



# An Assessment of the Relevance of Primary School Choir Directors' Musical Competencies on Quality Performances

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## Abstract

Choir directors are key players in the role of choral music training and performance. The quality of a choral performance is highly dependent on their musical competencies among other factors. This exploratory qualitative case study argues that the development of musicians' expressive communication of a composer's intentions to an audience hinges on the directors' ability to interpret choral music scores. Without proficiencies, no meaningful teaching of the songs is achieved, resulting in substandard performances. Informed by Bower's theory on choral practice, this study assesses the Shamva primary school trainers' musical competencies. The relevance of the proficiencies on quality performances is also assessed. Data were gathered from [N=10] ten purposefully sampled choir trainers with a wide range of experiences in choral music participation and school competitions through non-participant observation, document analysis, and face-to-face interviews. Findings reveal that the majority of choir trainers had very limited music theoretical knowledge, which made it difficult to apply to performances. The study established a relationship between the significance of competencies to individual capability levels. The recommendation of intensive regular competency upgrading courses, workshops, and seminars for trainers to improve levels of knowledge, skills, and performance is made. Performance standards and the choral music quality are creative entrepreneurship products.

## Introduction

Competencies are a wide range of abilities, knowledge, predispositions and skills required to effectively perform tasks to set standards (Alainati, 2015; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). The prerequisites include abilities and knowledge (Alainati, 2015). Incompetency negatively impacts performance, leading to failure by individuals or organisations to achieve set goals. In choral music education, trainers must possess knowledge and skills to prepare ensembles for quality performances. This study focuses on musical competency, one of the fundamental requirements (Dispo, 2017; Schaumberger, 2019) and its influence on performance techniques.

Choral musical competencies denote levels of knowledge and skills acquired through different learning experiences that determine the ability to interpret and apply the elements of music to a given



piece (Dispo, 2017). Competent choir directors read music from a score, provide meaning, and perform spiritedly (Drai-Zerbib & Baccino, 2014; Williamon & Valentine, 2002). Musical competency in choral performance is more than the mere ability to read notes. The disposition must enable expressive performance through engagement with critical thinking (Bower, 2004). The line of argument concurs with Silverman's (2007: 16) statement that:

...interpretation is the act of bringing one's whole being – intellectual, social, cultural, artistic, physical, emotional and personal – into the performing event. If this is not done, the result is nothing more than a production; it is merely an aural photocopy of a score. Conversely, without careful attention and study of a score, a performer will offer little more than pure subjectivity. Artistic-aesthetic interpreting depends on the continuous interplay of efferent and aesthetic processes.

The adroitness to interpret choral music requires the choir director to have cross-modal competencies and the ability to handle visual and auditory sources of information concurrently (Drai-Zerbib & Baccino, 2014). Choir directors should extract visual information from the score whilst performing the music. Aspects that include vision, audiation and motor processes are involved (William & Egner, 2004) in the presentation of performances.

A wealth of literature demonstrates how critical musical competencies are in training and performance. Bell (2004) reports that American choral performances by trainers with musical expertise resulted in community members' preference for the genre compared to other arts. Burdeva (2005) exposes trainers with limited musical knowledge and skills, leading to poor performances. Dispo (2017) takes note of schools without any staff member capable of training the choir for competitive tasks due to limited musical competencies. In these instances, competent directors are often hired to solve the problem. Several scholars have written on trainers' musical challenges impeding excellence in training and performance; Chin-Newman (2003) identifies pitch problems, Laing (2007) reports the absence of harmony within and across voice parts, Cottrell (2010) records breathe control challenges among singers, Coward (2007), Laino (2015) and Winnie (2014) observe articulation and diction challenges and plain singing. German choirs' exaggeration of the articulation of the text are described in Hauck's (2020) study. The studies reveal a plethora of problems experienced by directors. An inference can be drawn that musical competency challenges are diverse and lead to uninspiring choral performances.

Based on these revelations, assessing trainer musical competencies in other contexts is crucial to establishing more about individual director capabilities and challenges. Knowledge of choir conductors' musical abilities and shortcomings is important to allow for enhancement measures that will benefit trainers, learners and audience. No previous studies have examined directors' musical competencies concerning performances in Zimbabwe. Justifiably, assessing the choir directors' musical expertise was critical for establishing their levels of competencies and their impact on choral training and performance.

### **Assessment of musical competencies**

Assessment of musical competencies is not a new phenomenon. It is believed to have started with Carl. E. Seashore's (1866 - 1949) in the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Devaney, 2019; Seashore et al., 1956). He evaluated his examinees' musical aptitude in pitch, dynamics, time, rhythm, and tonal memory. James Mursell (1893-1963) and Edwin Gordon (1927-2015) followed suit later (Mursell, 1937). Their studies worked as a precursor to such studies by Leung and Wong (2005), Moistlik and Selke



(2011), and this study. This study assessed Shamva primary school choir trainers' musical competencies concerning performance quality.

Expressive choral performances relate to trainers' sound musical competency and are meant to meet people's aesthetic needs (Bell, 2004; Condon, 2015). The choir's ability to express portions of the music concerning the composer's intentions helps generate the desired mood in both the choristers and the audience, fulfilling the purpose for which it was composed (Cook, 2019; Jansson et al., 2019). Choral music is a powerful communicative tool critical to a country's political, social, economic, and religious functions (Frew & McPherson, 2015). This is achievable if the musical expertise of the choir director assists in moulding proficient musicians able to converse with an audience about the aesthetic range and artistic intent of vocal music in a redolent manner (Silverman, 2007). A choir director should be a true leader of an ensemble who interprets the score and conducts it in a way that creates and sustains emotional contagion through communication with the choir (Oikelome, 2020). Score study and interpretation of the music are important. They direct the rehearsals (Silverman, 2007). Music interpreted and performed with spirit moves the hearts of many to a special joy (Mugandani, 2016). This is realisable if the conductor and choristers allow the music to connect to their spirituality and let the physical expression follow (Contributer, 2020). deViller and Agenbag (2018) reveal choir conductors who placed little emphasis on expressive singing during rehearsals, concentrating more on the performance of the repertoire. The result was performances that did not touch the hearts of the singers and listeners.

### **Organisation of festivals**

Choral performances occur in and outside educational contexts for competition, religion and entertainment. In Zimbabwe, primary school choral music competitions are a prestigious annual event hosted by the National Association of Primary School Heads (NAPH) during the third term. Participation starts at the circuit, followed by districts, provincial and national levels, for recognition as the best school choir of the year and two runners-up (Antonio, 2018; Kachiko, 2018; Ncube, 2019). Other festivals, like the Eisteddfod Choral Festival, are held by the National Institute of Allied Arts. Schools, including Peterhouse, Dominican Convent, and Heritage Junior School, have participated and scooped awards (Hammond, 2013). Xtreme Afrique received the Africa Golden Virtual Award in Canada. In contrast, Choice Children's and Note2Note adult community choirs received silver medals at the 2018 World Choir Games at Tshwane University, South Africa (Ndabambi, 2018). Adjudicators are responsible for picking on the winners or losers at the competitions by assessing how well the elements of music in the competition songs will have been interpreted.

During NAPH competitions, reverberations, shouts of joy and handshakes follow a quality performance. However, in other contexts, the reactions may be different. People express joy differently. Choir directors play a key role in the training and performance of their groups. The quality of a choral performance is highly dependent on the musical competencies. Thus, their proficiencies' impact may be positive or negative. Based on the literature, a correlation between choir directors' level of musical expertise and the quality of choral performances is revealed. Directors' musical competencies may or may not assist choristers in expressing their feelings, ideas and imaginations through the music. The quality of a choral performance reflects the directors' level of musical proficiencies, among other factors, to a greater extent. They prepare and teach choristers to sing a song concerning their interpretation. Performances often reflect the musical competency levels of the choir conductor. There are no known previous studies on the subject locally, a gap this study seeks to close.



### **Theoretical framework**

Bower's (2004) philosophy advances the practical application of theoretical choral music factual knowledge. For a choral director to know the elements of music, like pitch, rhythm, intervals, chords, and melody, is inadequate. Emphasis is placed on theoretical knowledge, which should be implemented. Choral musical knowledge is significant when applied to critical and reflective problem-solving in the performance context. The understanding should enable conductors to go beyond recitation of musical facts to the ability to operationalise the details through performances for the benefit of choristers and the audience. From this premise, competency in choral music starts with reading the music score and comprehending the lyrics, leading to a rendition of appropriate emotions. Proficiencies assist choir directors in bringing out the aesthetics of the music. Cross-modal competencies to handle visual and auditory information concurrently are a requisite for choir directors (Drai-Zerbib & Baccino, 2014). Effective use of appropriate gestures to convey the expressionistic qualities of the music to choristers is the conductor's responsibility (Bower, 2004; Dispo, 2017; Hauck, 2020).

According to the theory, choir directors should be able to extract meaning from the score and demonstrate good singing before teaching choristers to create good sounds and go over chords, phrases, dynamics and intervals accurately. The ability to apply theoretical choral knowledge practically directs choral rehearsals. Choir directors should possess a firm command of diverse musical skills, knowledge, understanding and feeling for the genre to prepare choristers adequately for top-class performances. Choral performances provide entertainment, therapy and other roles in people's lives (Condon, 2015). Bower's proposals on the choral music curriculum provided a lens through which Shamva District primary school choir directors' musical competencies relating to the quality of training on choral performances were assessed.

### **Methodology**

An exploratory case study design (Rule & Vaughn, 2011) was carried out to holistically explore and describe (Yin, 2014) directors' choral musical competencies and their impact on quality performances. Purposive sampling selected ten [N=10] choirmasters from Shamva District, Mashonaland Central Province. Data were gathered through non-participant observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2017; Barasa, 2024). With the help of an assistant researcher, choir directors' theoretical and practical knowledge was assessed to develop an in-depth understanding of musical competencies and shortcomings. A holistic approach was adopted to assess the exhibition of different music elements simultaneously in performance. This assessment does not conflict with people's real-world listening behaviours (Devaney, 2019). Non-participant observation allowed for a concentration on identifying the trainer's strengths and weaknesses. Every activity was captured using an assessment guide. The documents that were scrutinised were previous adjudicators' reports. The aim was to determine musical complexities and common persistent competency-related comments (Jansson et al., 2019). A document analysis guide was constructed to direct the process. Semi-structured interviews were preferred because each participant had unique experiences with choral music (Cachia & Millward, 2011); hence, individual opinions, knowledge and feelings about the phenomenon under study were obtained (Crossman, 2017; Marwat, 2010). The technique also allowed for probing and observation of para-language to generate significant data (Kumar, 2019; Whiting, 2008), leading to an in-depth understanding of the subject (Bowen et al., 2017). Using the three techniques allowed for the comparison of results for more insight and a comprehensive



understanding of the problem, from which a judgement on the relevance of choirmasters' proficiencies on quality performances was made.

### **Discussion**

The following is a discussion of the several emergent patterns from the data.

#### **Choral musical knowledge**

Non-participant observation and interviews were mainly used to gather data on participants' choral musical knowledge. The data revealed that participants had limited choral musical knowledge. The levels of musical competencies differed from one choirmaster to the other. Generally, most participants had limited competencies in different elements of choral music: rhythm, pitch, harmony, time signatures, phrasing, performance directions, phrasing, and conducting. The excerpts from Goro and Fero (pseudonyms) substantiate the claim.

Goro:

*I know musical notes but have problems with their time values. If music is in tonic solfa notation, I cannot make sense of it rhythm-wise. What I see are pitches and not rhythm. I can also identify time signatures on music in staff notation, but I do not understand their purpose in music. On the other hand, I cannot detect time signatures on music in tonic solfa notation. Regarding harmony, yes, I understand that voices should agree, but I don't know how the tenor voice is pitched for it to agree with the other two voices. I do not understand the concept of phrasing in choral music; we just sing (laughing). Regarding performance directions, yes, I know one or two but I must admit that my knowledge is limited in that area. When conducting, I simply move my hands up and down...*

Fero had the following to say;

*There is very little I understand about choral music. Yes, I can identify all the musical notes and rests on the music, performance directions, and time signatures only if the music is in staff notation. My knowledge does not go beyond that. To give the duration of notes is a problem. I cannot also explain the relevance of time signatures, nor can I give meaning to the different performance directions on music pieces. If music is in tonic solfa notation, I get more confused. The other thing that troubles me is identifying the key to the music and the degree of scale at which the music begins. The music, which is normally in both tonic solfa and staff notation systems, shows we are starting to articulate soh or doh, but where that comes from, I don't know. So you see, there's a lot I still have to learn about choral music.*

Goro and Fero, through interviews, confirmed dominant sentiments from nine participants. It is plausible to suggest participants knew some elements of music, like rhythm, time signatures and performance directions. However, both excerpts express patterns of lack of sound theoretical knowledge of music. Variations in the degree of the choirmaster's musical knowing were noted. However, shortcomings overshadowed the few strengths. Non-participant observation confirmed the interview results by assessing the choirmasters' music-theoretical knowledge. Findings by Burdeva (2005) expose trainers with limited musical knowledge relating to poor performances; Dispo (2017) records schools without staff members capable of training competitive choirs. Without sound choral musical knowledge, choir conductors may be unable to train a choir effectively. Theoretical knowledge informs the application (Bower, 2004) for the realisation of the quality of performances.





### **Serious lack of practical skill**

A serious lack of practical skills is another pattern that emerged from the data. Choir trainers' adjudicators' reports revealed that Shamva District choir directors had serious challenges in interpreting choral music, as exemplified by recurring comments such as,

*Work on the rhythms of the whole song. Performance directions not effected. The tenor and alto voices not harmonising well with the soprano voice. You effected only two performance directions. Work on harmony within and across parts. Improve on pitch and conduction. Respect breathing points.*

Adjudicators' semantics differed but expressed the same ideas. One choirmaster with theoretical knowledge slightly above average received more positive than negative comments. Document analysis revealed similar views to those obtained through non-participant observation. Nine participants had difficulty in applying the little knowledge they possessed to performance. They had limited skills in interpreting, affecting performance direction, achieving harmony and conducting effectively. In addition, the participants had serious challenges with inaccurate pitch; the same pitch was articulated differently. Surprisingly, they could accurately articulate pitches on the modulator scale, ascending and descending, while failing to sing the same pitches from melodies or choral songs. Generally, rhythm interpretation posed challenges, particularly in observing the value of notes in the songs or melodies, such as two-beamed quavers, four-beamed semiquavers, triplets, and dotted minims. Seven (7) stopped midway to figure out how to proceed. Coupled with the failure to interpret pitch, the result was unmusical performances. Conversations with participants made the same revelation that nine choirmasters had gross challenges in applying theoretical choral musical knowledge to performance. Only one choir director's performance was fairly musical. He had the following to say;

*My theoretical knowledge is good. Yes, I don't know everything, but at least I can sing simple melodies independently. I usually miss it, where beats comprise smaller notes and rest. I take too much time to interpret such rhythms, making me miss the beat. My other strength is on the pitch. I have no problems with it. I can sound any pitch correctly.*

On the contrary, Kero (pseudonym) had the following opinion;

*Choral music is difficult to interpret. So many things need to be taken care of concurrently as one performs. It is not easy to identify what to sing and sing it accuracy in time. To be frank, I need assistance in almost everything about choral music.*

This citation is significant in many ways. It confirms choir directors could hardly perform choral music. The question was how the directors managed to stage performances at NAPH competitions. Chere (pseudonym) said they bought pre-recorded compact discs from competition songwriters. They then played the music until they could sing along from rote, from which they would teach choristers. From the explanation, participants relied on memorisation of the music. This was why they could hardly sing anything meaningful during the assessment. The findings revealed a relationship between limited factual and practical knowledge and poor choral performance. Choirs with similar diverse musical competency challenges are reported in Chin-Newman (2003), Cottrell (2010), Coward (2007), Hauck (2020), Laing (2007), Laino (2015) and Winnie's (2014) studies.

### **Musical expertise of little relevance in quality performances**

Musical expertise of little relevance to quality performances was portrayed as another emerging pattern from the data. Based on the level of choir directors' choral musical knowledge and skill to



apply to performance, most trainers stage unmusical performances. The levels of musical competencies hurt the potential to communicate composers' intent. Expressive choral performances can meet people's aesthetic needs. (Bell, 2004; Condon, 2015). Participants' levels of proficiency were far from achieving the desired performance outcome. Immense gaps existed between the choral scores and the performances eventually presented.

Asked to comment on the quality of their performances, nine participants unanimously agreed that their performances were below standard. Zuze (pseudonym) held this sentiment;

*I think I always present substandard choral performances. The mark out of a hundred I have always given since 2015 is below half. The comments, too, are more on the negative side. I don't blame the adjudicators for the marks and comments. I have challenges in putting the song together. I have serious challenges in interpreting music scores. What I teach choristers is what I would have memorised from the CDs we buy from choral composers. Whether I would have mastered it correctly or not is another matter. I teach what I don't understand, and it's a problem. I need assistance in score interpretation to improve my choral presentations...*

The views confirm choir conductors' limited expertise in preparing quality performances. In light of the choir above, conductors' existing musical proficiencies were of little relevance to the quality of performances. The competencies need further continuous development to impact choral training and performances positively. One of the responsibilities of choir directors is to develop sound choral musical knowledge and skills in choristers to enable the communication of ideas independently (Bower, 2004; Silverman, 2007). Choir conductors can train powerful choirs if they study, interpret, and apply their musical knowledge to the performances.

### **Conclusion**

The study revealed that most choir directors had little choral musical knowledge and had difficulty applying it to performances. The strengths in the interpretation of the elements of music were overshadowed by the shortcomings which impeded performance excellence. From what was gathered, it was inferred that the choir directors staged the performance without aesthetic value. Evidence in the findings proved that the participants were not composers' trusted ambassadors. Generally, the majority of choir trainers had very limited music-theoretical knowledge, which made it difficult to apply to performances. Thus, there was a relation between the significance of competencies and individual capability levels.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends regular intensive competency upgrading courses, workshops, and seminars to improve musical competencies. With improved competencies, directors are anticipated to enhance the quality of choral performances for competitions and recreation.

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