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## Community Choir members... why do they sing?

**Solveig Holmquist offers some new insights for the conductors of community choirs**



Thanks to much hard work and theorizing by people who get paid to sit around and think, we have the opportunity to be more effective in our teaching. I'm referring to such developments as Howard Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, the *Myers-Briggs Personality Index*, *Human-Compatible Learning* as presented by The Voice Care Network, and the *Brain Hemisphere Usage Sorter* developed by Claude Beamish.

Beamish's sorter and the brain research supporting it were very interestingly presented by Karen Fulmer during the Washington ACDA Summer Institute at the University of Puget Sound in July, and those of us who submitted to the "sorting" process found the experience ruefully illuminating and actually quite funny.

What all these interrelated theories and processes have in common is the stunning revelation that, like snowflakes, we humans are quite individual in our makeup. ("Well, DUH," you're now responding.) Not only are we different, but we need our differences to be known and valued. We need someone to take the trouble to find out who we really are, and to tell us that what we have to offer constitutes an important puzzle piece in the picture of life.

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All too often, however, each of us is judged in some sphere by what might be called a rigid stencil. With a stencil, you fit or you don't exist. The standard IQ test is an example: it measures intelligence by means of verbal and computational skills alone, and was compiled by scholars who resonated to (and did well in) those subjects! Not fair, we now rightly understand.

Alongside the previously mentioned advances, I'd like to call your attention to important thinking in the field of sociology known as leisure theory. Ouch! Stencil alert! "What do you mean, LEISURE?"

That certainly was my response when I was forced to confront and really absorb the fact that the singers in my community choir don't regard their

involvement in the same way I do. They don't even regard their involvement in the same way as each other! They're snowflakes...yet I've spent years thinking of them, talking to them, and planning for them as if they were professional musicians. I was squishing them under my stencil.

In studying community choirs as I worked on my doctoral dissertation, I found an article by Dr. Terry Gates in the Summer, 1991, Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education. This article's (rather dry) title was "Music Participation: Theory, Research, and Policy." Quite simply, it changed my thinking, which is no small undertaking.

In the first place I had to accept that, for my community singers, rehearsal really is leisure activity. Only a small percentage of us make our living in music. (Good thing, too, or the job market would be even more stressful than it is.) The companion revelation is that these singers make their living doing something else. In other words, sometimes it really will happen that a singer has to work at the time I've scheduled a dress rehearsal.

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A second change in my thinking had to do with the word "leisure." This is where the individuation process really kicks in. For leisure doesn't automatically imply a lack of focus or casual commitment. As Gates points out, there's a real difference between serious leisure and play, for example. Any of us can fill in the blanks in our own personal profiles, but in my case, volleyball or Scrabble (play) only interests me in a "pickup" sort of way, whereas I religiously set aside time for hiking and sailing (serious leisure). Yet there are people who actually engage in volleyball or Scrabble professionally. For them, it's work.

I'd like to share some of Gates' ideas with you, and ask you to imagine a situation or person in your choir as you go along. (For reasons no one has ever explained, scholarly writing can be pretty stiff. Personal analogy can help find the meaning.)

Gates explains a leisure theory called the P-A-P system: professional, amateur, publics. "The distinction between professionals and the members of a society who support them is clear. Amateurs, largely non-paid participants, interact with both these major groups. They are the most knowledgeable of the

activity's public; and sometimes they join the activity's professionals, or take their places, in performances or exhibitions for the public." He continues:

*Many, if not most, school, college, and community music ensemble directors pattern their plans and their members' behavior on the professional musician's model of instruction, practice, rehearsal, and public performance. Nonprofessional participants who "buy into" this value system can be classed either as amateurs or apprentices (professionals in training). As amateurs and apprentices, they benefit from the P-A-P system personally, socially, and, sometimes economically.*

But, Gates suggests, there is another group of serious leisure participants... hobbyists. Hobbyists engage in the activity for benefits that do not come from a P-A-P system. They admit to having no professional models (how many of your singers can name five professional singers?) The prospect of remuneration is not a primary motivation for the hobbyist's efforts. (How many of your singers take private lessons, hoping to become soloists?) "In brief," Gates continues, "the benefits that attract and retain hobbyists derive from the skills they use to meet ever higher personal standards related to the activity, from their active participation in developing new knowledge or creating unique products, and from shared experiences in the activity with like-minded others." Doesn't that describe most of the people in our community choirs?

<b>Gates' Typology of Music Participants in Societies</b>		
	<i>View music as:</i>	<i>Are reinforced:</i>
Professionals	work	in a social system made up of music professionals, amateurs, and publics
Apprentices		
Amateurs	serious leisure	idiosyncratically; not reinforced primarily by a sociomusical system
Hobbyists		
Recreationists	play	
Dabblers		

Hobbyists learn from others and benefit from reinforcement as much as anyone. The distinction is that hobbyists, unlike amateurs, do not adopt the values of professionals. Common American language usage endows the term "professional" with the implication that the professional is the most skilled

participant type. It's time we abandoned this pairing; surely any type of participant may have high quality skill.

It can be argued that in today's American culture, there are four major classes of behavior: survival, work, play, and serious leisure. All four classes interact in each person. (Take a moment here, in the privacy of your home, to mentally categorize your life's activities. Careful, now.) Each of us can be characterized by the relative importance we attach to the activities we come personally to associate with these four classes. For example, serious leisure is distinguished from play by the extent to which an individual participant accepts quite high costs in knowledge, skill, time commitment, and persistence contrasted with those activities regarded as play. For me that means investing in really good hiking boots. For your singer, that might mean paying hefty dues and scheduling nothing else on choir night.

Two other classes of music participants can be called "recreationists" and "dabblers." For them, music is play, not serious leisure. We each make sure that the play activities in our lives, whatever these activities may be, exact lower personal costs in knowledge, skill, time, and persistence than the activities' personal benefits. Another way of saying this is that the outlook of recreationists and dabblers is one of expected benefits. They look for entertainment. When a participant classifies an activity as play, the participant will only permit the costs to exceed the benefits for a short time before he or she will change activities. Had any singers like that? Did anyone ever say to you that she wasn't continuing in choir because "it's not much fun anymore." On the other hand, for amateur and apprentice participants (those who see music as serious leisure or potential work), ceasing musical activity is not easily done. Dropping out exacts a relatively high emotional cost. Has a singer ever said he debated turning down a job offer because there wouldn't be a community choir in the next location?

I'll now use Gates' own words to summarize this discussion of music participants and the categories in which they fit. Again, place the names of people you know and work with into the descriptions:

*With respect to music, there are three classes of people in any large segment of our society: music participants, music audiences, and people who perceive neither musical activity to hold personal benefits. Of the music participants, there are six types; professionals, apprentices, amateurs, hobbyists, recreationists, and dabblers. They are placed in types by the content of the costbenefit relationships. Professionals and apprentices will sustain costs over benefits so long as it is economically feasible. Amateurs and hobbyists will sustain economic costs over psychological benefits for long periods of time. Recreationists and*

*dabblers will sustain costs over benefits as long as music activity is entertaining or provides a source of curiosity. The professionals, apprentices, and amateurs are sustained and reinforced as part of the P-A-P system, and the rest are motivated idiosyncratically.*

*Hobbyists are serious about developing music related skills and knowledge. Recreationists see music participation as a form of self-entertainment. Dabblers are curious enough about music activities to get involved as participants, at least for a while. Music functions as play in both recreationists and dabblers. Amateurs and apprentices see music participation as work. All are participant type people.*

### **So what do we gain...**

So what are we to gain from this theorizing? At the very least, we can lower our own personal stress levels if we are aware that we probably have all six types of participants in our choirs. But more importantly, we can probably do a better job of keeping more singers engaged and interested if we design and plan for them rather than for ourselves (back to the IQ stencil of measurement.)

We'd really like to keep all talented singers, and we can improve retention if, in major aspects of our programs, we systematically reinforce the values of at least five types of music participants (it's probably safe to assume that dabblers won't stick around anyway). Choirs that are run only on the P-A-P system will typically reward only the first two categories. If a talented hobbyist or recreationist stays in a well-integrated P-A-P system program, it will be for rewards other than those planned by the program's director!

Gates again:

*Participants in P-A-P music programs who cannot be classified as amateurs or apprentices by reason of the way they perceive music to function in their own life contexts cannot be expected to find the reinforcement that will lead them to agree that the music participation benefits in that program exceed the costs. Status attainment, a basic social need, has a clear structure for the amateurs and apprentices in P-A-P music programs; however, hobbyists and recreationists who remain in such programs find it more rewarding to attain status in other ways than seeking reinforcement from these programs' value systems. Quite probably, socially motivated music hobbyists and recreationists who remain involved in music programs as participants become the programs' managers and workers, librarians, equipment movers, secretaries, even political leaders. Equally, they may be the programs' leading clowns and miscreants.*

Well, that last suggestion explains my husband's presence in the tenor section of my community choir!

I believe that if we truly know the singers in our community choirs and value their contributions and the motivations for making them, we can't help making better music. And that's what it's all about.

*Dr. Solveig Holmquist is Director of Choral Activities at Western Oregon University in Monmouth. She is founder and artistic director of Festival Chorale Oregon, a civic choir in its 19th season.*