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J. S. BACH IN EVERYDAY LIFE:
THE ‘CHORAL IDENTITY’ OF AN AMATEUR ‘ART MUSIC’
BACH CHOIR AND THE CONCEPT OF ‘CHORAL CAPITAL’

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents research on an amateur composer-oriented Bach choir. Its main purpose is to study the development of musical identities and musical preferences of choir members as they take shape through the collective learning process of rehearsing and performing large-scale choral music. The study analyses how the choral participation and performance creates a certain type of ‘choral capital’ (a combination of social and cultural capital within the choral setting) and how the choristers reconstruct and relate to the composer (J.S. Bach) by creating ‘choral identities’ linked to the composer-orientation of their choir.

This study is based on an interdisciplinary approach, seeking concepts and ideas from different fields of study – primarily sociology and music sociology (music in everyday life and the concepts of social and cultural capital in the amateur choral setting) but also music psychology regarding concepts of musical and vocal identities, history of music (especially Bach scholars, previous biographical writings about J.S. Bach), music and education (choral singing as informal music education) and interdisciplinary studies on music, health and well-being.

The methodological approach of this research consists of a grounded theory based, single case study where the case was the Croydon Bach Choir in London performing J.S. Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*, using participant observation (where I sang with the choir for one semester) and qualitative interviews as main research methods and gathering demographic background data on choir members via paper-based survey. Whereas significant research on music performances has been conducted, so far choral research, where the direct participation of the researcher as a member of the choir is used as one of the main research methods, is still quite rare.

Results indicate that participants develop socio-musical identity both through their choral participation in general, performance experiences and early music consumption in the family household and the emphasis of the importance of choral singing as a fulfilment instead of pursuing a professional career. Through choral singing, participants developed ‘choral capital’ through a) the effects of collective learning on their musical taste and preferences (thus broadening their musical taste and preferences and reconstructing the composer) and b) the well-being factor of collective singing and communal learning through the process of rehearsing and performing the

Mass in B Minor. Furthermore, findings indicated that participants construct Bach as a genius and a devout Lutheran, an image that relates to the romantic image of Bach presented in the late 19th – early 20th century biographical writings on the composer. Thus in general, their choral activities form a valuable addition to their social and cultural capital ('choral capital'), which they use as a source of well-being in everyday life. In addition, participants create a certain 'choral identity' by relating to the composer-orientation of their choir; the promotional label of Bach as a synonym for quality choral singing and the emphasis of challenging repertoire.

Key words: Music sociology, music in everyday life, musical identities, choral studies, choral music, Johann Sebastian Bach, baroque music, identity and performance, amateur musicians, social capital, cultural capital, choral capital, choral identity

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