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How Singing in a Seminary Choir Influences Episcopal Seminarians' Formation

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HOW SINGING IN A SEMINARY CHOIR INFLUENCES EPISCOPAL SEMINARIANS' FORMATION

BY SARAH KNOX, KEVIN TATE, GRAHAM KNOWLTON, AND CLARA E. HILL

The children's choir and choral scholars of Nashotah House at graduation day Evensong in the chapel of St. Mary the Virgin

CHORAL MUSIC IS CENTRAL TO many religious traditions, including those of the Episcopal Church (EC), whose seminarians frequently engage in choral singing, whether as part of a choir or a congregation. Given this centrality, we wanted to learn more about the experience of singing in an EC seminary choir.

Although some writers have discussed how engaging in music may affect well-being,¹⁻³ and many have examined the influences on vocational development,⁴ few have discussed religious vocations—that sense of a divine call that EC seminarians must demonstrate before they enter seminary training. In addition, as asserted by Daniel Aleshire (2006), “Education in sacred music . . . competes for limited educational space in a crowded curriculum to prepare future pastors . . . theological schools have a limited involvement in the education of church musicians . . . [and] very few schools require a course in sacred music.”⁵ Thus, the existing literature on vocational development may well not reflect the experiences of those pursuing Holy Orders, and seminaries themselves may be

hard-pressed to include such training in their curricula. Furthermore, we found no literature examining how participating in a seminary choir influences seminarians’ religious or vocational development. We seek to fill these gaps in the literature.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

We invited all seminarians singing in the Choral Scholars Choir (CSC) at Nashotah House Theological Seminary (NHTS), in Nashotah, Wisconsin, to participate in this project. All consented, as did one seminarian who was a past member of the CSC, giving us a total of eleven participants. Most participants were in their 20s and 30s, nine were men, all were white, and ten were pursuing a master’s of divinity degree. Seven identified as Anglican and four as Episcopalian; two were in their first year of seminary training, four in their second year, and five in their third year. On average, they had sung in the CSC for nearly 1.5 years. Participants had sung in choirs (EC, non-EC, and non-church) for about five years. Although four had no formal musical training, three had completed

an undergraduate degree in music, and four had studied a musical instrument.

After providing informed consent, each participant was interviewed by Sarah Knox in a 45–60 minute audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, we began data analysis, using consensual qualitative research,⁶ a well-known qualitative research method in the social sciences. In CQR, research team members reach consensus in each of the three steps of data analysis: (1) researchers identify domains, or topic areas, into which the transcribed data are organized (e.g., Why seminarian auditioned for CSC; High point of CSC experience); (2) the data in each domain are abstracted to capture their core or essence (called “core ideas”); and (3) the researchers compare the core ideas for all participants within a domain, looking for common themes across participants (cross analysis). The themes that emerge in all or all but one case are considered general, those that emerge in at least half are considered typical, and those that emerge in at least two and up to half of participants are considered variant.

FINDINGS

Participant Background and Its Relationship with Music/Choir

Participants typically auditioned for the CSC to enhance their professional and vocational development, and to enrich their formation. One stated that he wanted to understand church music so that when he “talks with church musicians, they won’t think I’m an idiot.” They also typically auditioned as a way to continue their earlier music and singing experiences. Variantly, participants auditioned to receive the stipend provided to CSC members, or for the opportunity to build a sense of community (e.g., “It was a great way to meet people”).

With regard to what they contributed to the CSC, participants typically referred to their musical abilities and experience: “I know the music, so I contribute my experience and training.” They also typically contributed through their ability to lead, model, or mentor. One participant, for instance, felt it his responsibility to set the tone for others. Variantly, participants contributed their passion for and dedication to the choir, and also their support for the choirmaster (e.g., “I keep the choirmaster sane”).

Benefits of Singing in CSC

Singing in the CSC contributed to seminarians’ daily lives in multiple ways. Generally, they ranked the CSC very highly among all of their seminary activities (“It’s what keeps me here”), and also generally found it a source of community. Typically, the CSC was an enjoyable activity (“a way to blow off steam”), provided a chance to participate in good music, deepened their worship experience (“singing is praying twice”), and fostered intrapersonal growth (“I learned to be more patient with myself”). Variantly, the CSC provided an opportunity to learn more about music, and also provided structure and discipline to daily life (“It was a healthy ritual

that at 4:00 P.M., no matter what, I am at rehearsal; that’s a sacred time”).

The CSC also nurtured seminarians’ personal development. Typically, the choir strengthened their musical skills, knowledge, and appreciation (“I have a better understanding of music’s different time periods and theological underpinnings”). Variantly, the choir enhanced seminarians’ awareness of their role as leaders: “I learned about being a leader, which is hard to come by for a young guy.”

Similarly, participating in the CSC fostered seminarians’ religious development as future clergy. Typically, they commented that the experience of singing was transcendent, reminding them that “great religion or faith is not just a mental construct, but has to be all-encompassing, expressed in ways that written words cannot do alone.” Variantly, the CSC complemented and enhanced their academic learning: “The Scriptures come alive for me in music.”

In addition, singing in the CSC nurtured seminarians’ vocational development. For example, their CSC experiences generally strengthened their formation for leading liturgy (“As a priest, I will be called upon to ‘be the understander of music and heal moral injury and develop people’—and thus will have to make decisions about music”). Typically, being in the CSC increased seminarians’ understanding of the role of music in church: “I have a greater understanding of how choirs work and how they interface with liturgy, so I have ‘inside knowledge’ of how things work.” Fi-

nally, their CSC experiences typically reinforced seminarians’ desire to support the role of music as clergy (e.g., one participant intended to advocate for music because of the value of music and choir in church).

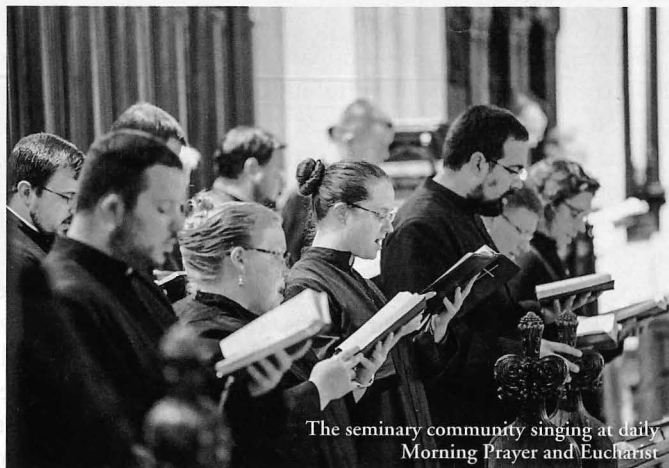
As high points of their CSC experiences, seminarians typically identified the singing of special services, such as Advent Lessons and Carols or Holy Week. Variantly, performing exceptionally well was a high point (e.g., “I am taken out of the present . . . taken up into Heaven to experience what the angels experience . . . I have a real and momentary sense of peace and grace”).

Drawbacks of Singing in CSC

Despite the numerous benefits of singing in the CSC, seminarians did note that the CSC sometimes detracted from their daily life. They generally commented on the substantial time and energy required by the CSC, describing it as second only behind their coursework. Variantly, CSC members’ attitudes and demeanors negatively affected the experience. One seminarian commented, for instance, that the occasionally humorous approach to choir “can be a danger if it detracts from the seriousness of what they’re doing as an act of worship.”

As low points of their CSC experience, seminarians typically commented on others’ occasionally disturbing attitudes and the associated interpersonal tension and negativity. As an example, one seminarian experienced discomfort when some CSC members were “dismissive of others’ expressions of faith.” Variantly, seminarians iden-

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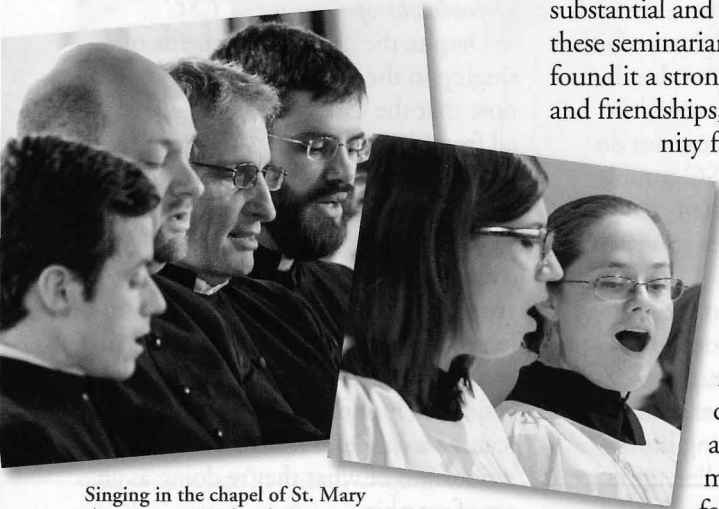


The seminary community singing at daily Morning Prayer and Eucharist

tified being “thrown into” a situation for which they felt unprepared as a low point, such as when one participant suddenly learned that he was to be the cantor for a service and had no idea what he was doing.

Other Findings

Seminarians’ interviews also yielded other intriguing findings. First, seminarians variably came to Nashotah House specifically because of its choral tradition (“It is the only seminary with this type of music program, which adds considerably to worship and to the lives of those participating”). Others variably noted that they could or would



Singing in the chapel of St. Mary the Virgin at Nashotah House

not consider any other seminary: “I had only two choices for seminary, and it really wasn’t a choice, because I wanted to go to Nashotah. Why would I go anywhere else?” Finally, seminarians said that they would continue to sing in a choir after graduation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Singing in an Episcopal seminary choir seemed to have a powerful influence on seminarians’ religious and vocational development. With regard to religious development, singing in the CSC deepened their worship experience and was transcendent. In terms of vocational development, singing in the CSC strengthened their formation, increased their understanding of the role of music in church, and reinforced their desire to support this role of music when they served as clergy.

These are potent findings, indeed, for they illuminate the vital contribution of choral engagement to the essential mission of any seminary: formation. For these seminarians, their involvement in the CSC was foundational to their priestly formation.

Relatedly, we also learned that these seminarians sought to sing in a seminary choir to enhance their professional and vocational development, as well as to continue their earlier music and singing experiences. To the CSC they contributed this musical background, as well as their willingness to lead, model, and mentor—desirable traits for all clergy. Singing in the CSC played a substantial and much-enjoyed role in these seminarians’ daily lives; they found it a strong source of community and friendships, as well as an opportunity for intra- and interpersonal growth and a chance to sing good music. In addition, the CSC enhanced their musical skills and appreciation. Being a member of the CSC required significant time and energy, but these demands were gladly met, for the most part. Singing

special services were particular high points of their CSC experience, whereas low points reflected occasional tension that arose from others’ distressing attitudes. Thus, participating in the CSC fostered personal, religious, and vocational growth; provided a sense of community; and enhanced the understanding of, appreciation for, and support for the role of music in church.

For those reflecting upon the role of a choir in their own seminary, or even in their own church setting, the findings described here are indeed relevant. As stated at the outset of this article, choral music plays a central role in many religious traditions, and for both clergy and laity, often serves as a way to connect with the Divine. For seminarians, a seminary choir is a vehicle for a profound and multidimensional effect on their development, and a vital component of their daily lives, echoing Guenther’s⁷ assertion of the impor-

tance of seminarians singing in a choir. The same may well be true for members of congregations, who seek spiritual growth and fulfillment via choral music. Amid these many benefits, it is also important to attend to the occasional difficulties that arise in choral endeavors. As such, choral directors, clergy, and choir members themselves may need, from time to time, to address their interpersonal processes and dynamics to ensure that the benefits of engaging in choral singing outweigh any negative elements. As noted by several of the seminarians, singing is indeed “praying twice.” What a tremendous gift to offer to all who wish to partake, both clergy and laity.

NOTES

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4. Gideon Arulmani, Anuradha Bakshi, Frederick Leong, A.G. Watts, eds., *Handbook of Career Development: International Perspectives* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2014).
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