

**CHOIR AND DEMOCRACY: THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF EXPRESSION****Özlem ONUK NATONSKI****ABSTRACT**

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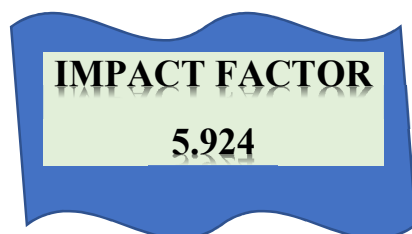
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This study approaches choral music not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a participatory space where social bonds are reinforced and democratic values are enacted. Grounded in principles of social-emotional learning, choral environments foster empathy, collaboration, and self-confidence skills essential for democratic life. Multicultural and inclusive choral projects, particularly those involving migrants and marginalized individuals, serve as platforms for belonging and civic engagement. Using a qualitative review methodology, the study highlights that singing together is not only a musical activity but also an ethical and socio-political practice.

Key Words: Choir, democracy, singing together.**Introduction**

In the 21st century, democracy must be reconsidered not merely as a political system, but as a relational practice embedded in everyday life, shaped through affective experiences, cultural participation, and ethical responsibility (Giroux, 1994). As public spaces contract and social bonds weaken under the pressures of individualism, there is an urgent need to reimagine democratic life



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in micro-social contexts. One such context is the choir an aesthetic yet deeply social formation in which individuals negotiate presence, difference, and shared meaning through collective voice.

This study proposes that choral singing constitutes a micro-democratic space, where individuals maintain their distinct identities while contributing to a pluralistic sonic whole. Rather than suppressing voices, the choir integrates them into a polyphonic structure that models the tension and possibility between unity and diversity. Grounded in the values of participation, empathy, equality, and mutual responsibility, choral practice becomes a site where democratic ideals are not only symbolized but *enacted*.

Framed through the lens of ethical relationality, the choir offers more than a musical experience. It functions as a living, pedagogical environment in which civic virtues such as listening, cooperation, self-regulation, and collective decision-making are cultivated. Whether through repertoire co-selection, non-hierarchical leadership, or participatory rehearsal methods, the choral space serves as both a metaphor and a material infrastructure for democracy.

Drawing upon interdisciplinary literature in music education, aesthetic theory, political philosophy, and cultural studies, this study positions choral music not only as a form of vocal

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training but also as a practice of cultural citizenship. Through the convergence of sonic, emotional, and ethical dimensions, the choir emerges as a transformative space where the democratic potential of art is realized in real time, voice by voice, breath by breath.

Research Aim

This study aims to reconceptualize choral music as a social practice in which individual voices are experienced within a collective structure in an egalitarian and transformative manner, emphasizing its role in democratic participation, ethical responsibility, and a sense of belonging.

Method

This study is a qualitative literature review that considers the relationship between choral music and democratic values. It systematically analyzes national and international academic sources in the fields of musicology, music education, aesthetic theory, political philosophy, and cultural



studies. Rather than collecting empirical data, the study offers a critical and theoretical reinterpretation of existing literature through content analysis.

Participatory Performance and Cultural Cohorts² in Choral Practice

Participatory performance refers to musical expressions in which the distinction between performer and audience dissolves, allowing all participants to engage actively in the shared act of music-making. In such contexts, artistic excellence is secondary to communal inclusion, shared experience, and collective vocal production. Choirs embody this model by providing a space where both individual voices and collective harmony coexist. Each voice is heard, yet rather than dissolving into anonymity, it interacts with others to form a cohesive whole. Thus, choral music functions not only as an aesthetic form but also as a social model that reflects communal participation and relational harmony (Turino, 2008; Small, 1998).

The concept of cultural cohorts describes groups of individuals who share common values, practices, and musical preferences, forming a collective identity through musical participation. Choirs offer a fertile ground for such cohorts, facilitating emotional resonance and coordinated action. The shared rhythms, breath, and sonic alignment create a sense of unity that enables choirs to serve as agents of social cohesion. When participatory performance is considered alongside cultural cohorts, choral music emerges as a vital medium for expressing social belonging, mutual interaction, and collective agency (Turino, 2008).

²The term “cultural cohorts” is used here as a concept developed by Thomas Turino within the context of music sociology. According to Turino, cultural cohorts are communities formed by individuals who share similar musical preferences, lifestyles, or values—regardless of whether they come from the same ethnic or geographical background—but who identify with the same types of music. This concept refers to temporary or lasting collectives through which individuals construct their cultural identities via specific musical practices. For instance, a gospel choir, an LGBT+ choir, or a diaspora-based migrant choir can serve as examples of such cohorts. These groups need not share a common language or religion; rather, what brings them together is a shared sensory, emotional, and identity-based space made possible through musical practice (Turino, 2008).

**Society and Harmony: Philosophical Foundations**

The concepts of society and harmony have long served as foundational frameworks for understanding the relationship between the individual and the collective, dating back to Ancient Greek philosophy. Harmony is not merely a musical term but also a political and ethical principle. It refers not to the suppression of difference, but to the integration of diversity into a meaningful and balanced order. This understanding directly parallels the structure of choral music: each vocal part is distinct yet complementary; none forms a complete melodic whole on its own, but together they create coherence and meaning (Plato, 2004; Aristotle, 2013).

Such a perspective envisions a social model in which individuals retain their intrinsic value while contributing to the collective. The choir, through its sonic harmony, becomes a metaphor for a micro-society where individual freedom is inextricably linked to social responsibility. Ancient philosophical thought thus finds concrete expression in the choral experience, generating a semantic field that extends from aesthetics to politics. In this sense, the choir functions both as a site for cultivating individual virtue and as a structural model for a harmonious community (Aristotle, 2013).

Is the Choir Oppressive or Liberating?

Historically, the choir has functioned both as a model of togetherness and as a disciplinary apparatus. Consequently, approaches to choral music have ranged from viewing it as a space for social bonding to critiquing it as a form that suppresses individuality and reinforces authoritarian structures. Due to its emphasis on discipline, order, and authority, some theorists have argued that choral practices may hinder individual freedom of expression and reproduce a passive model of citizenship (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997).

However, choral practices also hold emancipatory potential when guided by alternative models of leadership and pedagogy. In settings where the conductor acts not as a strict director but as a facilitator, where decision-making is shared and creativity is encouraged, the choir becomes a space where individuals can find their own voices and engage in meaningful dialogue with others. This positions choral music not only as a structural phenomenon but also as an ethical and political practice. Thus, depending on how it is organized and enacted, the choir may assume either a repressive or a transformative role. This ambivalence necessitates a critical reconsideration of choral music through a reflective and nuanced perspective (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997).



As Phelan (2018) notes, singing within ritual practices entails not merely belonging to a community, but actively participating in its symbolic world. Rather than passive involvement, ritual singing shaped through bodily resonance, temporal synchrony, and tacit meaning-making transforms choral participation into a liberating and transformative experience.

Contemporary approaches in choral pedagogy help articulate the structural foundations of this transformation. Choir environments designed around Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles support not only musical skill development but also democratic competencies such as critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and self-confidence (McNickle & Morris, 2022; Bıçakçı & Apaydın Demirci, 2022). When individuals are encouraged to claim ownership of their own voices within pedagogical freedom, the choir becomes not merely a space for organizing sound but a site for identity formation and self-efficacy (Garnett, 2017).

In this context, while Adorno's critical perspective on the choir retains its relevance, today's choral practices are being redefined through individual-centered and participatory models. This new vision of the choir shifts from rigid authoritarianism to horizontal relationships, and from technical discipline to emotional and ethical resonance. Yet, such potential is contingent upon how the choir is organized. As Adorno warned, authoritarian leadership structures and expectations of mechanical conformity can stifle the individual's critical voice. Therefore, a truly democratic choir must interrogate not only *who* sings together, but *how* they sing together (Adorno, 1997).

Choir as a Micro-Democracy: Embodying Democratic Values Through Collective Musicking

Choral singing offers more than an aesthetic experience it represents a lived model of participatory democracy. Within the structure of the choir, each individual voice contributes to a shared sonic outcome without being silenced or dominating. This polyphonic interaction embodies key democratic principles such as equality, reciprocity, empathy, and shared responsibility. As such, the choir becomes not merely a musical ensemble but a micro-society where active citizenship is practiced through relational listening and co-creation (Hawkins, 2024).

The concept of *micro-democracy* suggests that democratic values are cultivated not only in political institutions but also in everyday cultural practices. Choirs enact this principle by enabling individuals to express their voices while remaining attuned to others. No single voice overrides; instead, harmony emerges from mutual responsiveness. This structural balance fosters civic competencies including cooperation, deliberation, and respect for difference (Woodford, 2005). Choral settings thus function as pedagogical environments where the foundations of democratic life are rehearsed and internalized.



In the choir, participation is not solely physical; it is also emotional and cognitive. Through synchrony in rhythm, breath, and tone, singers engage in a collective act of meaning-making that strengthens their sense of social belonging. This resonance both sonic and affective creates a platform for mutual recognition and civic awareness (Small, 1998; Clift & Hancox, 2001). The embodied nature of choral singing transforms abstract democratic ideals into tangible experiences of co-presence and responsibility.

The leadership structure of the choir also plays a decisive role in shaping its democratic potential. When conductors adopt a facilitative approach encouraging distributed decision-making, repertoire co-selection, and interpretive openness the choir evolves into a participatory space rather than a hierarchical system. In this model, musical learning aligns with ethical and civic formation, promoting emotional intelligence, reflective listening, and the capacity for collective negotiation (Jordan, 2022; McNickle & Morris, 2022; Garnett, 2017). Here, the music educator acts less as a director of outcomes and more as a mediator of shared process.

Moreover, choral practice facilitates inclusive encounters among individuals from diverse social, generational, and cultural backgrounds. When implemented within socially responsive frameworks, choirs support identity negotiation and community-building. Especially in multicultural or intergenerational choirs, participants often report increased empathy, mutual understanding, and a reduced sense of social isolation (Harley, 2017). These dynamics align directly with the aims of a pluralistic and inclusive democracy.

In sum, choral singing not only mirrors but enacts democratic culture. It affirms the political importance of collective voice, shared listening, and aesthetic collaboration. Within the choir, democratic values are not simply taught they are experienced, embodied, and reimagined through the act of musicking together.

Choir and Identity Formation

Choral music is not merely the unification of voices; it is a powerful social practice that mediates processes of identity construction. As one of the emotional grounds where social belonging is cultivated, the choral environment enables individuals to define themselves on both individual and collective levels. Musical identity is shaped through recognizing, developing, and integrating one's voice in harmonious interaction with others. This process entails more than musical competence; it is a holistic experience that incorporates the social and emotional dimensions of identity (Ahlquist, 2006).



By bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds across age, class, ethnicity, belief, or gender the choir becomes a space where difference is negotiated and transformed through shared musical production. In this polyphonic setting, individuals not only express their own voices, but also learn to listen, understand, and respond ethically to the voices of others. Identity thus emerges not merely as an internal construct but as the outcome of an ongoing process of collective negotiation (Bithell & Hill, 2014).

When viewed through the lens of performative social identity, singing in a choir becomes more than a musical act; it is a site where a sense of "we-ness" is reinforced. For young people, migrants, or those experiencing social exclusion, the choir can offer a safe space that strengthens their expressive capacity. Helen Phelan's long-term ethnographic research with migrant choirs in Ireland vividly demonstrates how ritual singing plays a vital role in processes of social integration, emotional expression, and spatial belonging. According to Phelan (2018), through "borrowed rituals," individuals both experience and shape collective identity in public spaces.

Phelan's five dimensions of ritual resonance, embodied experience, performative structure, temporality, and implicit communication illustrate the multilayered role of the choir in identity formation. In this context, choirs are not only artistic collectives but also spaces of cultural memory where identities are continuously reconstructed (Phelan, 2018).

Various studies have shown that individuals who participate in choirs begin to perceive themselves not just as singers, but as integral members of a group. This sense of belonging strengthens identity on both personal and societal levels. The transformation experienced within the choral space fosters self-understanding and meaningful relationality through artistic expression. As such, the choir is not merely a space where identity is represented it is also a site where identity is actively produced.

The Historical Background of Choral Culture

Throughout history, choral music has played multiple roles as an aesthetic and ideological tool in shaping modern societies. Particularly from the 19th century onward, with the rise of nationalism across many European countries, choirs became not only musical ensembles but also spaces for producing cultural, social, and political identities.

Williams (2015) offers a detailed analysis of how working-class male choirs in Wales appropriated the oratorio tradition to construct both class-based and national identities. These choirs functioned not merely as musical groups but as collective identity spaces rooted in solidarity and a shared ethic of labor. Events such as the Eisteddfod choral competitions reinforced both social mobilization and cultural memory, becoming symbolic carriers of Welsh identity.



Similarly, Leterrier (2015) and Marković (2015) illustrate the role of choral societies in the construction of national identity in France and Serbia. During the French Third Republic, school and civic choirs were deployed as ideological tools to disseminate secular and nationalist values. In Serbia, choirs symbolized both cultural resistance in the post-Ottoman era and aspirations for European integration. These examples demonstrate that choirs have not only preserved traditions from the past but have also embodied modernist visions of the future.

Vidaud (2015) and Lajosi (2015) emphasize how choral movements in Central and Baltic Europe became entangled with ideals of populism, folklore, and cultural authenticity, contributing to the re-articulation of ethnic identities. In countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, song festivals were seen as forms of “silent revolutions” enacted through music and became peaceful acts of resistance against totalitarian regimes. Estonia’s “Singing Revolution” (1987–1991) remains a striking example of how mass choral performance enabled political subjectification. Here, music served not just as a means of expression but as a direct instrument of social transformation.

Religious choral practices have also historically functioned as powerful tools for transmitting collective identity and shared values. Church choirs, particularly in Western Europe, extended beyond liturgical duties to become vehicles for both educational and social norms. From the German *Kantorei* tradition to Anglican cathedral choirs in England, sacred music shaped choral culture by linking spiritual formation with the harmonization of collective voices. These practices contributed to both vertical and horizontal forms of belonging within religious communities and laid the foundation for early Western music pedagogy.

In the Nordic countries, choral culture developed not only as a means of national identity formation but also as part of a broader ideology of social equality and welfare. In nations such as Sweden and Norway, choral practice evolved into a socially engaged practice that prioritized participation, emotional well-being, and collective responsibility over individual excellence. The choral movement led by Eric Ericson in Sweden offered a modern choral aesthetic that fused technical excellence with democratic engagement. This model promoted a conception of choral leadership that emphasized facilitation over authoritarian control, and encouraged singers to contribute not only vocally but also to decision-making processes.

In the Turkish context, choral initiatives during the early Republican period especially those carried out through *Halkevleri* (People’s Houses) and *Village Institutes* exemplify efforts to cultivate civic consciousness through aesthetic means. These practices, which blended Western polyphony with local musical elements, should be understood not only as artistic endeavors but as part of a broader pedagogical and ideological reform agenda. Today, choirs operating within civil



society organizations and universities continue to reflect this historical continuity in contemporary forms.

Historical examples clearly demonstrate that choral music has served both as a collective mode of voicing and as a medium of social organization. Cultural identity, political discourse, social solidarity, and individual self-construction are all interwoven within the fabric of choral practice. Thus, in historical context, the choir should be understood not only as an artistic practice but also as a formative agent in shaping the public sphere.

Fields of Practice and Educational Dimensions

Choral music is not merely an aesthetic activity; it is a multilayered field of practice with pedagogical, social, and psychological dimensions. Beyond these effects, the choir also serves as a microcosm of democratic life. In educational settings, choral participation supports not only cognitive and emotional development, but also cultivates democratic skills such as collective decision-making, shared responsibility, and the internalization of participatory culture.

Choir practice fosters abilities closely associated with democratic life, including self-discipline, empathy, attentive listening, and collaborative decision-making. In this regard, choral engagement is not only a musical pursuit but also a powerful tool for ethical and civic education. As Paul Woodford (2005) emphasizes, music education can foster democratic consciousness when grounded in a critical pedagogical framework, and the choir provides a unique environment for this purpose.

Choral education supports social-emotional development by promoting not just vocal training but also a sense of belonging, self-confidence, and mutual responsibility (Harley, 2017). This approach reveals that choir pedagogy responds not only to technical skills but also to individuals' psychosocial needs through a holistic educational model. Studies have shown that choral participation among adolescents positively influences identity development and group social cohesion (Garnett, 2017).

One of the foundational principles of democratic societies inclusion finds concrete expression in choir settings. Choirs that bring together individuals of different ages, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds create an environment that supports equality and diversity in education. Especially in choirs involving individuals with special needs, participation enhances emotional integration and social inclusion, offering an experience that transcends barriers through the universal communicative potential of music.



This potential is not confined to formal education. Amateur choir initiatives carried out by municipalities, cultural centers, NGOs, and voluntary organizations also play a vital role in fostering social inclusion. Such choirs become spaces where individuals reconnect with communal life and counteract contemporary challenges such as loneliness and alienation. Therefore, choir singing is not only a musical experience but also a practice of civic engagement and a cultural foundation for democratic life.

A choir is not only the convergence of voices, but also a space where silence and listening are experienced as a collective ethic. In this context, the choir enacts what Jacques Rancière defines as a ‘distribution of the sensible,’ a regime in which the visibility and audibility of bodies are politically mediated. An aesthetic-political space where decisions are made about whose voice is heard, what is felt, and which bodies are made visible (Rancière, 2004).

In conclusion, choral music is not merely a method of music education; it is a participatory, empathetic, and transformative learning environment that supports both personal and collective development. In this light, choral practice aligns directly with the democratic educational goals of the 21st century and should be understood as a holistic approach.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that choral music is not only an aesthetic art form but also an ethical and pedagogical space in which democratic life is experienced. As the social fabric of the 21st century continues to be reshaped by intensified individualism, emotional fragmentation, and growing inequality, it becomes increasingly necessary to reconstruct democratic values not only at the level of political systems but also within the micro-realities of everyday life. In this context, the choir should be regarded not merely as a convergence of voices, but as a living embodiment of democratic values in which principles such as equality, reciprocity, and participation are internalized.

In the choir, every voice is heard but no voice dominates or is silenced. This polyphonic structure aesthetically reflects the pluralism that modern democracies require. Moreover, establishing collective harmony necessitates that individuals cultivate values such as self-regulation, attentiveness, and responsibility. Thus, choir practice contributes to participatory democracy not only symbolically but also experientially. Woodford’s concept of “micro-democracy” underscores how the choir becomes a pedagogical space where individuals can develop civic virtues (Jordan & Bland, 2024, Freer, 2011). Here, music is not a technical performance but an ethical experience that fosters social awareness.



The choir also serves as a platform for the reproduction of cultural belonging and social inclusion. As Phelan has shown, ritualized singing within choirs enables migrant individuals to reconfigure their identities in a collective context. Meanwhile, Thomas Turino's concept of "cultural cohorts" demonstrates how individuals who share similar values can generate alternative public spheres through musical practices. These spheres contribute to building the affective and experiential dimensions of democratic culture beyond its institutional frameworks.

In sum, choral music can play not only a metaphorical but also a practical and pedagogical role in the reconstruction of democratic societies. The egalitarian organization of vocal relationships, practices of harmony based on reciprocity, and the ethical dimension of collective creation position the choir as not only an art form, but also a stage for human rights, social equity, and participatory citizenship in the 21st century.

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