

Study of St. Olaf Choir Cultures

St. Olaf College

May 19, 2008

Title

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Abstract

There are many subcultures at St. Olaf College. We choose to look at the choir culture, specifically. The music program attracts many to attend our college. Even though this is a large part of our school, the students that do not participate in choral activities know little about the choir community in our school. Many have preconceived notions about a "choir person" left over from high school as exclusive and completely dedicated to music. We as non-choir member St. Olaf student researchers took a look into the choir, by going into different choir practices, conducting a focus group and individual interviews. We observed that the choir culture at St. Olaf is very diverse, bringing in students from all majors and all social networks. The five main choirs at St. Olaf also differ from one another not only in style but also in internal interaction and outside perception.

Summary

I. Introduction

A. St. Olaf choir culture is publicly defined by the St. Olaf Choir, yet few realize that other choirs are important to choral community

II. Setting/History

A. There is a long standing tradition of music at St. Olaf and the legacy continues today.

III. Problem

A. Researchers coming from a non-choir participant perspective investigate the complexities and layers of the choir culture.

IV. Methodology

A. Contact conductors

B. Observe choir practices

C. Conduct interviews and focus groups with choir members

V. Viking/Manitou

A. Freshman choirs separated by gender

B. Initial development of choir students

VI. Chapel/Cantorei

- A. Practice rituals and director influence
- B. "Catch all" choirs; wide range of student participants

VII. St. Olaf Choir

- A. Formality
- B. Audition Process

VIII. Conclusion

- A. The St. Olaf Choir community proves to be very diverse in nature and content.
- B. Choir participation is not exclusive to music majors, nor completely isolated from the greater St. Olaf student body

Introduction

Outside Minnesota, few know specifics about St. Olaf College or even that it exists. The few times St. Olaf is referenced would be the *Golden Girls*, or one might recognize the name from *The Great Gatsby*. However, another venue that has spread the name of St. Olaf College is the St. Olaf Choir and the music program it stems from. And within the musical community, the St. Olaf Choir is quite renowned. Still, at the college itself, besides the weekend of Christmas Festival, students who are not involved in music take little notice of the activities happening in Christiansen Hall of Music. Christmas Fest, with its mass musical performance, fills the Skoglund Fieldhouse, (a sight for most normal sports venues) and reaches a broader audience when occasionally aired on PBS and various other radio programs. Even with this huge event, few students realize the prestige of the St. Olaf Choir and its director Dr. Anton Armstrong. Besides an interim class, few non-music majors or non-choir members make their way inside the music building. This is not to say that these students do not have preconceived notions about what "music people" are like. Outsiders to the music culture at St. Olaf get a skewed view of the culture, hearing and noticing the vocal students singing choir music around campus. Also, there is a stereotype of this "strange music culture" carried over from high school experience of choir members as outcasts or exclusionists.

Participants in St. Olaf choir ensembles are far from outcasts when considered within the music community. The choir headliner is the St. Olaf, or Ole Choir. However, there are many other musical ensembles that also contribute to this subculture at St. Olaf. We specifically looked at the five choirs that participate in St. Olaf's annual Christmas Fest. Manitou and Viking Chorus are the freshmen women's and men's choirs, respectively. The Chapel and Cantorei ensembles are co-ed choirs open to sophomores and above by audition. The St. Olaf Choir is also co-ed, but practices more often, has a larger time commitment and is, well, THE St. Olaf Choir. Simply by making our way into the different practices and getting to know a few of the students that participate in choir activities, it is apparent that while some stereotypes of a 'choir person' might hold true, the diversity of the different choirs and the students within the choirs are multifaceted.

Setting/History

The official beginning of the St. Olaf Choir was in 1912 when it began touring over Easter weekend throughout a few Middle Western states (Shaw, 107). Previously, choir activities were associated with St. John's Church Choir located in Northfield, Minnesota. The congregation at St. John's included many Oles who participated in the choral activities of the choir dating back to the first class at St. Olaf in 1875. The first St. Olaf Choir director was F. Melius Christiansen, who began his career in Northfield directing various ensembles, including ones from St. John's church. Soon after the founding of the choir, a tour to Norway commenced in 1913 (Shaw, 111). The St. Olaf Choir has had only four directors throughout its ninety-eight years of existence: F. Melius Christiansen, his son Olaf C. Christiansen, Kenneth Jennings and Anton Armstrong, who is the present director. Besides F.M. Christiansen, all are St. Olaf graduates.

Other choirs were added as the music program began to grow. Viking Chorus was established as early as 1935 (Shaw, 375). The other ensembles of Manitou, Chapel, and Cantorei were added later. The tradition of the Christmas Festival began along with the beginning of the St. Olaf Choir, in 1912. A Christmas program was given in Hoyme Chapel just before classes let out for break. The St. Olaf Orchestra was added in 1922, and the concert was held in the gymnasium (Shaw, 593). When the event moved into the gymnasium, the tradition of the Christmas Fest we know today really got started. With room for decorations and a theme, the celebrations that surround the weekend of the Festival began. The Festival sound made it on the airwaves by the 1970s and on TV shortly after that (Shaw, 604). Today, Christmas Festival weekend is one of the largest and most prominent events held at St. Olaf. Christmas Festival each December marks the accomplishments of the five participating choir students and their directors.

The Problem

St. Olaf College students are linked in a sense of camaraderie created by shared experiences. Even if two students randomly met each other while, let's say, standing in line for a concert, they might feel a bond despite being complete strangers. However, students of St. Olaf choirs share extended experiences specific to choir, such as rehearsals, weekly practices, concerts, Christmas Fest, tours, etc., that unite them further and perhaps exclude non-choir students who cannot participate in these events in the same manner. Although choir and non-choir students communicate with each other every day, the concept of this "choir world" is largely mysterious to those who have never entered the music building or witnessed a choir practice. Ironically, St. Olaf College is internationally recognized for its strong choir history and its continued presence, but some St. Olaf students enter campus without even knowing who the conductor of the St. Olaf Choir is or how many choirs we have on campus. What choir is and what happens during it is ambiguous to those who have not experienced choir, which may cause them to fill in the unknown blanks with assumptions or rumors concerning what choir might be like and may uphold certain stereotypes about who choir people are and how they act.

We as student investigators coming from a non-choir perspective embarked on this research primarily to learn about what choir culture is actually like at St. Olaf College. Starting with the basics, we wanted to know about the similarities and differences between Viking, Manitou, Chapel, Cantorei, and the St. Olaf Choir. We developed a set of questions concerning: What is choir practice like and how do the different choir practices compare? How do choir members interact with each other and how do they view themselves relative to other choirs? Do the choir members have aspirations to move "up" or "sideways" to a different St. Olaf choir? As our observations and interviews progressed, we became increasingly aware of the conductor's key position in determining how their particular choir is perceived by setting certain standards and expectations, which opened a whole new set of questions including: In what manner does the conductor direct choir? How do the students and conductor interact with each other during practice? Is their relationship based more on humor, respect, or a combination of the two?

Methodology

In order to conduct research with St. Olaf Choir students, we first sent our project proposal for IRB approval. After IRB approval we decided to send a letter to the Academic Administrative Assistant (AAA) of the music department, explaining our project and asking if she would be willing to forward another letter to the e-mail aliases of the five largest St. Olaf Choirs, asking them to participate in our study (Appendix B). Little did we know that what seemed a simple way to contact multiple people at once would bring us a number of obstacles to conquer. First of all, the music department has two AAAs, plus an additional Administrative Assistant specific to music organizations. St. Olaf's sociology/anthropology department has one AAA, as does the history department, the biology department, and the mathematics, statistics, and computer science department. The fact that St. Olaf's music department has such an extended staff, including a performance librarian, associate manager of music organizations, assistant director of admissions and music admissions coordinator, marketing specialist for St. records/music organizations, and a piano technician, led us to consider the importance of the music department to St. Olaf College. The organizational mammoth that the music department consists of suggests that great pains are taken to ensure that the St. Olaf music ensembles are running well throughout the year.

After a week we had no response from either of the AAAs, so we stopped into the music department's front office to try and gain a response. The AAA we spoke with said she thought she had received our letter, but assumed that the other AAA had responded. This miscommunication, she remarked, occurred often, as it was hard to keep track of all the requests, even with (or especially because of) two AAAs for the department. She encouraged us to go down to another administrative office and speak with the other Administrative Assistant in regards to our research. We obliged, and found that, instead of talking to the staff, we should directly contact each choir director in order to seek their permission (Appendix C). E-mailing each conductor proved to be just as tedious; within another week, none of the four choir directors of the five choirs had responded to us, and we went knocking on their office doors.

Our reception by two of the choir directors was phenomenal. We first knocked on the door of Dr. Anton Armstrong, a world-renowned conductor who directs the St. Olaf Choir. He peeked his head out through a crack when he opened the door, and looked at the three of us researchers with impatience and inquiry. We explained that we had e-mailed him the previous week and were wondering if we could sit in on one of his choir practices. In a controlled and calmed voice, he told us he was doing Ole Choir auditions at the moment but if we could wait five minutes he would speak to us then. We sat outside his office on a bench until he was finished and he called us into his office after the choir student had vacated. His emotions varied between anxious, assertive, flustered, and demanding as he explained to us that we could not observe the choir this week. We had caught him in the middle of a weekend when the Ole Choir was presenting a visiting composer's work, and because of the stress of that upcoming concert in addition to Ole Choir auditions, he did not have the time to consider our proposal, and would get back to us a week later to see if it was appropriate for us to observe.

In contrast, after leaving Dr. Armstrong we ran into Dr. Christopher Aspaas, director of Viking Chorus and Chapel Choir. We quickly explained ourselves and asked if we could observe one of his choir rehearsals. He immediately and enthusiastically agreed, saying that all of his rehearsals are open, and with a smile, ran down the hallway to his next engagement.

Even though all four choir directors had received our e-mail at the same time, their reactions to our interest in the choir community were varied. After additional e-mail contact we were able to set up rehearsal observations with the remaining two choirs, Manitou and Cantorei (Appendix D).

In addition to observing each choir's practice, we set up a group forum and several individual interviews with choir members. Even though all three researchers observed every choir's practice, in the following accounts, different sections are headed with the researcher who recounted the descriptions. In our one-hour forum, we talked with four students who had participated and were participating in several of the choirs. All choirs were represented minus the St. Olaf Choir, though three of the students had previous contact with the Ole Choir through audition or interaction with its members.

Viking Choir

The first choir practice we attended was that of the Viking Choir, which consists of nearly 80 first year men who gather for about an hour three times a week in Studio A. Studio A is an oblong room with a vaulted wooden ceiling painted decoratively with Christian passages and symbols, but is considered to be an undesirable practice room for both acoustical and spatial reasons. Although the room had enough large wooden chairs for all students to spread out comfortably, it did not provide enough space lengthwise because when the students attempted to fit into the required four rows for practice, they had to stand touching shoulders and occupying the total length of the room. Since they only occupy the middle portion of the room's entirety, their sound will not travel as well as in a more appropriate acoustical setting so their experienced sound quality becomes worse because of the spatial area. Unfortunately, the other suitable choir practice rooms are occupied by the St. Olaf Choir, The St. Olaf Orchestra, and Philharmonia (a St. Olaf orchestra) during Viking's practice time. The fact that Viking choir is the only music organization to practice in Studio A leads us to believe that their undesirable location is simply based on lack of space during that popular time slot. It may be that Viking Choir must practice in Studio A because it would not be logical for the orchestras to transport their instruments to a different building for practice. However, Viking's placement suggests that the St. Olaf choir and the orchestras have priority, and perhaps seniority which makes it more important for them to have an appropriate acoustical space.

When we observed Viking on Tuesday, April 22nd it was most discrete for us to sit in the back of the room facing the same direction as the choir. This is different from all our other choir observations when we were able to sit somewhere behind the conductor and get a full view of the choir. Our back row location provided a limited view of the conductor and the students in the first two rows but presented a wonderful opportunity to get a closer look at what goes on in the back row of the choir. This may skew our understanding of Viking choir if there is a significant discrepancy between how the back row acts compared to the rest of the choir. It is possible that the back row could be accustomed to less supervision and could therefore expect to be more distracting without receiving a reprimand than their front row peers. On the other hand, our unique view of the back row may have given a more honest and "behind the scenes" perspective on the overall conduct of Viking because we were able to see behaviors that are normally unseen.

After a brief conversation with the conductor to remind him of our presence that day, we quickly shuffled back to our posts in the back. As students continued to enter, the room was buzzing with loud laughter and general lighthearted fun, such as telling animated stories with sound effects and demonstrations or hand gestures. It was common for students to greet each other with high-fives which lead into more story telling. There was a small group of students gathered by the grand piano in the front center of the room who were playing songs they had memorized. In a later interview a previous member of Viking claimed that playing the piano before choir was "typical" of first year males because it provided a chance to display their extended musical talents in front of the others. Amidst the commotion the conductor gave out an even louder yell which signaled that the choir should line up amongst the chairs to form backrub chains. These backrubs are a part of the routine which relaxes singers, enabling them to perform better, but also creates a sense of camaraderie through the simple act of touch and ensuring that everyone gets rubbed. It was curious, however,

that there was still a steady flow of students who entered the choir room after the backrubs were done. In total, there were about 10 or so students who came late, as opposed to about three or four late comers for other choirs (excluding the St. Olaf choir, to which nobody came late). Again, this happening might be a coincidence of the particular day we observed or perhaps a general characteristic of the larger first year male population, but it could also be that students were purposely tardy because they felt uncomfortable with participating in a backrub chain.

Although this was one of the last choir practices before a performance, there was little to no tension in the room largely because of the seemingly popular lax demeanor. A few were eating snacks even when they were seconds away from beginning a song. While singing, some were slouched over or had their hands in their pockets instead of standing up straight and others let their eyes wander around the room instead of maintaining eye contact with the conductor. On occasion there would be a student who would try to grab the attention of the other men around him by tapping them on the shoulder and making gestures to cause them to laugh. Additionally, some students would be extra animated with their singing by swaying back and forth and making exaggerated facial expressions. Between songs students murmured to one another, which included more joking, sound effects, and chit chat, while the conductor was talking. I found it particularly amusing that the talking did not stop until a split second before a song began and that the chatter started up again immediately after the song was done.

I was surprised that the lack of heed given to the conductor did not seem to be interpreted by either student or conductor as synonymous with a lack of respect. On the contrary, the conductor appeared to be exceptionally understanding of the dominating desire to be rambunctious and in return was accepted into the larger solidarity of the group. This "team spirit" was vividly apparent when a student addressed the conductor as "coach," which suggests the conductor is like a sports coach in that he has ultimate authority in a personal and traditionally masculine relationship. Even though this was a men's choir, I thought the structure really did at times resemble a sports team or a sort of "boys club." The interactions between the students and the conductor were based on inside jokes which were fueled by the conductor as well as the students. When students were getting restless and making playful jokes about the songs, the conductor responded with "you crazy kids" instead of requesting their utmost attention and seriousness in their final days of rehearsal. I was also surprised by the students striking display of group mentality. The conductor would announce a song and the entire choir would respond with cheering and hooting, or booing in one loud voice. As the leader of this group, the conductor would play along with exaggerated facial expressions and being animated as a way to embellish the choir's response.

I couldn't help but notice the striking prevalence of certain gender dynamics within Viking. There was one particularly slow song where the choir was required to put their arms around each other. I doubt it was coincidental that this touchy-feely song was the one the group booed the most (in comparison to the much loved pirate themed song from earlier in the practice). In regards to having to put their arms around each other, the conductor insisted that they had no choice and they had to practice it the way they were going to perform it, so reluctantly the students put their arms around each other. First of all, I think it is important to point out that they felt awkward with this at all. To a room full of women, this song might still be considered sappy, but I doubt there would be as much complaining as the men pulled out. Perhaps they were so unwilling to do something that could be interpreted as wussy because it does not align with the dominant conception of masculinity. Although they had successfully masculinized the structure of choir through their conversational interaction, avoidance of putting their arms around one another while singing a slow song was out of their control. Students coped with the awkwardness they felt in really different ways. Some decided to take the humorous way out and be overly friendly about touching the other people. From time to time these jokesters' hands would creep over to the others armpit to tickle and take advantage of that person's lack of ability to escape, and at times a hand would slowly fall down to touch the other persons butt until it was swatted away by that now annoyed person. There was another group of people who coped by trying to have minimal physical contact with the other people

by keeping their hands in fists behind the other persons back or making their arms very stiff and held away from the other person to give only the illusion of touch. There were also a couple who did not participate and kept their hands in their pockets. This brings me back to my assumption about students purposely arriving late to choir in order to avoid the customary backrub chains. If some students are really that uncomfortable with this type of physical contact, it makes it seem likely that they would be willing to be tardy to class to avoid the event.

At the end of practice, the conductor gave the choir a grade of a C+, which is obviously not that impressive a grade. The seriousness of it all was almost immediately erased with a reassuring "but we are more than half way there!" At this, the choir gave another loud cheer and many gave high-fives again. Looking back on the experience, I was surprised that such a mediocre "grade" was met with such humoristic delight but after comparing this experience to the rest of the Viking choir structure, I am not surprised in the least that they should end in the same manner they began: with excitement and camaraderie.

Mead's theory of *symbolic interaction* helps to explain the functioning of choir practice. In social interaction people learn the meanings and the symbols that allow them to understand their setting. The interpretation of the setting directs the behavior and actions of each individual and can be modified to conform to different situations when needed (Ritzer, 217-218). When entering into Studio A, a choir member behaves in response to the other members in order to fit what is expected of him. The students who were greeted with an energetic high-five returned the enthusiasm regardless of how they may have been acting before going into the room. It was acceptable to be animated and make jokes during this time before practice because the praise and acceptance of others indicated that it is desirable to mirror these actions. Once practice began the boundaries of acceptable behavior were primarily set by the conductor, although students also adjusted their behavior based on the students in close proximity. Appropriate behaviors determined by the conductor varied depending on the task at hand and required adjusted student behavior. If they are singing, for example, the joking is expected to subside and the student is expected to be attentive. Students will continually modify their behavior to a certain degree of conformity based on how the situation is redefined. Likewise, if students switch choirs at some point in time they are likely to adjust their behaviors to fit the expectations of their present situation. Even though most men participating in Cantorei, Chapel, or St. Olaf choir were once a part of Viking choir, their behavior changed to conform to what is considered suitable by the choir director and the other students.

On a larger scale of how students define their situation, Viking choir shows a striking difference compared to Manitou, Chapel, Cantorei, and the St. Olaf Choir in what is considered "front stage" and "back stage." Goffman's elaboration on Meads work affirms that the front stage, where the performance takes place, evokes different behaviors than the backstage, where people feel more liberated from playing their role accordingly. While the other choirs applied front stage behavior to the entire choir practice, Viking perceived the situation to require front stage behavior only while they were singing. Between songs, Viking quickly transitioned into acting as if they were back stage. When front stage behavior is necessitated, students change their appearance and manners in accordance to how they wish to be perceived. They may be more likely to adjust their listening, stance, eye contact, etc. as a way of showing what is to be expected of his performance. For instance, students who ask questions during practice and stand up straight are likely to have higher expectations than those who slouch and gaze aimlessly around the room.

Manitou Choir

Manitou Choir, the choir for first year women, starkly contrasts with our observations from Viking. Immediately noticeable was the difference in setting. Instead of being tucked away in Studio A, Manitou practiced in CHM 233, the same room as the St. Olaf Choir, despite its time overlap with

Chapel choir. I am not exactly sure why this would happen, but I have my suspicions. The choir's regular conductor is very well respected in St. Olaf's music community and it might be that her reputation has given her top choice of practice rooms despite her choir consisting of solely first years. This year, however, the regular conductor was on sabbatical and was temporarily replaced by a different female conductor. Regardless, Manitou practices in a room that is acoustically superior to Viking's current practice room. There are barriers behind the bleachers which direct sound towards the front, a large carpet rug on the floor, ceiling dividers, and carpet rectangles on the upper parts of the walls which all contribute to better sound quality. Similar to Viking, Manitou had a grand piano in the middle of the room but they also had a chalkboard which the Manitou conductor used to write out the order of songs they were to sing along with the day's agenda. Before the choir even began practice, I could already tell that this choir was much more structured and organized than what we observed in Viking.

Interestingly enough, the room was decorated with five posters which commemorated the St. Olaf Choir for its long history of being "among the nation's best." The room's quality suggests that it is primarily for the St. Olaf Choir while other choirs are allowed to use it when the St. Olaf Choir is not in practice. Since CHM 233 is used by multiple choir groups, I would have expected that there would either be posters regarding multiple choirs or posters that celebrated collaborated achievements such as Christmas Fest. But there weren't. Although it is true that the St. Olaf Choir is among the nation's best while the others are not, it still seems that there would be an option which would acknowledge the other choirs for their achievements as well. However, the St. Olaf Choir could act as a symbol of inspiration to all the choirs to encourage them to try their hardest to achieve greatness.

The energy of the first year women was as unique as that of the first year men. I sat next to a few students who were in the "sick bay" which was located behind the conductor. These 4-5 girls were verbally curious about my presence. One of them, who assumed I was in the choir, asked what section I was in. I told her I wasn't in choir and her next assumption was that I was a prospective student. Being wrong again, she was clearly embarrassed when I explained that I was a junior conducting research, perhaps worrying that she had offended me by guessing I was younger than I actually was. Apparently this shows that the girl believes that upper classmen require different treatment or more respect than a first year or prospective student should have. Perhaps this belief could be further reflected in the views of other choirs, meaning that choirs with upperclassmen are better or more respectable than Viking or Manitou.

I would have expected there to be backrub chains before Manitou practice more than the other choirs since it is an all women's choir, but this was a false conception. There were no backrubs given at all. As students came in, they took their seats and talked with their neighbors. There were grocery bags filled with snacks on the piano which everyone was allowed to take. One girl informed me that they will be having treats every day till the end of the semester because they did not use any of their choir budget for "anything fun this year." The choir practice itself started 10 minutes late which I found surprising because the chalkboard schedule led me to believe that the conductor might value punctuality along with organization and structure.

This particular practice might have been more serious than other Manitou practices because it was the last practice before their Sunday concert. There was some quiet whispering while the director was talking which compelled three or four students to "shhh" the whisperers. But when that didn't work one girl said in a loud frustrated voice, "Guys! It's our last rehearsal, please be quiet!" And at that the whispering stopped. The behavior of this girl who detested the quiet whispering illustrates the tension and stress in the room. Perhaps this is an isolated event due to timing, or it could be that Manitou takes themselves more seriously than their Viking choir counterpart. If such an event were to occur in a Viking practice, I would speculate based on the previous choir observation that it would be met with a lighthearted response and continued whispering. Manitou members were considerably more formal than those in the Viking choir practice. Students stood up straight with

their feet together for every song and with their arms hanging by their sides while keeping their eyes fixed on the conductor.

Coordinated stretches were led and demonstrated by the conductor. This was coupled with specific instructions on what their mouth shape should look and feel like when trying to achieve a desired effect, as well as what part of the mouth they should be using. These descriptions were much more technical and detailed compared to Viking and the other choirs we observed whose tactics, in comparison, seemed to rely more on the students own ability to identify and fix their errors. I am not saying that the method of the non-Manitou choirs is necessarily more effective because it is possible that errors could go undetected or not fully comprehended by the students. By receiving more instruction, Manitou members might feel more prepared and confident about their ability to perform in future choirs.

In terms of group identity, there were three choir members wearing "Manitou Singers" sweatshirts, which I see all over campus including Manitou sweatshirts made in previous years that are still being worn. Clearly the willingness to show the world that you are a member of Manitou shows a sense of group pride and belonging. These sweatshirts not only demonstrate this pride and belonging to other Manitou members, like the Viking choir's group responses to the conductor's announcements, but also to non-choir students as well as to the outside world. The unity of Viking and Manitou choirs may be fueled by the general excitement of being a first year student who is open to meeting new people and making new friendships. However, since most all female members from other choirs were first in Manitou (and males in Viking), it could be that Manitou symbolizes a blissful time when members who want to achieve great success and members who just want to have fun were at the same starting point. It is a common experience of all St. Olaf choir members that is likely to produce many fond memories that continue to be treasured as people get older and join other choirs.

The conductor continued her systematic approach to address and critique each section of students equally. I noticed that the songs they sang were very women-centered. For example, there were songs which contained lyrics such as "My mother said to me..." "Till our wedding day" "So softly she came to me" and a song sung in Spanish describing the work of a woman. These lyrics suggest and enforce the idea that mothers are gentle and caring and that women in general are soft and tender and dream of their wedding day. The conductor also made comments and analogies that seemed more geared to a group of females, like comparing notes and melodies to a haze of watercolors and remarking that a door that had squeaked sounded like a baby (which the choir found entertaining). Even though the conductor would congratulate and praise the choir for meeting her expectations of change and correction, she never admitted they had reached perfection and asserted that there was always room for improvement. Compared to the Viking choir, who humorously rejoiced over receiving a C+, the Manitou choir did very well but was not as satisfied with their accomplishments for that day.

Symbolic interaction, as previously defined, elucidates the relationships within Manitou. Symbols and meanings could be derived from the setting, other students and the director. Because they practice in the same room as the St. Olaf Choir, some students may have felt compelled to perform at their best to live up to symbols and standards of the St. Olaf Choir as depicted in the posters that lined the walls. Practicing in such optimal space may cause some to feel distinguished and to have an obligation to be respectful, thus causing them to adjust their behavior accordingly. It is therefore appropriate in Manitou to sit quietly in ones chair and talk to her neighbor instead of climbing over the rows to greet a fellow student while the opposite is true in Viking choir. Since most students were engaged in one-on-one conversations, one is likely to perceive that this type of individual attention is expected and students will mirror this behavior in attempt to conform to the group standards. Likewise, it is acceptable within the group to declare Manitou pride by wearing "Manitou Singer" sweatshirts. If one student was not particularly fond of the sweatshirt for aesthetic or comfort reasons, she still might be urged to wear it because it is positively received by other

members who wear similar sweatshirts. Because the director is the acknowledged leader of the choir, student's interactions with her were more formal than interactions within Viking. The Manitou director was generally more reserved compared to Viking by evoking students to respectfully approach her individually instead of making jokes with her as a large group. Ultimately, Manitou student behavior is dictated by their consensus for a more serious approach to choir achieved through symbolic interaction.

Cantorei and Chapel Choirs

Cantorei and Chapel choirs have been described by members as the 'catch all' choirs at St. Olaf. There are many similarities between these choirs in their make up, but the music they sing, the clientele, and the directors are a few differences. Both require auditions, and are open to sophomores and above. Most members were either in Manitou or Viking Chorus their first year at St. Olaf.

Immediately there was a feeling of being back in high school when walking into CHM 240 for Chapel Choir practice. Perhaps it was the setting of choir risers that brought me back, or the backpacks strewn about the entrance and practice room. The camaraderie and general chatter added to that effect, too. Things began very similarly to how Aspaas had begun Viking with the back massages, and a few warm up numbers. When the massages started there were no co-ed rub-downs going on. It must have been just the atmosphere that reminded me of high school because high school men would either not participate in back massages or not on each other anyway. There were many recognizable faces at this practice. To an outsider it is surprising to know someone who is in choir that was unexpected. There were at least two football players I could identify in the choir ranks. Even though it is a stereotype that sports participants are not usually involved in choral activities, it is hard to deny the rarity of those who do have talent in both realms and want to share it. I also noted that there was an accompanist playing the piano for the rehearsal.

Without being part of this music culture at St. Olaf, most probably do not know the differences between the types of music that Cantorei and Chapel sing. Before looking deeper into the choir culture at St. Olaf, one might know that Viking and Manitou are freshmen choirs and of course everyone has heard of THE St. Olaf Choir. Cantorei and Chapel choirs are a bit more mysterious to an outsider; however, the choir names are usually familiar due to Christmas Fest involvement. Cantorei sings more of the traditional church/hymn music, while Chapel Choir focuses on music pieces that could be 30 pages long, are from different cultures, and are a bit less traditional pieces. Chapel Choir had been only our second observation so I for one was not aware of the differences. However, it was noticeable that one of the songs they practiced seemed to go on forever. When Aspaas mentioned starting the piece at the 3rd movement, it answered a few questions about the length of music sung by Chapel Choir.

When interviewing choir members and during group discussion among members, we were all hoping to uncover some drama. Maybe because tabloids and TV shows focus so much on celebrity happenings we thought that St. Olaf's quasi-famous bunch would provide us with some racy gossip. However, all the members had very positive things to say about their fellow choir members and choirs. Ole Choir, as predicted, got a few jabs about being 'God's Choir' or perhaps a bit elitist, but when pressed harder students admitted their respect towards Ole Choir. Viking and Manitou members acknowledged that as freshmen choirs they accepted being at the bottom of the picking order. The one issue that we will expose now is the Fleece Incident. The St. Olaf Choir annually gets a black fleece jacket with the name The St. Olaf Choir embroidered on the chest. This year Chapel and Cantorei wanted to get fleeces with 'A St. Olaf Choir' embroidered on them. Ole Choir did not approve of this and thought that it was poking fun at them, (which it probably was). The story ends with Chapel and Cantorei having their own choir names on their fleeces without the slogan 'A St.

Olaf Choir' dominating the text. One can see the power dynamics here; Ole Choir did have the final word, but at the same time the other choirs knew they were picking a fight that might ruffle a few feathers. Not the kind of story that tabloids are filled with, but it is what we have to work with at Olaf.

Within the choirs there was also a relative calm between members. A member described it as just like any class you might take. There is always that kid that asks too many questions or just likes to be heard. "Aspaas has his doctorate in choral performance; he'll know when it's an F or F sharp!" In the focus group we asked if music majors were favored or held lofty positions in choir hierarchy. The response was that you knew who the music majors were, but besides that there were no real other stigmas that went along with them. "The codes of behavior surrounding the position of conductors and players are linked to the power structure of the ensemble, which in turn affect the social organization of the ensemble," (Livingston, 125). Because of the loose formality of the choirs it makes sense that a stronger hierarchy doesn't exist. The friend groups within the choirs are drawn on the lines of outside interest and age, but no one group is dominate.

When we asked about divas in the choirs there wasn't much of a response. There are a few positions of power within the choirs. One of those positions is the section leaders. One of my interviewees had had a negative experience with his section leader. The policy for Chapel Choir practice is after three misses you must re-audition for you spot the following year and missing practices during the week before a performance is not acceptable. After being abroad first semester this Chapel Choir member was no longer on its email alias and had missed a memo about a practice time the week of a performance, scheduling work at the exact same time. After he found out about this practice he wrote an apologetic email to his section leader about missing the rehearsal. After the practice he missed, he received an angry email from his section leader requesting that he must go discuss his absence with Aspaas. Aspaas was quite sympathetic and indifferent to my interviewee's rehearsal miss. My Chapel Choir interviewee was quite upset that his section leader's handling of this what should have not been a big deal absence. "I understand the policy, but I wasn't neglecting my responsibilities as a choir member. Also if I had not sent that curtsey email acknowledging my absence, my section leader would never have noticed."

Coincidentally, this Chapel Choir member is auditioning for Cantorei Choir. I asked if this incident was influential in his decision to try out a different choir. "In all honestly I like Cantorei's practice schedule better. I am not a fan of Chapel's Friday afternoon practice." He also expressed his dislike of non-traditional choral music. In our focus group there was a student who had switched from Cantorei to Chapel after his sophomore year. There are a variety of variables that affected these students' decisions, many of them personal music preference and not with any malice towards the choir they were leaving.

Between Cantorei and Chapel there is a bit of a rivalry because of their similarities. Through observation it may appear that Cantorei might take themselves a bit more seriously. One interviewee said, "Cantorei has a more of a refined image, with their sacred music and all." While waiting for Cantorei Choir practice to start in Boe Chapel, a member herded everyone up to the stage saying, "Let's move up there so Ferg doesn't get pissed!" There were a few more traits and mannerisms that led me to think of Cantorei Choir members as a bit more serious. When Dr. Ferguson, the conductor of Cantorei, arrived, he said a few words and then began to play a tune on the piano. Cantorei members then proceeded to file their way down to the piano to pick up a new piece of music, in an orderly fashion to the beat of the music.

Besides Ole Choir, which had had a chance to practice new music before rehearsal, this was our first time observing a choir sight-reading. Cantorei was seeing a piece for the first time. Ferg began playing through the piece, and gradually people started to chime in. This is the first time it was possible that a non-choir person, like myself, might pick up on a mistake made during these first

few run throughs. After a while Ferg dropped the piano accompaniment and the choir was able to get along fairly well singing *a capella*.

The students had been standing and sitting intermittently, but for the most part when Ferg played the intro to a song or a few chords for people to hear their cue, the choir stood. However, after Ferg had taken a long time to explain some logistics of the new piece, he began playing the intro and only a small minority of the members stood up and then sat right back down again after no one joined them. Ferg stopped the music and gave a bit of a lecture. "We stand when we sing to practice our posture," then a small pause, "as opposed to Chapel choir." A few giggles are heard and then practice continued with everyone standing erect.

This is actually quite true. While observing Chapel Choir, the members sat for the majority of the time. Towards the end of practice Aspaas made everyone stand, commenting, "We're looking tired, let's stand up!" It was also apparent that when Aspaas would work specifically with the women on their part, the men, especially in the back, would slouch, with elbows on their knees. It was easy to tell when the men were about to enter in a piece of music because the whole row of them would shift their posture and sit up straight.

The attitude of the students in these choirs is quite reflexive of their directors. "The more the conductor is set apart from the players in terms of ability, status, and professionalism, the greater the air of formality that surrounds the rehearsal," (Livingston, 125). Aspaas is younger than Ferg. Both are greatly accomplished; however this statement by Livingston does hold true in that the level of formality that surrounded the rehearsals is greater at Ferg's practice than in Aspaas's. There seemed to be a bit more respect shown to Ferg in practice, in terms of listening when he was talking and a more formal attitude. Aspaas conducted practice in a bit more lax way. Not saying that students respect him less, but the banter and body language of the students told me that Chapel Choir was a less formal setting.

The students who populate these two choirs are from all over the St. Olaf spectrum. There are some fundamental differences between the two choirs, but they both are truly 'catch all' venues. There are music majors in these choirs who are quite satisfied in their place, not wanting to move on to Ole Choir and the time commitment that comes with it. Others are just doing time until they can make Ole Choir. There are those who have had music as part of their lives before college and enjoy it. They simply want to continue their music involvement. This is the main drive for members to participate in choir. Also, having any extra curricular activities on your college resume always looks good. My Chapel Choir interviewee definitely fit that profile. However, he kept his choir person identity somewhat hidden, but this was more due to the fact that most of his friends were not involved in the music realm. He described his desire not to be vocal about his choir status because of how people in the choir culture were viewed in his high school. He described his actions as not deliberate, but more out of habit. He recalled that many times his friends would say, "I forgot you are in choir." I don't think he was ashamed of his choir associations, but simply did not believe that something that needed to identify him.

When at the rehearsals there was a definite shared pretext of what constitutes a choir practice. Pierre Bourdieu explains, "Practices are not objectively determined nor are they a product of free will," (Ritzer, 387). Students elect to come to these practices, although they are set at predetermined times and places. As a person who has done musical things in the past, I can think back to my other experiences to help with my understanding of the rehearsals I am observing. The different social roles within a choir make rehearsals a kind of ritual, which can be read as cultural performance. The meanings endowed in the rituals are intertwined with the social relations among members (Livingston, 129). Because of the diverse membership of these choirs there are not strong social relations. Like my Chapel Choir interviewee said, the people that he hangs out with from the choir outside of rehearsal times were friends of his before choir. However the choir

members do share knowledge of the rituals that are part of the practice and the inside jokes that come about after a length of shared experiences.

The St. Olaf Choir

Commonly known as "the Ole Choir," the prestigious St. Olaf Choir lives up to its renowned performance status by practicing five days a week for one and a half hours. Even the White House has entertained the St. Olaf Choir numerous times, the first appearance dating to 1920, and the most recent being for President Bush in May 2005. A month later, the St. Olaf Choir traveled to Norway where their performance was recorded and later shown nationally in the US on PBS broadcasting. The large-scale touring nature of the St. Olaf Choir is a particularistic value that distinguishes its standing above the other choirs at St. Olaf. This creates a very notable "in-group from the out-group" distinction among the choirs (Ritzer, 280). We eventually were allowed into this "in-group's" rehearsal after contacting Dr. Armstrong a week following our personal encounter.

Because of sectionals preceding the group rehearsal, the Ole Choir did not do any group warm ups. Instead, they took out the piece they had been working on in their sections and, after a single chord from Dr. Armstrong, proceeded to sing through the piece *acapella*. In speaking with an Ole soprano after the rehearsal, she said it was the first time the whole choir had run through the piece. For reading through the piece once, the performance was almost flawless in quality. However, when a choir member would make an error in singing, he or she would raise a hand to indicate it was his or her mistake. I do not doubt that Dr. Armstrong could hear each individual voice in the choir and note who was singing off key at any moment. His attention to precise sound was obvious through his intense concentration during each piece. This rehearsal was different than others, reported an alto after the practice, since the choir does not usually spend the majority of the period on one piece. For the rehearsal we observed, the choir was singing a piece that was composed by one of the tenor members. The choir was planning to record the piece for that tenor. It was an impressive composition in style and tone, and could easily have been mistaken for a piece composed a couple hundred years prior to the present.

The St. Olaf Choir practices in Fostness (CHM 233), a space the size of two regular classrooms, located on the second floor of the music building. The walls are adorned with St. Olaf Choir paraphernalia, and the space, though not completely aesthetically appealing, is acoustically designed to accommodate a choir as large as the 75-voiced Ole Choir. All members are present and not exempt from singing unless special circumstances permit, such as a tenor who is sitting out due to his upcoming recital that night.

When signing up for the St. Olaf Choir, each member is required to sign a contract stating that they will be members for as long as they are St. Olaf students and that they will place choir as first on their priority list, including commitments to all tours, performances, and appearances. This involves coming back to school early during some breaks, and staying through commencement week, a commitment which the St. Olaf Orchestra and Band also request. Dropping out of choir for any reason, including the desire to study abroad (which is not allowed as an Ole Choir member), is seen as shameful and even frightening. "I would be scared to quit choir; you'd be killed!" voiced one Ole Choir member. "Ole Choir Member for Life" becomes the norm, and the benefits of being part of this macro-organization, the choir, outweighs the potential disadvantage of giving up the flexibility of a college schedule without this extracurricular activity. Sociologist James Coleman investigates how norms, like the intensity of the Ole contract, become normalized and viewed in less extreme terms. Like George Homans who developed the exchange theory in terms of rewards and costs, Coleman explains that this push-pull interaction between gaining control through collective power and giving up individual rights leads to large-scale normalized behavior (Ritzer, 297). Thus, the positive

prestige of membership in the Ole Choir is worth the sacrifice of ever traveling abroad apart from the choir.

Auditioning into the Ole Choir is no light matter either. After individual auditions with Dr. Armstrong himself, each student who is called back must sing with the existing choir members (those who will not be graduating). Then, the prospective choir member is placed by Dr. Armstrong within the choir, and asked to sing with his section. If Dr. Armstrong likes the mixed sound, the prospective member will stay standing; if he is disliked, he will be asked to sit down. The final decision is made when 75 voices are standing, and those rejected are sitting down, watching their classmates who did or did not "make the cut." "[Ole Choir] auditions must have been the most terrifying experience of my life," remarked one soprano, who reflected on this year's group auditions. "I had one friend who was sitting down, and one who was standing up, and I didn't know which one to hug first." From those who do not make the cut, a lasting bitterness may ensue. One student who had tried out for Ole Choir since her sophomore year, now a senior, reflected on being rejected three times. As a vocal education major, this student, "felt intimidated by Anton, like every interaction in class would impact [her] Ole Choir audition." Dr. Armstrong does not seem to base his choices on music majors alone; many of the Ole Choir members are not music majors, and many vocal music majors are not in Ole Choir. Another particularistic value of the St. Olaf Choir is their longer practice schedule. "Some vocals choose not to sing in Ole Choir because of the time commitment," remarked one student who sings in Chapel Choir. The two upper-classmen who participated in our focus group agreed that the major difference between the quality of Chapel/Cantorei and the St. Olaf Choir was the amount of time spent practicing together. St. Olaf Choir events are numerous and sometimes planned several months ahead. Choir students realize the importance of the St. Olaf Choir's commitment to excellence, and their role in the community.

During rehearsal, Dr. Armstrong mentioned events that were already planned for the following year. Though the choir is not afraid to smile and laugh if Dr. Armstrong strays for a moment from the choir literature ("It smells like pizza"), during rehearsal, the students do not stray from the task at hand, listening intently to Dr. Armstrong, and rarely talk among themselves during rehearsal. The St. Olaf Choir is committed to using all of its rehearsal time for singing, even though it will put in a plug for attending the early morning softball game the next day.

Conclusion

The St. Olaf Choir community proves to be very diverse in nature and content. The formality of choir practice is reflexive of the age group of the choir, gender, and the conductor's direction. Viking and Manitou represent the younger choirs, and Chapel and Cantorei represent the maturing choir student. As the younger male group, directed by the fun-loving Aspaas, the atmosphere of Viking practice was the least formal of the choirs, contrasting with the direction of the St. Olaf Choir by Dr. Armstrong.

As we asked choir members if they desired move "up" or "sideways" to a different St. Olaf choir we found a range of answers. Some switch between Cantorei and Chapel because of the music content or the conductors. There were some amazing singers in Cantorei/Chapel that could be in St. Olaf Choir but may choose not to because of its time-consuming requirements and the agreement not to go abroad. Even if a choir student is talented enough to be in Ole Choir, not everyone in aspires to this as the ultimate goal.

Even so, outside the St. Olaf community the public views St. Olaf choir culture as represented solely by the prestigious St. Olaf Choir. We feel that this generalized opinion fails to recognize the range of experiences that St. Olaf choir students gain from participating in any of the five performing choirs. In fact, further study into the St. Olaf choir community would involve investigation into the choral

groups that do not participate in Christmas Fest, including Gospel Choir, Collegiate Choral, and Early Music Singers.

Our focus on the five performing St. Olaf choirs illuminated the theories of social interaction among choir members. The norms of behavior and commitment within each choir displayed the camaraderie formed by common experiences and repeated rituals. However, friendship among Ole students does not form just because they are involved in a choir together, as the five choirs are diversely composed from the student body. And yet, this added understanding of sharing a common skill and practice helped form a strong subculture within the St. Olaf student body.

As researchers we formed a new appreciation for the complexity of the St. Olaf choir community and the different viewpoints from each member. After completing our research, we hope to shed new light on a commonly misunderstood and misinterpreted subculture at St. Olaf.

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