

‘Oh Joy, Oh Rapture’: The Oily Chart Opera Company reflects the enduring charm of Gilbert and Sullivan in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

For over four decades ‘The Oily Chart Opera Company’ have annually produced and performed a Gilbert and Sullivan Savoy opera in Pretoria, South Africa. In this strictly amateur group, designed to allow busy people to participate over six to seven weeks, members undertake all the roles on stage as well as making costumes and stage sets. Unique to the group is a single music ‘coach and accompanist’ having served for 45 years and many of the current members having performed in all of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas more than once. Data was gathered in a survey forming part of a research project Spirituality and Well-being: Music in the community. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to code the data into four broad themes: Joining, Learning and Leadership, Benefits of Community Music, Connections to Well-being and Spiritual Connections. The findings show the typical benefits experienced by those who perform regularly in groups, although this group draws special joy from their strict focus on Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas. They also understand the spiritual connection to their music in the familiar dual categories of religious and secular spirituality. This particular group of performers is keeping Savoy operas alive in modern-day sub-Saharan Africa.

KEYWORDS

Amateur musical theatre; community; Gilbert and Sullivan productions; social engagement; spirituality; well-being

Musical theatre and group singing are ongoing practices, serving many purposes. The positive effect of performing any music for an audience, by professionals and amateurs, is a profound experience, producing positive results (Bailey and Davidson 2005). Beneficial effects on social, emotional, physical and spiritual health of participants in group singing (Clift and Hancox 2001,2010) are explored in this study of an amateur group, the Oily Chart (OC) Opera Company, which has staged a Gilbert and Sullivan (G&S) Opera each year for the past four and a half decades. The OC performs only G&S works. That this provides benefits of a shared interest in this genre as well as the benefits of singing in groups is attested to by a study of performers and audiences at the annual G&S Festival in Buxton (Pitts 2004).

The G&S Savoy Operas have become popular in performances across many parts of the globe: despite being called ‘fuddy-duddy relics of a bygone age ... sexless and camp ... racist, right-wing Olde English nerdery’, ‘G&S has arguably never been in better fettle’ (Bradley

2016, vii). In Pitts's 2004 study of the Buxton G&S festival, performers valued the musical and social aspects equally as they both contributed to the enjoyment of and commitment to the G&S operas. This also rings true for the group in this study where both the musical and acting components present challenges and a sense of achievement for the membership. For over 45 years the group has had the opportunity 'to escape, for a time, the frustrations of everyday realities' (Bailey and Davidson 2005, 271). Coming together as a group the 'social component provide[s] friendship in an environment of shared interest' (Bailey and Davidson 2005, 271). As part of the 'shared interest', satire and humour are relished through the performances as a form of community music.

Singing around the world, in both formal and informal settings, tends to develop in many directions (Lebler 2008; Bartleet et al. 2009; Higgins 2008). In community music settings, key to success is the repertoire and 'music making involved', 'the intentions of the leaders or participants in a program' and in the case of singing together for more than four decades, as with this group, 'the characteristics of the participants' (Veblen 2007, 6).

In many community singing groups the focus is bringing together people with similar interests, backgrounds, norms and values (O'Connor 2009). Singing specifically, by expressing emotions, feelings and thoughts, can enhance meaning in life (Juslin 2013). It provides people with a sense of belonging and identity (Langston and Barrett 2008), offering group identity and social connection (Langston 2005). Meeting regularly as a group is an essential part of rehearsals; members look forward to seeing their friends as a form of social interaction and affirmation (Zanini and Leao 2006; Kerchner and Abril 2009; Skingley, Martin, and Clift 2015), despite the OC pattern of meeting for a production only once annually. Social interaction assists group members to stay connected and cope with age-ing and its associated grief (Hillman 2002; Hays and Minichiello 2005b). Often members feel connected as they contribute to the social fabric of their local community – certainly found with the Oily Charters.

Singing not only has social benefits but also physical and psychological benefits. Levitin (2010) argues that singing together releases oxytocin – 'a neuro-chemical now known to be involved in establishing bonds of trust between people' (Kosfeld et al. 2005). Releasing oxytocin loosens the synaptic connections in which prior knowledge is held, clearing the way for acquiring new understanding through shared behavioural actions. This is a view of music as the 'biotechnology of group formation' (Freeman 2000); Tarr, Launay, and Dunbar (2014) point to the association between the self-other and neurohormonal mechanisms as important in contributing to the synergy of social bonding in music activities. Whatever the mechanism, others have experienced music offering a social rather than a merely individual identity (Benzon 2001).

Studies have shown that singing enhances well-being (Southcott and Joseph 2013; Menehan 2013; Weinberg and Joseph 2016). However, Clift (2012, 121) pointed out that 'there is some way to go before the real significance of singing and health and well-being is fully understood'. Lehmberg and Fung (2010, 26) note that senior citizens (such as many of the members of the group under discussion) who have participated in music for a lifetime may receive more and deeper positive benefits than those who participate for only a short time.

In addition to the social and well-being benefits, people also use music (singing), art and religion to experience and explore the multidimensional subjective experience of spirituality. The notion of spirituality may vary from one context to another in religious and secular

circles. Veselinovi c-Hofman (2009, 116) points out that spirituality is an 'open space' that has unrestricted variants between 'a subject and an object and lies in between the human and the divine'. This interplay is often connected with an individual's beliefs and values as opposed to religious doctrine. Despite a lack of clear understanding of the difference between the two, spirituality is not synonymous with being religious or having a religion. However, the terms are often used interchangeably (Stanard, Sandhu, and Painter 2000) and may be characterised by mystical, transpersonal, transcendent and numinous spiritual religious experiences (MacDonald 2000), often practised through spiritual disciplines such as prayer or meditation (Fisher 2011).

The notion of spirituality is 'an integral experiential component of music' (Palmer 1995, cited in Moody 2012, 207). Lipe (2002, 210) argues that throughout history music has played a significant role 'in religion and spiritual life ... across cultures' and 'can serve as a sacramental vessel ... to nourish our [one's] spiritual life' (Seifert 2011, 26). Music is essentially entwined with spiritual experience (Seifert 2011) where the 'spiritual' can occur through music while listening to it (Cobussen 2008). Tshabalaba (2010, 73) found in his study based on a Pentecostal charismatic youth group a 'sense of connection' prevailed through religious spiritual involvement and musical emotional engagement.

Situating the study

South Africa has a strong colonial heritage, an aspect of which is the popularity of musical comedy, a subcomponent being the Savoy Operas. As far as can be ascertained, G&S performances were a familiar feature of the Cape Town cultural scene early in the 20th Century (Hauptfleisch 1988) and two long established companies have presented full scale theatrical productions in the cities of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth for decades.

Keeping the G&S tradition alive in the city of Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa, is the Oily Chart Opera Company. Pretoria is part of the Tshwane metro, which has the third largest population in the province of Gauteng. The familiar African demographic of a 'population [that] is aging simultaneously with its unprecedented growth of the youth population and its related challenges' (Nabalamba and Chikoko 2011, 2) is prominent; in South Africa the growth rate of older people is expected to increase by 10.5 per cent by 2025 (Joubert and Bradshaw 2006).

'Whites make up a larger percentage of the population in Tshwane than in any other major metropolitan area in the country' (SAPA 2013) but within the White group, English speakers are in a distinct minority. Traditionally Oily Charters have been from the White racial group, the majority English speaking, sharing an appreciation of what could be described as the typically British sense of humour and wordplay found in G&S operas. Over the years an increasing number of non-mother tongue speakers of English have cho-sen to participate, but nevertheless the cohesiveness referred to in connection with this group tends to reflect a specific British heritage rather than the cultural diversity of multi-cultural, multilingual and multiethnic South Africa.

Within the OC there exists a long history of involvement of two and even three generations in certain families. Lehmborg and Fung (2010, 19) recognise that older citizens are 'an important component of society and their window of musical opportunity is expanding'. This rings true to a large extent with the OC where typical G&S 'blushing maidens' can easily be retirees, with their children and grandchildren also involved, on stage, 'with laughing song

and merry dance¹., backstage and in the audiences, year by year; certainly they offer a supreme example of sustainability and that it is extremely beneficial for older people to be involved with others of all ages (Varvarigou et al. 2015).

All three of the authors have strong links to music teaching, learning and performing in their respective settings. Author 2 and Author 3 are tertiary music academics; Author 3 is a retired science research manager and he and Author 3 have a long-standing relationship with the OC group, which gave them access to past and current Company members.

Background to the company

The amateur group calling themselves The Oily Chart Opera Company since 1982 have gathered in their current form since 1971 on Sunday evenings, over six to seven weeks each year in eastern Pretoria to rehearse for a once-off performance of one of the ever-green G&S operas. Clearly the OC nomenclature is a spoof on 'Mr D'Oyly Carte's Opera Company', named after its founder, Richard D'Oyly Carte, who was the manager of the Royalty Theatre in Soho. Remembering an earlier successful collaboration between William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan he brought the two – composer and librettist –together again in 1875 after which they enjoyed a productive partnership for over a quarter of a century. After Richard D'Oyly Carte's death in 1901, first his widow, then his son and subsequent heirs have kept what is widely known as the Savoy tradition² alive, and 2016 again saw *The Mikado* at London's Savoy theatre, in a new co-production with Scottish Opera.

The OC has always rehearsed and performed in the school hall of a small private (i.e. fee-paying) boys' primary school in Pretoria: Waterkloof House Preparatory School, commonly known as WHPS (pronounced whips). All originally began in the late 1950s, when the then headmaster of the school, a great G&S fan, and his wife, a pianist capable of accompanying, used to gather their extended family to sing G&S together.

In 1971 four old boys of the school approached the current Musical Director with a request to play the piano for an audition session. The first mention of the Oily Chart title on the programmes comes in 1978: *The Oily Chart: WHPS Old Boys Gilbert and Sullivan Society*. The name of the company changed in 1982 but has remained the Oily Chart Opera Company ever since. The Musical Director has continued accompanying productions, uninterrupted, for 45 years. Some programmes available from the early days refer to her, alone, as 'the Orchestra', but she recalled in a personal communication the then producer's tendency to invite ad hoc musicians to add emphasis to various items³.

The accompanist taught class music at WHPS, the primary school which both her sons attended. Before the death of her husband, over a decade ago, he sang several times in the OC chorus. The cohesiveness indicated by such interlinking activities and memberships hints at various reasons for the group's longevity, although there appears to be no current shortage of new participants and little complaint of cliques within the membership, as could perhaps have been expected.

Despite the age of the Musical Director (recently turned 90), all participants had only praise for her efforts and the extent to which she helps them. One particular response says it all: 'I am amazed each year. Margaret plays with love and obvious enjoyment. Viva Margaret! May you never suffer with rheumatism'.

A particularly well-known Oily Charter was (ABA)⁴ Tony Brink (1927–2003), widely recognised as South Africa's pioneer of engineering geology. According to an article written in Afrikaans, and here translated into English⁵:

Tony had an exceptional musical talent and a strong baritone voice. At school he was the leading bagpiper, but later generations of students knew him as the guitarist who entertained them around the campfire with a large variety of songs, often with impromptu variations ... In 1957 the Brink and Baber families (his brother John was married to a Miss Baber) spontaneously decided, off their own bat, to mount a production of the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta *HMS Pinafore* ... So began a tradition which continues to today – each year one of Gilbert & Sullivan's operettas (there are thirteen) is presented at the Waterkloof House Preparatory School. Tony was for many years the heart and soul of these amateur productions ... where all costumes and decor are produced by the participants themselves. His record of participation was unbroken from 1957 to 2003 (with the exception of 1980), often in a leading role and as producer (Haarhoff and Korf 2007, 48).

Tony was ably assisted for many years by his close friend Rhoda Baber, an artist and ceramicist of distinguished reputation. Despite her physical limitations, having been born with spina bifida and being in a wheelchair, Rhoda regularly attended rehearsals and produced wonderful costume and set designs. Tony also had little difficulty in singing a major part and directing all the others in a production.

The OC presented its first G&S production in 1959 and has managed an annual production ever since, with the exception of the period 1963–1970 and 1981. Its 50th production, *The Gondoliers*, was mounted in 2015. Over this lifetime, the company has presented the full canon of the Savoy Operas, and in the original chronological order in two separate seasons, from 1979 to 1992 and from 1999 to 2011⁶.

Strictly an amateur group with members undertaking all stage roles as well as making costumes and sets, the Company has adopted a very specific production and rehearsal style, designed to allow busy people to participate by attending an average of six Sunday evening full cast rehearsals, with principal parts fitting in a few extra rehearsals during the week. All the cast are allowed, if they find it necessary, to use scores and libretti on stage, although many use specific extracts on prompt cards, especially for the dialogue. Within these constraints all the members and the directors, all rotating cast members, somehow manage to create a production that they, their friends and family, thoroughly enjoy each year⁷. There are effectively two performances, although the Friday one is called a dress rehearsal and the Saturday evening 'the performance'. This production approach is clearly a major contributor to the sustainability of the Company. Suggestions from time to time that a more 'professional' approach should be adopted have been firmly resisted.

The longevity of the Company had, until recently, given rise to concern that it might die out, and that the research for this article should be conducted while sufficient participants were still accessible. However, the past two seasons have also seen an influx of under-50s whose enthusiasm well matches that of the older garde. Even more positive is the enthusiasm for the form expressed by their friends whose first exposure to G&S was via the OC productions.

Gender balance and age distribution of the current 'membership' has not been measured, not least because membership is not at all formal, being managed via an email contact list. Cast numbers over the past 10 years have varied from lows of <35 to a maximum of 58 – a serious challenge on a small school hall stage! It is significant that those years with participant

numbers <35 were all the longer operas, *The Gondoliers*, *Utopia Ltd* and *The Grand Duke*.

The 28 respondents to the questionnaire, which included most of the 30 participants in the 2015 production, displayed the following age distribution:

>60 y	20
40–59y	6
<40y	2

Perhaps the 2025 projection of 10.5 per cent growth rate of older people in South Africa by Joubert and Bradshaw (2006), combined with the perceived acknowledgement of the joys of the genre by young first-time audience members, provides reassurance that G&S and its OC performers are not threatened with demise – or certainly not in Pretoria!

Methodology

The study forms part of the project *Spirituality and Well-being: Music in the community*, initiated by the second author at X University in Australia, from whence ethical clearance was obtained. The wider project aims to investigate and identify:

- Why people come together to share music making and practice
- What are the benefits of community music making
- Does music making connect to spirituality
- Can music making and sharing contribute to one's well-being?

Participants in the 2015 production of *The Gondoliers* had the project explained to them by the first author. In addition, they were given the X University Plain Language Statement explaining the project and the questionnaire process prepared by the second author. Both first and third author helped collate the data and sought further clarification from members, who could remain anonymous, regarding the questionnaire which was distributed by hand at rehearsals or by email and could be returned into a collection box or emailed. The questionnaire served as a convenient sampling tool and as a useful way to gain insights from a representative group 'of a given population' [the OC group] (Gay, Mills, and Airasian 2012, 141). The questionnaire included both closed questions such as age, gender and number of years singing with the group, as well as open-ended questions such as: What benefit do you derive from participating in the Oily Chart productions? How do you learn your music? Do you see a spiritual connection to your music making? How do you benefit socially through your engagement with the Oily Chart? What are some of the highlights or lowlights of working with the Musical Director/Accompanist? According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000, 255) 'open-ended questions are a very attractive device for smaller scale research or for those sections of a questionnaire that invite an honest personal comment from the respondents in addition to ticking numbers and boxes'.

From the thirty participants in 2015 and about 15 former members,⁸ twenty-eight responses were received and all three authors participated in several rounds of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through online communication from 2015. In June 2016 all three authors met face to face to undertake final analysis. In this paper we focus on all the

sub-topics/aims of the project, given in the four bullet points above. However, because of unique OC characteristics, there was a significant overlap between interpretation and response to the questions relating to community involvement and personal benefits; these have therefore been conflated in some cases. In the findings section below, comments are clustered into four overarching themes.

The authors draw on a social construction of reality (Stake 1995; Yin 2003) in which there is a particularly close collaboration between the participants and the first and third researchers, as Company members themselves. These connections enabled participants to tell their stories and describe their views of reality (Crabtree and Miller 1999; Baxter and Jack 2008) to people with whom they are familiar and have had a long-standing relationship. Questions were short and clear to achieve reliability and validity and were ‘in line with the targeted population’s vernacular and avoid[ed] problems such as double-barrelled questions’ (Bird 2009, 1311).

The size of the sample and the range of questions explored militated against statistical significance as an evaluation technique. IPA was selected because it provided understanding of how the Company make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them. According to Malcolm (2013, 63), ‘phenomenology attempts to uncover what it means to participants from their perspective ... it explores any research participant’s deeply personal sense of all that is around them ... attempts to gain a rich and detailed understanding of people themselves’. IPA reveals meanings that go beyond ‘what participants might articulate themselves’ (Taylor 2014, 2). While it is essential to ‘remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world’ (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003,28), IPA also involves a process of interpretation by the researcher(s) (Smith 2005; Clarke 2009). As Joseph (2014, 157) points out ‘the researcher has to listen, understand and trust the participants’ voices when interpreting the data’.

The authors read and analysed questionnaire answers, initially making notes and grouping them in tables (Smith and Osborn 2003). The face-to-face meeting allowed the authors to further discuss the ‘connection between emergent themes, grouping them together according to conceptual similarities’ (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014, 12). Only pertinent data aspects are reported, under the overarching themes. Some findings are demonstrated using direct quotations from Company members (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

Findings

This section is divided into four broad overarching themes: Joining, Learning and Leadership, Benefits of Community Music, Connections to Well-being and Spiritual Connections.

Joining, learning and leadership

Joining

Respondents were asked two questions: What made you join the Oily Chart? and Why have you continued to participate? It must be reiterated that the Oily Chart Company functions for only 6–7 weeks a year as the annual production is studied, rehearsed and performed. Virtually all community interactions are within these 6–7 weeks per year, although some members have

associations outside OC gatherings. Many seemed to have joined the Oily Chart for their love of the Savoy Operas and the unique combination of Gilbert’s satirical humour and Sullivan’s wonderfully tuneful and singable music. This features strongly in the responses: ‘Love of G&S’ (many times); ‘Brought up since 6 years of age on G&S songs’. Enjoyment of group singing of any kind was regularly mentioned, with a few respondents also referring to the welcome opportunity to be on stage. ‘ ... with the demise of the local professional opera groups I was left with no opportunity to perform. Oily Chart provided this.’

Many members were invited by existing Oily Charters, who sketched enthusiastic pictures of fun and fellowship. An interesting feature is that several wives joined at the instigation or encouragement of their husbands, but no husbands cited the influence of their wives! This is consistent with the view of Ian Bradley(2005, 108) who alleges “... like the sons of Gama Rex in Princess Ida, ‘men predominate over women.” He produces significant detail that contrasts this Savoyard characteristic with the domination by women of most other amateur choral groups, arguing further that most of the really engaging characters in the operas are men, reflecting ‘Gilbert’s own very definite misogyny’.

Many members simply stated ‘Enjoyment’, with large numbers expanding this to include the singing, and the G&S style. The achievement of building something worth-while as a joint effort in a short time and the spirit of teamwork among kindred spirits was regularly mentioned. ‘It is enormous fun to do something like this in such a short period of time.’ ‘I love G&S operas and it’s a joy to perform them with a wonderful group of people’. ‘I love the music of Sullivan and the words of Gilbert and I enjoy the company of fellow singers.’“... enjoy it when we are all on stage together and the camaraderie in the dressing room.” And the Oily Charters seem to enjoy each other’s company: ‘The people and the forum ...’, ‘Nice atmosphere at rehearsals with friendly people ...’, ‘Enjoy maintaining contact with the people’.

Learning

Respondents were asked: How do you learn your music? This is obviously important in all amateur groups where most members need help in learning a part. It has particular interest in that OC rehearsal times are short and participants are not expected to memorise parts but may take scores onstage.

Amateur singers learn by a variety of routines and the Oily Charters are probably typical. The distribution is shown below.

Routine	No. of responses
Listening and repetition at rehearsals	12
Sight reading – to some degree	9
Listening to recordings (CD, YouTube, midi)	9
Rehearsal with Accompanist	6

NB: Some respondents reported more than one routine.

Quoted responses include:

Listening and repetition at rehearsals: ‘By ear and repetition’; ‘By attending every rehearsal, as I am unable to read music’ and ‘from hearing and reading it/repeating it’.

Sight reading – to some degree: ‘I can’t read music but can follow the ups & downs & have a basic knowledge of rests, breaks & timing. G&S is easier to follow as the music is all so similar’.

Listening to recordings (CD, YouTube, midi): ‘By listening to it over and over. I cannot play an instrument or read music. This leaves me with getting training tracks and singing along to it until I remember it’; ‘YouTube soundtrack running in the background as I work’; ‘Listen to the CD and sing to the score’.

Rehearsal with Accompanist: ‘Lots of help from Margaret’; ‘Where would I be without Margaret ... to help me’.

Leadership

Respondents were asked for Highs and Lows in working with the Directors and the Accompanist/Musical Director. Most Directors participate because they love to sing and they take turns away from their first love for the sake of the Company. Few have any other directing experience. Despite this the respondents were generous in their acknowledgement of Directors’ patience and skill. This comprehensive response sums it up: ‘The directors generally are fully representative of the Oily Chart ethos of putting on a good show, but having fun in doing so. They are always right on top of things, having prepared thoroughly for the practices. This must involve a considerable time commitment, but they are invariably witty and encouraging, rarely complaining even when they do not encounter the same degree of commitment from the principals or the chorus’.

There were interesting comments about individuals but too personal for anonymous reporting. The Accompanist/Musical Director is an integral part of the Company’s history, having occupied that role single-handedly for more than four decades. Respondents were very complimentary about her talent, commitment and supportiveness; there were no negative comments about her.

Production selection process

Respondents were asked: Do you enjoy the process used to identify the production for the following year and why? (Feel free to criticise the process). Except when the canon was being followed chronologically, the following year’s production is identified at the ‘AGM’ held at the cast party after the Saturday production. This is actually an announcement of the choice of the only remaining founder member, titled Chairman for Life, and is treated humorously with only a few respondents suggesting a more ‘democratic’ process.

Benefits of community music

Respondents were asked two relevant questions: What benefit do you derive from participating in the Oily Chart productions? How do you benefit socially through your engagement with the Oily Chart? Inevitably perceived benefits overlap with reasons for continuing to participate, and, sharing and participation in the community.

General benefits

Opportunities to experience the sheer joy of singing fine music, in groups, and even acting are widely cited. ‘The pleasure of group singing timeless, fun music’. ‘... enjoy the fun, fellowship & lovely music/singing and the opportunity to ‘perform’ on stage’. ‘It gives me a chance to sing (which I love doing) and act which I have never done until I joined the Oily Chart.’ Development of singing and other performance skills is seen as a major benefit. ‘My ability to read music has improved; Margaret (the accompanist and singing coach⁹) has helped me develop unsuspected talents and I enjoy the practices as much as the performances, but I do enjoy performing on stage’. ‘Apart from the enjoyment and camaraderie, I exercise my voice for other choral activities’. ‘I get to get my voice back into condition, and have a good time’. ‘Excellent accompaniment, opportunities to contribute in ways I enjoy’. ‘I’ve learnt a little about music and about people in an unusual environment and under an unusual kind of pressure.’ ‘Before participating in the productions, I knew little about Gilbert & Sullivan. I now love and appreciate their unique talents’.

Social benefits

Many respondents referred to good friends made through the Oily Chart. ‘... one friendship that means a great deal to me’; ‘Keeping up friendships’; ‘Old friends. In fact, over the years various romances have even blossomed within the cast, with at least one case resulting in a very happy marriage! Association with like-minded people¹⁰ was frequently reported as a benefit: ‘It’s wonderful meeting up with ‘similar minded’ people’; ‘... a good way to meet and participate with others of like interests, no matter how good they are at singing.’ ‘Meet and engage with others with a mutual interest in music which is often positive.’ ‘I enjoy the calibre of people who speak my language, understand my strengths, weaknesses and challenges, and who provide encouragement and praise.

Extending their range of acquaintances, as distinct from forming friendships, was seen to be a bonus: ‘Making interesting new acquaintances and renewing some old ones’; Also the benefits of the wide demographic scope of the Company: ‘Meeting different people from different social & occupational backgrounds.’ ‘Mixing with different age-groups.’ ‘By socialising with people from different walks of life, I learn so much.’ ‘One has the opportunity to discover the other interests and hobbies of fellow singers.’ ‘I’ve met some lovely people.’ ‘The richness of the people in terms of experience, heart and good fun’.

On the one hand the Company assembling only annually has specific appeal. ‘When I see familiar faces after a year, I always get a rush of joy!’. On the other hand, some respondents favoured interim formal contact: ‘There is little social connection outside Oily Chart, which is a pity. It would be nice if we had a ‘reunion’ after six months or so just to ‘connect’ with each other again.’ ‘Getting to know new people. Although more social interaction or possibly more contact through the year would also not be amiss’.

Connections to well-being

Respondents were asked the question: How has it affected your well-being?

‘Something to look forward to’ is a common response: ‘It is an annual activity that I look forward to. Having things to look forward to is probably good for one’s mental and physical

well-being.”Added another dimension to my life. Has given me new songs to sing in the shower!’.

Support in difficult episodes of life was also mentioned: ‘It has given me the motivation to walk after my hip-replacement operation. I was disappointed when I was unable to be in *The Mikado* because I was in too much pain to stand for any length of time’.

Simply expressed happiness was frequently articulated. ‘Positively. I feel happy.’ ‘I have had some moments of great happiness.’ ‘It brings me a lot of joy and laughter.’ ‘So I always leave with a bounce in my step and a smile on my face.’ ‘I often leave a rehearsal buoyed and not wanting to stop singing’.

There are also stress relief acknowledgements: ‘Singing relaxes me and I feel that singing is a healthy pastime. Soldiers are taught to sing during exercise routines, to improve breathing and physical fitness.’ ‘I have always used singing to relax.’ ‘... it always is a boost to me. And the boost to one’s confidence.’ ‘Yes, very much so. Our meetings every Sunday are fun and any stress one has just falls away. Boosts one’s confidence.’ ‘It has improved my confidence – everyone is so supportive.’ ‘Confidence to use my talents. Courage to try new things & extend myself’.

Spiritual connections

Respondents were asked: Do you see a spiritual connection to your music making? (Please make your own interpretation of ‘spiritual’ and include it in your response.) The clarification in parentheses was included because other studies had often elicited the response –It depends what you mean by ‘spiritual?’ Some respondents saw a religious connotation to ‘spiritual’, with various emphases. A distinction was drawn between singing in sacred items, which influenced their relationship with Almighty God, and formed an important part of their singing lives, and ‘singing G&S’ although the latter was also linked to worship: ‘With G&S I celebrate loving my neighbour’; ‘C S Lewis said that ‘whatever a man does for its own sake for pure enjoyment, brings him closer to God’’. ‘Music is the food of the soul.’ ‘Singing is a joy to my soul’. Several respondents declared their singing talent to be a God-given gift, with some even associating any use of it with glorifying God.

Some members found spiritual connections without religious connotations. More commonly singing, especially group singing, was seen as ‘uplifting’ with other related references to the ‘human spirit’. ‘Feeling elated’ and ‘having positive emotional feelings’ after group singing was cited as ‘relaxing’ and ‘having fun’. Reference was made to ‘singing in harmony’ as ‘touching something deep’. It was interesting to note that having no spiritual connection was very much a minority category. One response asserted ‘Nothing spiritual with the Oily Chart’. Another responded ‘while I love making music, it rarely transcends just being music’.

Discussion and conclusion

The OC community members all live within 20 km of the performance venue. They yearly come together for a few weeks to present a full Savoy Opera onstage with costumes, sets and piano accompaniment. As many members do meet outside of this particular group where they sing in various other choirs, meeting regularly forms a strong social connection for them and the accompanist. This social connection is an essential part of rehearsals where they look

forward to seeing friends as a form of social interaction (Hays and Minichiello 2005a; Jacob, Guptill, and Sumsion 2009). This long-standing group has experienced music engagement between group members as supporting their 'group identity, collaborative learning, friendship and social support' (Creech et al. 2014,17). Through such engagement with like-minded people singing G&S, membership felt united where their group identity and a sense of connection as 'The Oily Charters' are strengthened (Schippers 2010; Gridley et al. 2011; Veblen 2013).

Members also acknowledged being enthused by the accompanist who over more than four decades returns yearly to teach, practise, prepare and perform the Savoy Operas. Having a knowledgeable 'leader' and accompanist adds to the musical and social benefits of singing in such a group. Researchers have found that these connections offer social affirmation for both individuals and the groups (Tonneijck, Kinebanian, and Josephsson 2008; Davidson et al. 2014; Skingley, Martin, and Clift 2015). Group members also felt connected to the wider community as they contribute to its social fabric by performing yearly, keeping the Savoy Operas alive at the tip of Africa in the 21st century. Though twenty of the twenty eight participants were over the age of 60 and the accompanist has turned 90, all 'embraced the sense of community that came with belonging to a choir [a music theatre group]' (Tonneijck, Kinebanian, and Josephsson 2008, 173).

Belonging to a group like the OC enhances quality of life (Seligman 2011; Buetow et al. 2014; Joseph and Southcott 2014). Singing also provides spiritual connections in relation to what members think and believe (Pretorius 2008; Roof 2005); spirituality was perceived as 'profound and transcendent' (Atkins and Schubert 2014, 76), connecting to the Body, Mind and Spirit trichotomy (Lipe 2002; Seifert 2011; de Souza 2014).

Though the authors agree with Brisola and Cury (2015, 395) that 'singing is a complex, multifaceted activity and a multidisciplinary area of research', OC membership is driven primarily by fulfilment of members' personal, including musical, needs. However, there is a strong sense of sharing one's talents and bringing joy to others by singing to/for and with them. Obviously appreciative audiences also contribute to the performers' feelings of satisfaction and well-being. In the main, this study of amateur performers adds to the body of knowledge showing the benefits of community singing. The findings in this study present the experiences of twenty-eight individuals from one G&S group – a limitation in itself where all members of the group are additionally English speaking white South Africans. It is acknowledged that the findings may have been different had the group been more multifaceted. Though G&S operas may be considered 'fuddy-duddy relics of a bygone age' (Bradley 2016), this particular group of South African performers are still singing well over forty years on and music for them 'creates a sense of belonging and community amongst the singers' (Dore, Gillett, and Pascal 2010, 10).

It seems that, in Pretoria at least, there will continue to be annual cries of 'Oh Joy, Oh Rapture'¹¹, reflecting the 'innocent merriment'¹² derived from life with 'atouch of poetry in it'¹³.

Notes

1. From 'The Mikado'.
2. G&S operas are also widely known as the Savoy operas, relating to the fact that they were mostly performed at the Savoy theatre, the building of which could initially be afforded because of their commercial success.

3. The 1971 team comprised Piano, 2 Violins, Tympani and a Horn!
 4. Official initials as opposed to the name Tony by which he was commonly known.
 5. Haarhoff & Korf's use of the Afrikaans equivalent of operetta is here maintained in translation, although the G&S/Savoy productions are most commonly known as operas, despite often being light operas/musical comedies – the typical description of the difference between operetta and opera.
 6. Believing this achievement to be significant, an attempt was made to have it recognised in the *Guinness Book of Records*. The request was unfortunately turned down on grounds of 'lack of general interest'.
 7. Always in the printed programme is a note to the effect that 'This performance is solely for the enjoyment of the cast: any enjoyment derived by the audience is coincidental and not intended'.
8. It is not certain how many of those emailed per the available list actually received the questionnaire.
9. Officially known as the Musical Director.
 10. Article in preparation. The Oily Charters are, however, a larger group and so the possibility of such uniformity is far less likely. The answers to question 5 (relating to this issue) have not been analysed for this article, as not necessarily being in line with the aims of this specific research project. It is, though, the intention to continue with such analysis in follow-up research.
 11. From 'HMS Pinafore'.
 12. From 'The Mikado'.
 13. From 'The Pirates of Penzance'.

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