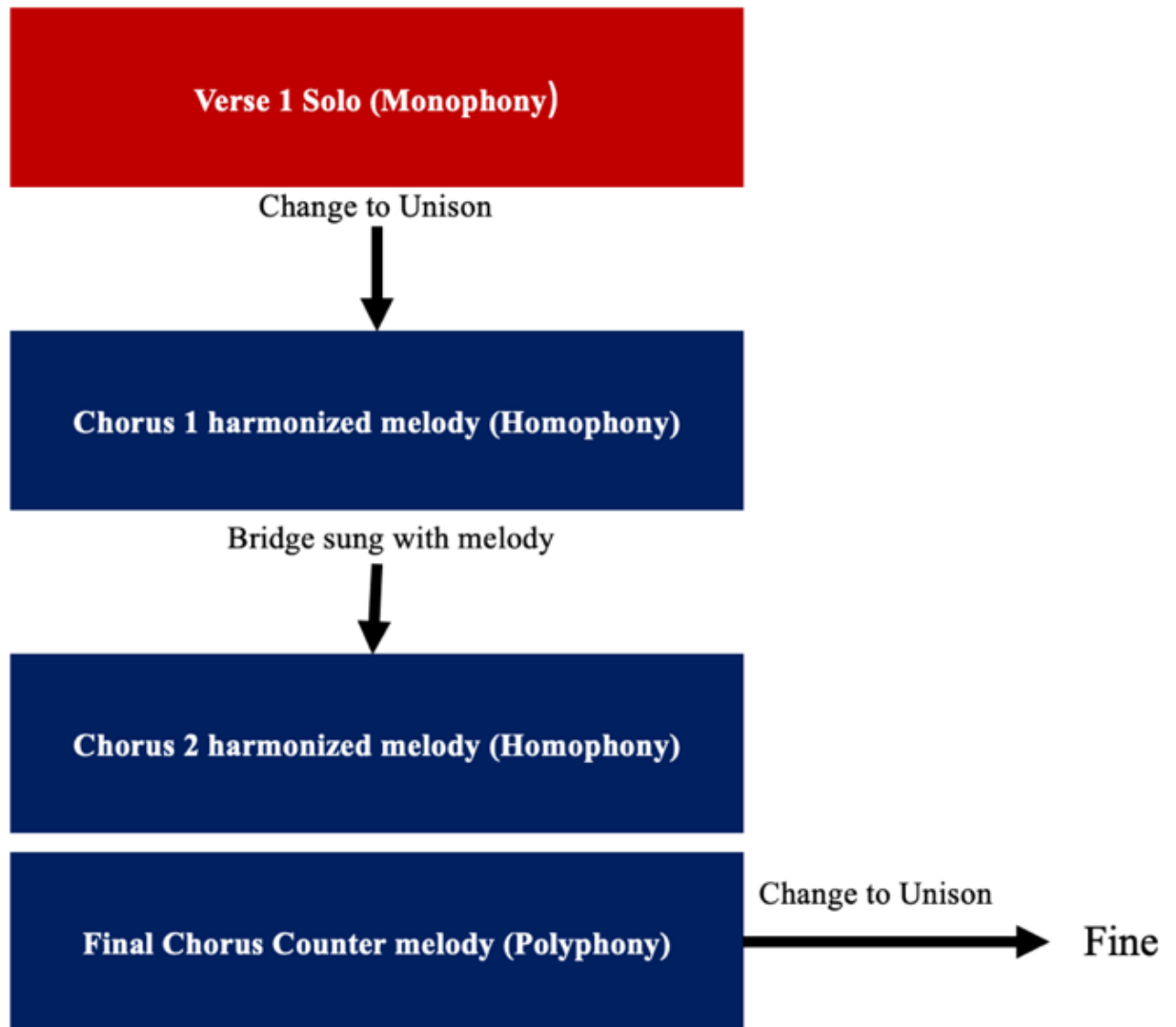
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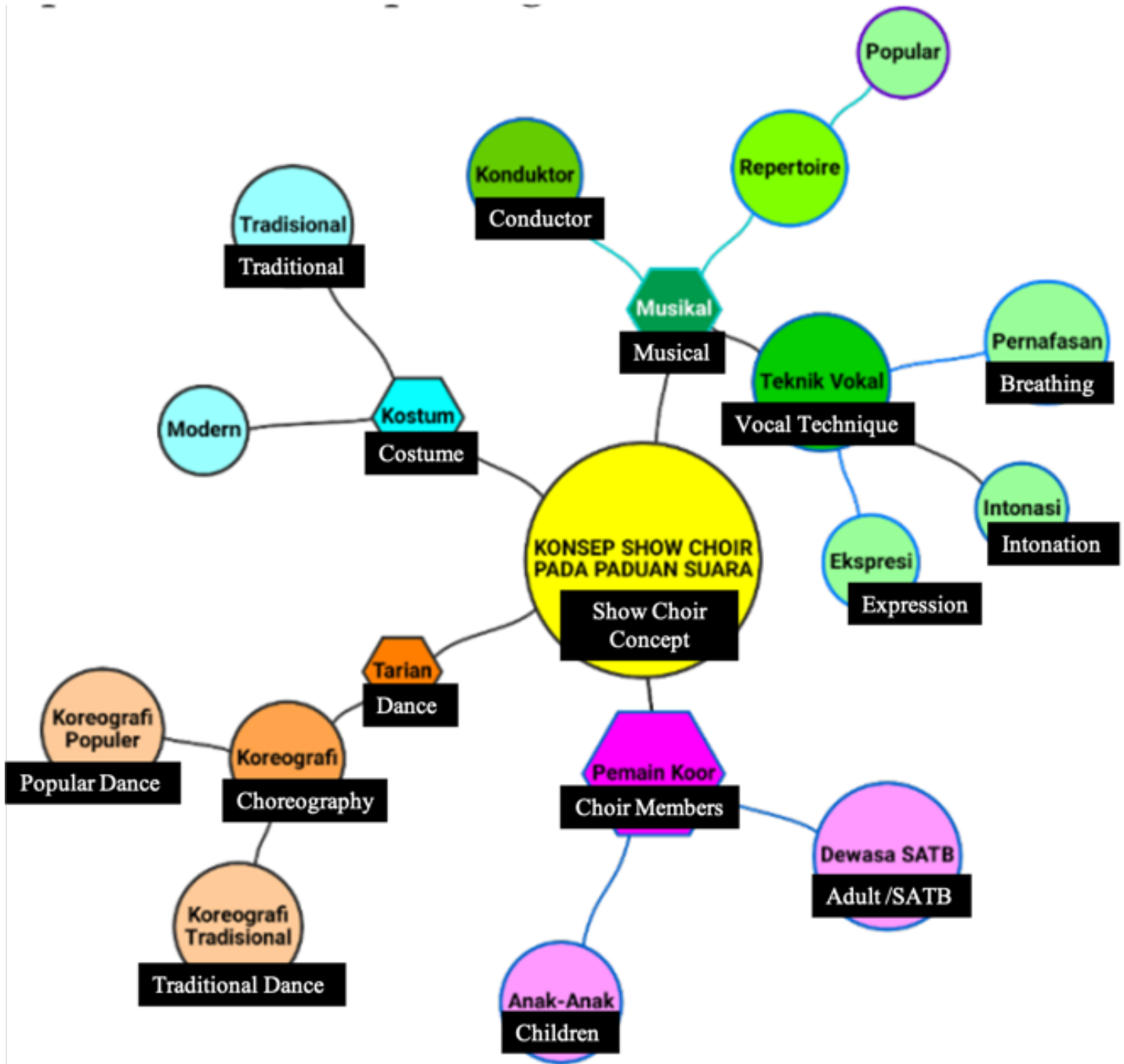
Appendices**Appendix A**

Common show choir arrangement harmonic texture (Cassidy, 2013, pg. 22).



Appendix B

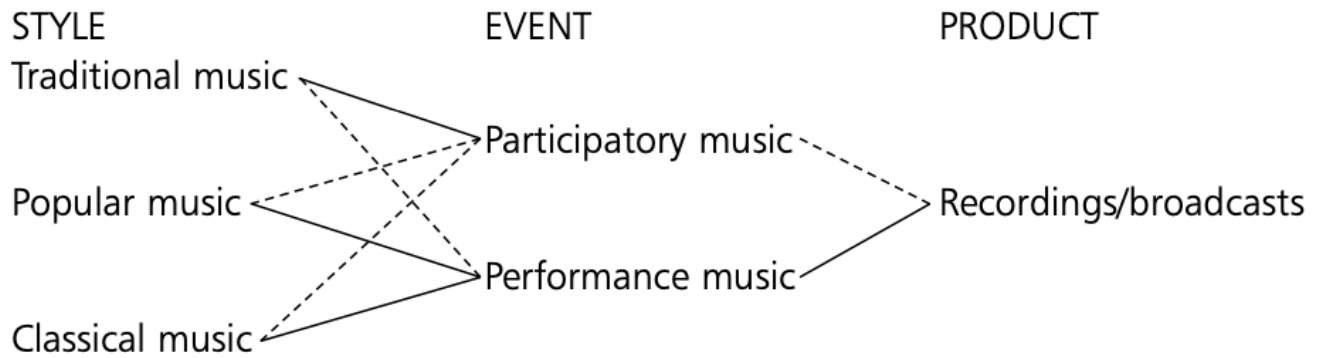
Map of Indonesian show choir structure (Widodo, Tjaroko, & Setyawan, 2019, pg. 126).



Appendix C

Trends in music consumption & production Blaukopf (1992, as cited in O'Flynn, 2006, pg. 143)

O'Flynn *Vernacular music-making and education*



Source: Adapted from Blaukopf (1992, pp. 193–195).

Key: Continuous lines denote strong associations. Broken lines suggest the possibility of other ties.

Appendix D

Vowel Placement Chart (Alder & Mulvihill, 2016, pg. 60).

