



“CREATE MUSIC THAT WILL OPEN A PERSON’S HEART”: A PERSPECTIVE ON EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING AS DEPICTED IN THREE FILMS

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Music in film is a powerful means for highlighting particular themes or messages. Furthermore, film music provides a background to what the viewer perceives in scenes or events through the experiences of the actors. Although mostly fictional, many emotions or situations depicted in films can be assimilated with the life experiences of the viewer. The three films in question in this article, *As it is in Heaven*, *Les Choristes* and *Harmony* show that, in facing life's many challenges, singing as a form of music can serve as a means to express and/or attain a measure of emotional and social wellbeing. The meaning of group singing, the relationship between singing and wellbeing as well as the comments of conferences attendees and the interpretation of some lyrics are discussed in this qualitative research article. The preceding points link to the “broaden-and-build” model of positive emotions.

Keywords: wellbeing, positive experiences, group singing, *As it is in Heaven* (2004), *Les Choristes* (2004), *Harmony* (2008), “broaden-and-build” model.

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Die gebruik van musiek in films is'n besonder kragtige wyse om spesifieke temas of boodskappe uit te lig. Filmmusiek verskaf ook 'n agtergrond vir wat die kyker in besondere tonele of gebeurtenisse deur die ondervindinge van die spelers beleef. Alhoewel heelwat emosies of situasies wat in films uitgebeeld word, fiktief is, kan die kykers as gevolg van hul eie lewenservaringe hulle daarmee vereenselwig. Die drie films wat in hierdie artikel ondersoek word, *As it is in Heaven*, *Les Choristes* en *Harmony*, wys dat sang as wyse kan dien om uitdrukking aan emosionele en sosiale welstand te gee wanneer verskillende uitdagings in die lewe 'n mens in die gesig staar. Die betekenis van groepsang, die verwantskap tussen sang en welstand sowel as die kommentaar van kongresgangers en die interpretasie van sekere lirieke word in hierdie kwalitatiewe navorsingsartikel bespreek. Die voorafgaande aspekte word met die “verruiming-en-bou”-model van positiewe emosies verbind.

Kernbegrippe: welstand, positiewe ervaringe, groepsang, *As it is in Heaven* (2004), *Les Choristes* (2004), *Harmony* (2008), “verruiming-en-bou”-model.





1 INTRODUCTION

The three films selected have a strong association with people's emotional and social wellbeing through the medium of music. In these three films social and emotional states of wellbeing are intertwined with music. Music is the umbrella term for musical processes like creating, listening and performing and therefore we do not distinguish between singing or choir singing or group singing or music making. For the purpose of this article we use these words as synonyms. Tia DeNora (2013:3,4,6) asks "How musical is wellbeing" and discusses the power of music, and she continues by asking "How wellbeing is musical" and mentions that meaningful experiences are an inspiration to the brain. These questions were the springboard to investigate the topic.

We followed a qualitative research design in an interpretative theoretical paradigm to understand, describe and interpret the subject matter. The following research question guides the discussion: What is the relevance of singing to emotional and social wellbeing as depicted in a fictional environment in the selected films as well as in real life? A literature review in which the following topics are discussed forms the basis of the argumentation: wellbeing and the experience thereof through choir singing; the role of music in films and specific in the three selected films — *As it is in Heaven* (2004), *Les Choristes* (2004) and *Harmony* (2008).

2 THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WELLBEING

Wellbeing can be manifested in different ways: physical, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual/religious wellbeing. In a chapter entitled "Feeling good" Guse (2014:19-38) explains two perspectives on wellbeing: *hedonism* and *eudaimonism*. Happiness, a satisfying life and pleasant experiences are linked to hedonism, whilst *eudemonia* is connected to a "life well lived" (Potgieter & Botha, 2014:44). Defining these terms is a complex task. Hedonic activities "will make you feel happy" in the moment, whereas *eudaimonia* is connected to feeling *right*: it has a moral and ethical basis. *Eudaimonia* can be experienced on an individual and societal level. Researchers from various disciplines have different views about *what* makes life worth living. Wong (2012) highlights human survival and flourishing; Victor Frankl (1963) emphasises finding "meaning in life"; Csikszentmihalyi (1999:825) has done pioneering research on the notion of *flow* – musical flow may lead to self-esteem and happiness. Steve Dillon (2007:47) mentions that arts activities like music "are considered intrinsically motivated and this is flow – where we lose ourselves in the intrinsic pleasure of the task".

The fact that music is implicated in so many different types of interventions relating to health and wellbeing underscores the belief that being moved or touched by music cannot be held to be purely a metaphor, which renders an embellishment of our daily lives (MacDonald *et al.*, 2012:4). "Illness, health, the body and mind, culture and agency are intertwined" (DeNora, 2013:6) and music has an active factor that can be identified in wellbeing.

In life's many challenges music, and more specifically song, expresses comfort, happiness and jubilation. Some consider singing as a superficial humming; however, singing carries emotions touching the individual's inner being (CNS forum, 2006:7). Wellbeing in general provides the individual with the vitality for living and for interacting with others, creating harmony (Victoria Health, 2011:32). Boyce-Tillman (2000:93) points out that "[w]ords divide, but sounds unite". For the purposes of this article we will briefly discuss emotional and social wellbeing.

2.1 Emotional wellbeing

Through their surveys Kahneman and Deaton (2010) distinguish between two concepts of happiness, which include emotional wellbeing and the evaluation of life. They interpret emotional wellbeing as day-to-day pleasant or unpleasant experiences. These include experiences of joy, fascination, anxiety, sadness, anger and affection. By "overall satisfaction" they refer to the evaluation of a person's life. At the University of Gothenburg neuroscience researchers have proved that singing and emotional wellbeing are linked.

Singing in a choir is as good as yoga because the breathing patterns can regulate your heart beat ... This study could explain why choral singing is said to be good for your health, because reducing the variability of your heart rate is likely to be good for your wellbeing (Collins, 2013:5).

When a weaker voice is dominated by a louder voice in music, harmony fails. In life the oppression of the weaker individual creates an imbalance in society and disrupts general wellbeing. A group can become a society whose lives depend on all its members contributing to the wellbeing of the group (CNS forum, 2006:4). To achieve this kind of harmony in life and in group singing, each individual must find his/her own voice but should also respect the requirements of a team/group (Richardson, 2004: 2). This is one of the fundamental dimensions of our existence in society. The lack of balance between the needs of the individual and of greater coherence is an important cause of discord (CNS forum, 2006:5).

2.2 Social wellbeing

Participating in group singing leads to a common purpose of developing cohesion within a common group culture through a common set of attitudes and behaviour (Drummond, 2012:305). Social wellbeing refers to how the individual copes in a social environment and in terms of acceptance in society through integration into a group (White, 2007:24). The experience of wellbeing and belonging is closely related to such a group identity. As social relationships develop in the context of the group singing, the satisfaction in terms of achievement, motivation, enjoyment and affection is considerable. A great reward is that self-identity is deepened through teamwork, creating harmony which leads to acceptance of social structures in the world we live (Drummond, 2012:307).

Singing together gives us a feeling of submission, not the oppressive kind but gaining by submitting to a common song,





tempo, structure and rhythm (Guthrie, 2011:28). In everyday life many factors can disrupt the harmony within a group; these include factors such as personal conflict, excessive competitiveness, unwillingness to co-operate and, most of all, the great difficulty of stepping aside and accepting the group where all members merge to embark on a joint project.

3 THE DEPICTION OF DEVELOPING WELLBEING IN THE SELECTED FILMS

In the three films under discussion singing, and especially choir singing, several seemingly hopeless situations unfold, develop and change drastically for the better. After years of a meaningless existence in a small village, a prison, and a reformed orphanage in the respective films, the characters discover and develop meaningful lives when they are exposed to interaction through singing. We will proceed by giving a brief summary of the storyline of each of these films as well as a visual image from the films (in alphabetical order) to give the reader a sense of their visual feel.

3.1 *As it is in Heaven* (Sweden, 2004, Kay Pollak, director)



Image 1 *As it is in Heaven* (www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/19648)

A famous conductor returns to his small village and is asked to breathe new life into the village choir. Like him, all members of this choir have been exposed and damaged through abuse, humiliation, negative attitudes and lack of trust, and are consequently in search of acceptance through their own voices. He teaches them to find their own voice tone; one can perceive them discovering themselves through singing, which in turn enhances their trust in one another and socially as they become aware of, and respect, situations in their small enclosed village. The film is about people whom one can relate to in real life and the experience enriches the individual characters and their personal conflicts within themselves and their prejudice towards others. When a choir is formed, the viewer perceives more conflict that stems from a lack of spiritual and social connection within the group. Only when dramatic situations occur, do they all realise that their own problems actually unite

them as a group. After a verbally and physically abusive incident in scene 6 (extract 4.56–6.12),¹ an enlightened experience is dramatically interpreted by a powerful song. Although the film is a fictional story, the visual impact of seeing the characters singing together makes a spiritual connection with the viewers.

3.2 *Harmony* (South Korea, 2009. Dae-Gyu Kang, director)



Image 2 *Harmony* (see bibliography Images of Harmony)

The setting of this film from Korea is a women's prison. The film depicts the lives of these women in prison and experiences of some individual's lives before they were sentenced to imprisonment. The viewer poignantly perceives weakness and a yearning for individuality, and experiences real sympathy for the characters and comes to care about their fates; barriers of hatred, prejudice and intolerance are broken down to create harmonious teamwork among individuals through group singing. The film shows the hardship and the difficulties people experience to gain the love and acceptance of their families and society, and to satisfy their need for friendship. An inmate starts a choir but in order to form a unity of sound, members must bond through trust and acceptance. In scene 4 (extract 50.01–50.33) the lack of co-operation leads to insults and more physical fighting. Only when they share their personal life experiences do trust and bonding develop. This results in the choir singing together in harmony as one voice, forgetting about their surroundings and individual problems. Scene 5 (extract 56.13–56.54) shows the enjoyment of achievement and social bonding through singing together and performing for other inmates and officers. As a result of the success of this group, and realising the potential of singing for rehabilitating people, the authorities of the prison arrange for them to participate in a concert in public. The transformations of the individual characters are perceived in the final sequence (scene 8) of the film through their sense of wellbeing created by their enjoyment and achievement through singing; this in





turn results in social acceptance by a public audience with all barriers of prejudice destroyed (extract 1.30.01 – 1.31.09).

3.3 *Les Choristes* (France, 2004, Christophe Barratier, director)



Image 2 *Les Choristes* (www.imdb.com/title/tt0372824)

Les Choristes is set in 1949 at a reform school for troubled boys where teachers are apathetic and the principal rules without any tolerance. The boys are lonely and troubled individuals searching for something better in life and are in desperate need of attention and affection. A new teacher arrives and establishes a choir in an attempt to install a little love and hope in these troubled students and so contribute to their general wellbeing. The success of the choir results in pupils dropping their tough exteriors and starting to interact socially. It becomes a tale about the healing and constructive power of music. The official trailer clip of this film provides enough sense of the isolation and fighting that the children experience at the school. Their desperation in seeking for attention and love is evident. By forming and singing in a choir, these children develop a sense of social interaction that strengthens them and enables them to bond and stand together. They become more disciplined in themselves and more tolerant of others. The visual impact of their emotional development is supported by their singing (see trailer clip of film).

In general when the characters in all three films start to understand their surroundings, their ability to cope with what happens transforms in a positive manner, which gives greater meaning to their lives and surroundings (CNS forum, 2006:2). Although these films come from different countries and cultures, the unifying aspect of wellbeing generated through singing is noticeable. The characters in all three films are drawn together by the power of music through group singing and have been empowered to face their issues. Only when they dare to break through their constrictions can they act in accordance with what they really are and thus create meaning for their lives, which in turn generates spiritual and social wellbeing. Everyone in the group should find their own voice. Only then can they stand up for themselves. A group becomes a close-knit

community that supports and strengthens the individuals that are so necessary for its existence.

We explored the meaning of group singing as portrayed in the films and the way it could be linked to emotional and social wellbeing. Group singing may be experienced as an informal coming together of people with a specific interest – a school, sports or church event – or a more formal experience, such as singing in a professional choir. The soundtracks or “musical multimedia”, as Cooke (1998) referred to it, were studied by the authors of this article.

In the context of film the sound design is of enormous importance, although sound design in this article relates especially to singing in the three films. The term was first used by Walter Murch in 1979 to describe his work in *Apocalypse Now*; he argues for the importance of the careful layering of the three sonic elements – sound, dialogue and music. “Since film and sound were synchronized, sound, dialogue and silence have all been part of the film soundtrack” (Murch in Brown, 2009:207, 208). But sound is also the beginning of music and in contemporary film music it can be difficult to decide where music stops and sound effects continue.

According to Campbell (2010:250), “vocal music is the most personal of all types of musical expressions, as opposed to the somewhat more distant performance on instruments as extensions of the body”. Music therapists (see MacDonald *et al.*, 2012; Stige *et al.*, 2010) investigate the role of singing in therapy and health. Music, through singing, is a healing aid and, although humans cannot really perceive what is happening in their minds and bodies during singing, the action creates something special.

Music creation and expression have been explored throughout human history for its contribution to the arts, humanity and community. A beautiful and expressive medium, music is a powerful tool, an art form that is difficult to quantify in terms of how listening to music can create an emotional experience that is both unique to the individual and shared by many (Blythe LaGasse & Thaut, 2012:153).

Although ‘creativity’ and ‘being creative’ are nowadays used in different contexts and have become buzzwords since the 1960s (Boyce-Tillman, 2014:57), it is important to define them as a springboard for music-making. Boyce-Tillman (2015:58) furthermore describes creativity as “mystery, darkness, chaos, enlightenment, ordering, playing, freedom, self-expression and transformation, and the need for courage and risk taking”.

The concept of music is abstract. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest that we relate music to our bodies, our environment and the way we interact with other people. *Pitch, rhythm, melody* and *harmony* are musical concepts and refer to the way we identify and discuss these concepts in terms of the sounds we hear. “We can say that music is experienced as a multidimensional structured whole and what are commonly known as the ‘elements of music’ could be considered dimensions of that whole” (Wiggins, 2015:29, 30). Music is in [most cases] an





aural activity and so music can be described as an aural art and “musical thinking is thinking in sound” (Wiggins, 2015:36). The construction of music occurs through *performing, listening and creating*. This statement could be found in an approach to knowledge, understanding, interpretation, and “praxis”.

Praxis involves active reflection and critical reflective action for the development of (a) personal and community flourishing and wellbeing, (b) the ethical care of others and (c) the positive transformation of people and their everyday lives (Elliott & Silverman (2014:68).

The archetype of the music teacher has long been popular in

films. Mr. Holland's Opus (1995), Music of the Heart (1999), The Music Teacher (2012) show examples of a person who “creates music to open the heart” (these words were the life vision of Daniel Dareus, who was the conductor in As it is in Heaven). Music in films evokes and elicits a strong emotion and provides additional meaning to a film's narrative (Lipscomb &

Tolshinsky, 2005:394). In Chapters 1 and 2 of his book A history of film music Cooke (2008:1-66) discusses the development from “silent cinema” to “the sound on track”.² Without music a film could appear to be lifeless. Neuroscience has shown that visual images add meaning – the auditory in combination with visual images – to our understanding of films. Music creates and relieves tension, provides comfort and arouses emotion

(Cohen, 2010:879, 880). Music is such a central facet in As it is in Heaven, Les Choristes and Harmony; it not only serves as a soundtrack, but also provides the means for the characters to experience an active and constructive response to society.

Although the three films are all set in different countries with different languages and cultures, they are connected by one unifying phenomenon: *wellbeing* created through *group singing*. In achieving harmony through unity, each person is an individual, but also part of a group. In singing, the uniqueness of every individual voice adds to the unique timbre of the whole group when they sing together (CNS forum, 2006:4).

Because people have individual problems, the harmony, melody, rhythm of sound and relationships create the shared and individual wellbeing and support needed to overcome difficulties. The purpose of such teamwork is relevant in all three films as seen in their growing confidence in themselves (their own voice) and relationships with others. The purposeful striving for a sense of achievement and self-esteem becomes a major accomplishment in their lives (Victoria Health, 2011:51).

During the Music and Wellbeing international conference (6 to 10 August 2013) in Potchefstroom, South Africa, June Boyce-Tillman asked the audience to feel their pulse and tap the tempo of it. The result sounded like rain drops on a zinc roof! Then she

asked us to sing the following (Boyce-Tillman, 2006:152);

CHORUS

Sing us our own song the song of the earth,

The song of creation, the song of our birth,

That exists in belonging to you and to me,

To the stars and the mountains, the sky and the sea.

1. Listen! You're hearing the song of the earth,

They sing it who know of their value and worth,

For they know they belong with the sea and the sky,

To moonshine at midnight, the clouds floating by.

CHORUS

2. It is not one song but patchworks of sound.

That includes all the pitches that people have found

That includes the vibrations of earthquakes and bees

Of laughing fire's crackling and murmuring breeze.

CHORUS

3. All blend together to make the earth one

Fragmented parts separated too long,

True notes and rhythms and colours and beat

Make sacred spaces where we all meet.

After we had sung the song, Boyce-Tillman asked the audience to tap again the rhythm of their pulses and we sounded like one person (Boyce-Tillman, 2014:14). This she explained is the main purpose of a community, namely to generate a sense of wellbeing, a sense of oneness, a channelling of people and their life experiences into a more harmonious whole, which can augur well for the way in which people live and interact and respond to stimuli and situations.

4 THE BROADEN-AND-BUILD MODEL OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Wissing (2014:141-171) discusses different theories on functioning well and feeling good. We have concentrated in

² The aim of this article is not to analyse the soundtrack of the films as such but to interpret the relevance through the songs intended to enhance wellbeing.

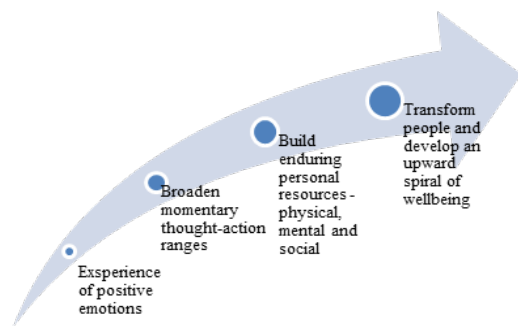




our discussion mainly on positive emotions and therefore the broaden-and-build model that Wissing (2014:148) describes, based on Frederickson *et al.* (2008:1045), who also explored the links between singing and wellbeing and its concomitant advantages, is central to our study.

Positive emotions contribute over time, together with the broadening effect, to building intellectual resources such as the capacity to be mindful or to solve important life problems; social resources such as the ability to give and receive social support; ... and psychological resources such as resilience, purpose directedness, and the ability to maintain a sense of mastery over environmental challenges (Frederickson *et al.*, 2008).

Figure 1: The broaden-and-build model of positive emotions based on Fredrickson 2001 (Wissing, 2014:148)



Paul Kingsbury (2014:91-105) begins Chapter 7 of the book *Soundscapes of wellbeing in popular music* with the words “Listen! It’s alive” and refers to different aspects of life – from “tuning into music” to “wellbeing out of the spirit” to “a lovely singing voice to” to “silenced by words” (to mention just a

few topics that have relevance for this article). In *As it is in*

Heaven Daniel Dareus (the choir conductor) begins the choir practice with the instruction to listen. He tries to form a choir with community members, and inspires them to listen to the sound they are producing – he was actually not prepared to allow the group to sing before he was convinced that they knew what active listening was. They could only experience positive emotions after they had realised that the sound they created with their voices blended and gave them a peaking sensation. Singing requires all one’s concentration on the music and therefore helps one to forget one’s own emotional problems. This teamwork creates the confidence to manage and work through one’s own problems. This leads to the upward spiral:

from experiencing sound that creates a special sensation to the person to a transformation that changes the person. In the process personal resources are built up: a “shared language” and a sense of belonging to a musical community which helps developing personal discipline and emotional confidence (Victoria Health, 2011:41). One of the most rewarding and sustaining aspects of group singing is the bridging of social gaps and broadening of individuals’ perspectives of life (Victoria Health, 2011:43). It becomes a tool for therapy, social justice,

emotional support and all facets of wellbeing as depicted in all three films. Moving from chaotic noise and sound to creating a piece of art generates positive emotions.

Through courage and humanity, the growing sense of wellbeing generated kindness, citizenship, hope and spirituality, which were enhanced through an activity such as singing. “For me, now, the space and place I live in is stamped with the experience of singing with the choir ... a virtual village of belonging, that has made this my home” (Gridley, 2008:305). This “home” is experienced in all three films as a space where individuals belong and feel safe. *As it is in Heaven*, *Les Choristes* and *Harmony* show that group singing is a powerful personal and social wellbeing activity.

After presenting this paper at the international wellbeing conference, attendees mentioned in their personal reflections on how music and singing influenced their lives.³ “I have made friends for a lifetime, we are a team” was like a refrain they shared with me. Judy⁴ mentioned the spiritual experience of making music together with others: “I had this feeling of awe and was not aware of the environment – it was just this wonderful togetherness” Martin said. For Judith it created a sense of unity and bonding with all kinds of people. Marina mentioned the non-prejudiced approach of acceptance when making music together. In short, they felt safe and this showed that people can work and communicate together in a respectful manner. Sandy reflected on the healing power of choir singing after her emotional and physical abuse. Will said that he was emotionally touched, whereas Cathy asked if this presentation could be repeated at her work, as they experience much conflict between co-workers. Heather, an education specialist, commented on the discipline that music creates. The participants also reflected on the visual impact of the selected film clips and the way they have experienced similar situations.

5 CONCLUSION

In each of the films the transformations of the individuals show how “positive emotions undo negative emotions” (Wissing, 2014:149). The lyrics of some songs of the films support this reaction. Gabriela’s song from *As it is in Heaven* justifies her empowerment – from being abused by her husband to developing a meaningful self-esteem – she decides to live a purposeful life.

It is now that my life is mine

I’ve got this short time on earth

And my longing has brought me here

All I lacked and all I gained.

In the broaden-and-build model (Figure 1) meaning may stem from experiences of wellbeing like hope, flow, ecstasy,

3 Video recordings of the discussion were made.

4 Pseudonyms are given to protect the privacy of the attendees.





mysticism and transcendence. Cloete (2013:39) describes the transcendental as magic, an interaction between reality and vision. The metaphors in the song *Caresse sur l'océan* (2004) in *Les Choristes* summarises something of this mystery:

Touch the ocean

Carry the bird so light ...

Find a path to the rainbow

To discover Spring

Calm on the ocean.

Though all stories in the films were fictional, they depict a sense of growing humanity in real life situations, enhanced by singing as the vehicle for promoting emotional and social wellbeing.

Singing opens new avenues to create opportunities that may open the heart. Real-life situations reveal how sound, melody, harmony and song give meaning to individuals and groups. The human sciences are nowadays more concerned than ever before with health, happiness, the self, the meaning of a person's life, positive attitudes, beauty, art, belonging, hope, dreams and vision. The topics that are presented at international conferences and national and international postgraduate research bear this out (see the special edition of *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 10(2), November 2014). Choir singing for children, adults and the elderly is a favourite music-making experience that takes place in formal and informal settings.

"Let the people sing"! is a refrain with a far more penetrating meaning and significance than would emerge from the surface.

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