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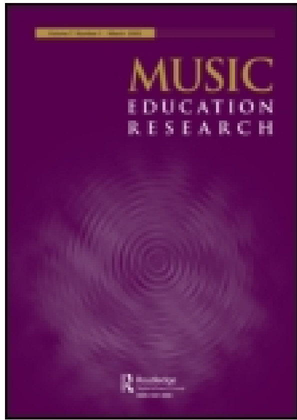

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The Accafellows: exploring the music making and culture of a collegiate a cappella ensemble

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The *Accafellows*: exploring the music making and culture of a collegiate a cappella ensemble

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Despite the growth in number and popularity of collegiate a cappella ensembles in the USA over the past 20 years, few researchers have studied these self-governed, student-run, popular music ensembles. This ethnographic case study examined the music making and culture of the *Accafellows*, an all-male a cappella group at a mid-western American university. An analysis of coded data from individual and group interviews and rehearsal and performance observations revealed five emergent themes: (1) music-making culture; (2) fraternity; (3) alumni involvement; (4) autonomy, leadership and hierarchy; and (5) value of participation. Findings provide a glimpse into the musical lives of the nine members of the group and shed light on the value of their participation in this music ensemble. On the basis of these findings, the author provides recommendations for music educators and suggests future research on informal music practices in formal settings.

Keywords: autonomy; collegiate a cappella; ethnography; informal learning; popular music

Introduction

The custodians kicked us out of the music classroom at precisely 11 p.m. As I quickly packed up my computer bag and video equipment, the nine young men filed out of the music practice building. Moments later when I joined them, they had gathered under the light of the lamppost in the courtyard. As I surveyed this group, they seemed like typical college students, chatting, joking and laughing with one another. Yet several of them wore identical jackets, suggesting they were members of a team. As Evan blew a note from the pitch pipe, they quieted down and came to attention. Without a word, he gave the preparatory gesture, and they began to sing a heartfelt and melancholy rendition of the traditional Irish song 'Danny Boy'. The thick texture of voices echoed between the two adjacent music buildings, creating a luxurious blanket of sound.

'Let's star it up!' Evan called out after the final cadence. 'Star it up', some of them echoed. The men huddled together with arms around each other's shoulders, like football players before a game. As they began to sway slowly back and forth, Evan told them how proud he was of their accomplishments this year. He thanked them

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for their hard work and dedication and gave encouraging words for their upcoming concert.

As I shivered in the chilly air, I thought, 'What music educator wouldn't love to see nine college students share their love of singing and music with each other?' I was impressed by the degree to which they had made music an integral part of their college experience as members of a student-run ensemble and created a culture in which they seemed to support each other both musically and personally (Field notes, 21 April 2010).

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Researcher reflections and rationale

Collegiate a cappella ensembles in the United States have grown considerably in number and popularity over the past 20 years (Duchan 2007). These self-governed, student-led groups arrange, perform, and record popular music without instrumental accompaniment (Duchan 2007) and exist primarily outside of college music departments (Brown 2009). Despite the history of this musical genre, researchers have begun to study these ensembles only recently (Mayhew 2009). The present study seeks to illuminate the music making and culture of a collegiate a cappella group and to discover how this knowledge may benefit music educators.

Though I have taught secondary choral music for 10 years and sung in numerous choral ensembles, I never participated in an a cappella group. I was first introduced to one as a senior in high school when our student teacher, who himself was a member of a collegiate a cappella ensemble, shared recordings and videos of his group. Five juniors were inspired to form their own ensemble, *Five O'Clock Shadow*, with the help of our student teacher. They were an instant success, and, by the end of the school year, they had made business cards and were performing numerous gigs throughout our community. During my college years, I did not pay much attention to the various a cappella groups on campus and instead focused on more 'serious' music. Furthermore, in my methods courses, there was nothing more than a brief mention of these types of popular music ensembles. In fact, few choral methods textbooks even mention these types of ensembles. I began to wonder: What is it like to be a member of a collegiate a cappella ensemble? Why do college students participate? How do music teaching and learning occur? How does the group create and sustain its music making? What do participants gain from their experience? What might music educators learn from this knowledge?

Music making in informal settings

The study of music making outside formal institutional settings, such as schools, has contributed valuable knowledge to the field of music education. In fact, a number of studies have investigated music making among professional pop musicians, community choruses, teen garage bands and hip-hop artists (Bell 2000; Campbell 1995; Finnegan 1989; Fornas, Lindberg, and Sernhede 1995; Green 2001; Jaffurs 2004; Kennedy 2003, 2009; Söderman and Folkestad 2004; Townsend 1997). One of the purposes of such research is to help music educators understand how music making takes place in these informal settings and gain knowledge that may be used in formal music education settings. Jaffurs (2006) articulates this as follows:

> If educators can understand the scope of the experience and meaning that students create through informal music making, perhaps they can apply what they have learned, and more students in their formal settings will develop curiosity and desire to learn the skills necessary to create music. (14)

Green's (2001) pioneering research is relevant to the present study because it described how popular musicians acquired knowledge and skills for performance through what she referred to as 'informal music learning' (16). These informal learning practices included a combination of listening to and imitating recordings, peer-directed and group learning and individual practice. Green contrasted these activities with traditional teacher-led instruction and argued that informal practices could be implemented in formal music education settings.

Among the aforementioned studies that examined informal music contexts, two studies are most closely related to the intent of the present investigation. Studies by Townsend (1997) and Kennedy (2009) examine the music making in choral settings using an ethnographic approach and suggest implications for music education. Townsend (1997) explored the process of teaching and learning choral music in an African-American Baptist church. His study revealed the use of aural transmission (observation and listening) and that church choir members learned through both practice-based and example-based means. In addition, more experienced members worked with newer members to help them become a part of the community. Townsend concluded that the music, the teaching and learning process of the church choir could be transferred to school choral settings; however, the spiritual aspects of the religious musical experience may not be transferable.

In a similar study, Kennedy (2009) examined the culture of a community-based, intergenerational choir. Her findings revealed that members enjoyed that people of all ages and backgrounds were welcomed, that it was a non-auditioned group, that there was flexibility in terms of commitment to number of rehearsals, performances and performance dress code. In addition to musical participation, Kennedy identified healing, spiritual and transformative experiences as by-products of membership. The teaching and learning process included aural transmission, with an emphasis on rote learning and 'off book' singing, the repetition of repertoire as a means to develop singers and community, occasional one-on-one sessions to find one's voice, performing with a purpose (as a fundraiser for an outreach project), and the belief that harmony can promote peaceful coexistence. Kennedy concluded that many of the elements of this ensemble could be transferred to school choral programmes.

Research on male singing

A prominent topic in the research on male singing is that of participation and non-participation. The steady decline of males who sing, referred to as 'missing males', has been the focus of several recent articles that document this ever-growing concern among educators (Freer 2008; Gates 1989; Harrison 2004; Harrison, Welch, and Adler, 2012; Koza 1993). Several studies have examined reasons why males from elementary schools to community choirs choose to participate in choral music and the meaning they ascribe to their participation. Research studies indicate that the major reason why males, regardless of age, choose to participate is because they love to sing (Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz 2003; Durrant 2012; Hylton 1981; Kennedy

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2002; Kwan 2002; Mizener 1993; Neill 1998; Sichivitsa 2001; Sweet 2010). These studies also reported other benefits of participation including: musical growth, personal satisfaction, friendships, positive feedback, sense of achievement, fun and enjoyment.

A few studies have been conducted with collegiate populations. Sichivitsa (2001) reported that college students in her study participated because they enjoyed singing and making music. Furthermore, she found that parental support had more of an impact on participants' intentions to continue with the class than did parental musicianship (Sichivitsa 2001). More recently, Durrant (2012) suggested that some males 'join university choirs by accident or through persuasion, while others join because they have indeed had positive school choir experiences and want to continue to join in singing activities' (111).

The majority of the research on male singing participation focuses on boys during their middle and high school years, a time when there is a significant decline in participation (Freer 2009b). Studies suggest that adolescent males discontinue participation due to a variety of factors including: changing voice, lack of skill or interest in singing, lack of male role models, peer teasing, family pressure, choral music's relevance to their future goals, issues surrounding male identity/stereotypes and busy schedule (Castelli 1986; Demorest 2000; Freer 2009a, 2009b; Harrison 2010; Kourajian 1982; Phillips 1998).

Another focus in the relevant literature seeks to explain the decline of male singing and propose possible changes in instruction within the classroom in an effort to improve retention. In an extensive review of literature, Freer (2012) identified structural, developmental and motivational factors that contribute to the problem of missing males. According to Freer, there are some major 'misalignments' between the traditional models and practices of choral music instruction and the cognitive, development and musical needs of adolescent males (20). Based on findings from several research studies that examined the experiences of adolescent boys, Freer points out that the 'stereotypical yet dominant authoritarian' (19) conductor model, which focuses on performance goals through teacher-led rehearsal is incongruent with a 'co-musician' (20) approach in which boys interact with peers and teacher during music learning and rehearsing. Furthermore, research indicates that boys prefer: (1) acquiring transferable musical skills (such as vocal technique and music reading skills) (Freer 2009b); (2) a variety in rehearsal instruction, including physical movement (Freer 2009b); (3) specific task and skill-oriented feedback (Freer 2009a); and (4) repertoire that has interesting text and appropriate challenge (Freer 2009a).

Recently, several researchers examined male engagement in music from a sociocultural perspective (Adler 1999; Harrison 2007, 2008, 2010; Koza 1993). Evidence suggests that the perception of music as a feminine endeavour discourages males from participating in music, particularly singing. With the intent of uncovering why boys are excluded from certain musical activities in school, Harrison (2010) examined the gender stereotypes that underlie boys' music experiences. He found that the boys were keenly aware of the social pressure they faced in participating in gender-incongruent musical activities. Harrison suggested the following recommendations to help music educators minimise the effect of gender as an exclusionary reality and promote male inclusion: select repertoire that avoids reinforcing male stereotypes (e.g., sea-shanties and military songs), use student-centred learning

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activities, incorporate appropriate role models, develop awareness of stereotyping and counter-stereotyping and support students during times of transitions in school.

Though much of the extant research on male participation in music and singing concerns school-age students, one study, which is relevant to the present investigation, examined music making within adult male chorus. Faulkner and Davidson (2006) studied Icelandic men's perceptions of competition and cooperation as a part of their choral experience. Researchers found a complex interaction of these social processes in learning, rehearsing and performing. For example, members collaborated in sectional rehearsals to learn music quickly through a combination of written notation and rote learning and competed to 'get it right' as a means of motivation for learning and rehearsing (225). Researchers concluded that, for study participants, singing in harmony was both a literal and metaphorical way to describe their relationship in the context of singing together.

In addition to the need for further research on adult male singing, there is also a need to examine 'male-dominated popular music domains' (Harrison, Welch, and Adler 2012, 8) and specifically, collegiate contemporary a cappella (Mayhew 2009). This study contributes to the broader discussion of male participation in singing and suggests ways in which this knowledge may be useful to music educators.

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Collegiate contemporary a cappella

Ethnomusicologist Duchan (2007) traced the emergence and development of collegiate contemporary a cappella from the glee club tradition, the barbershop quartet tradition, and the popular music of the mid-twentieth century in the USA to its current prominence on college campuses. According to Duchan, collegiate ensembles generally range from 8 to 16 singers and can be all male, all female or mixed. The majority of their repertoire consists of contemporary pop and rock songs and may include jazz standards, Broadway show tunes or novelty songs. Typically, a cappella arrangements include a solo melodic voice with one voice providing vocal percussion and the remaining voices providing 'instrumental' backup. Background voices use syllables rather than words to evoke the mood of a contemporary pop song and to loosely emulate the sounds of instruments from the original recorded version. 'Musically, contemporary collegiate a cappella is distinguished not only by its repertory, but by the way that repertory is translated into the voices-only medium. Stylistically, a cappella balances an emulative imperative with a desire for originality' (Duchan 2007, 3).

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, Duchan (2007) examined the musical, social and cultural dimensions and interactions among members in three Boston-area a cappella groups. Musically, he argued that the rehearsal is 'both a musical and social negotiation through which a group's *sound* and *identity* are shaped and reshaped' [original italics] (138). Socially, participation provided a 'safety net' of support in which camaraderie and friendship develop as a result of their shared musical endeavours (306). Overall, Duchan concluded that participation was a 'transformative experience' that can result in improved skills in a variety of areas including: musical skills such as vocal technique, arranging, vocal percussion, performance and recording, as well as non-musical skills such as time management, and business and administrative tasks (306).

In another study, Mayhew (2009) compared the perceptions of contemporary, collegiate a cappella ensembles held by university music faculty and student members of those ensembles. The results indicate that both faculty members and students agree that such groups provide valuable opportunities for performing, leadership and for music education majors to gain non-traditional ensemble experience. Perceptions differed significantly, however, regarding vocal health and affiliation these groups should have with the college music department.

Duchan's research recognised contemporary collegiate a cappella as an independent choral genre and established 'the rehearsal as a site of musical and social negotiation' in which decisions are made (xii). Mayhew's study reported the perception that a cappella ensembles provide valuable learning experiences to its members. Neither study, however, examined how understanding the music making and culture of a collegiate a cappella ensemble might benefit music educators.

Purpose and problems

Building upon the extant research on informal music making, male singing and collegiate a cappella, and the methodology of the studies by Townsend and Kennedy, the purpose of the ethnographic case study was to investigate the music making and culture of the *Accafellows*,[1] an a cappella ensemble at a mid-western university. Specifically, I was interested in how members engaged in music making (including selecting music, rehearsing and performing) and how their shared culture (including attitudes and values) supported their musical endeavours. As a result, I hoped to gain information that might be helpful to music educators and offer implications for music education.

Method

Evan, whom I knew and sang with in the university chorale, was the current musical director of the *Accafellows*. Through several conversations with him, I learned that they had several weeks of rehearsal prior to their upcoming concert, which was an adequate time frame for this investigation. Therefore, I decided to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity, which Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as opportunistic sampling, and select the ensemble with which I already had a personal contact. Evan became the 'gatekeeper' through whom I gained access to the other eight ensemble members (Creswell 2007, 71).

Since my purpose was to understand the music making and culture of the *Accafellows*, I chose an ethnographic approach (Creswell 2007). This is a case study that focused on one particular ensemble within a larger culture of collegiate a cappella. Data collection techniques included observations of rehearsals and performances, informal conversations, and formal individual and group interviews. Observations and interviews occurred over the period of three weeks.

After obtaining university approval and written permission from all the participants, I began to immerse myself in the culture of the group through participant observation. I observed four rehearsals and three performances, consisting of two dorm gigs and an end-of-the-semester concert. The rehearsals ranged in duration from about an hour to 2 ½ hours and were conducted in a music classroom. Dorm gigs consisted of impromptu performances in dormitories on

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campus to advertise for their upcoming performance. At the end of each evening of dormitory performances, the participants debriefed and discussed the schedule of upcoming events. The concert, which took place in the auditorium on campus, was approximately an hour and a half in duration and featured 21 songs. For all observations except the first evening of dormitory performances, I video-recorded using a digital video camera mounted on a tripod and made comprehensive field notes in a notebook, recording both descriptive and reflective notes, in order to gather thick descriptions (Creswell 2007).

In addition to formal observations, I made a concerted effort to interact with members of group as much as possible. Our informal conversations helped me to get to know each of them as individuals and gave them an opportunity to get to know me. I felt this was particularly important both to establish rapport and to help me to get a feel for what it is like to be a member of the group.

After observing the first rehearsal, I asked for volunteers to participate in individual interviews; seven of the nine ensemble members agreed. I conducted each interview in person at mutually convenient times and locations and audio recorded using *GarageBand* software on my personal laptop computer. For each interview, I followed a predetermined script of questions, inquiring about musical background, reasons for participating, musical strengths and weaknesses, role and contributions to the group, likes and dislikes of membership and reactions from family and friends. I posed follow-up questions to seek further clarification of responses when necessary.

Approximately one week after the concert, I conducted a group interview following the fourth rehearsal. The participants sat in chairs in a semi-circle in front of me, and I placed the video camera at my side in order to record the entire group simultaneously. Group questions were from three sources: (1) my observations from rehearsals; (2) topics that arose from individual interviews; and (3) questions adapted from Hallam's (1995) study on the music learning process of professional musicians. I first invited the participants to reflect and comment on that evening's rehearsal as well as their recent concert. I then asked how they selected repertoire and soloists, created arrangements, made musical decisions, gave feedback, and used original recordings. Finally, I asked them to discuss the role of the alumni, benefits and challenges of singing in the group, the formal/informal nature of their ensemble, and the importance of producing a recording.

Following each interview, I created a written transcript from the recording and began open coding, the process of reading each interview line by line and writing down possible codes (Creswell 2007). I used both emic codes – those that emerged from the data – and etic codes – those that I brought to the data and based upon the research questions (Creswell 2007). After generating a substantial list of codes, I began to categorise and refine them. Whenever possible, I used participants' exact words for final codes. Throughout this process, I relied on my experience as a choral director and ensemble singer to bring context and meaning to the interpretation of the data.

The methods used to ensure trustworthiness were data triangulation, member checks and peer review. During the initial analysis process, several themes emerged that influenced my questions for the group interview. I also used field notes to triangulate data from interviews by searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence. This provided an opportunity to verify data generated from different sources. Member checks allowed the participants to review the transcribed interviews

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and change or edit any of their responses to better reflect their intentions; only minor changes in one transcript were requested. A peer completed a review of the coding and analysis of the data to assure consistency and credibility. Finally, I sent a final draft to each of the participants and welcomed input. All gave positive feedback about the paper and said they were pleased to have been a part of this project.

Participants

Participants were members of the *Accafellows* – or *Fellows*, as they refer to themselves – and consisted of nine males, aged 19–23 years. Their group was originally founded in 1996 by a freshman music education major who sought to create an alternative to the a cappella group that existed as a subset of the university's Men's Glee Club. They are affiliated with the university as an official student organisation, yet, operate independently of the music department and have no faculty director. Their participation is entirely voluntary; they receive no college credit, grade or other university recognition for being a part of the group. I refer to each participant with a pseudonym to protect his identity. Table 1 provides information about the participants.

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Table 1. Participant information.

Name	Age	Years in group	Major	Musical Background
Charlie	23	1	Microbiology	Previously sang with another collegiate a cappella group.
Adam	22	1	Computer Engineering	Former music education and vocal performance major. Played brass in middle and high school. Sang in choir in high school.
Randy	22	4	Film Production	Played saxophone and piano. Performed in musicals in high school. Joined choir in 10th grade.
Evan	21	2.5	Music Education	Sang in choir in middle and high school. Plays guitar.
Gavin	21	2.5	English Education	Former music education major. Played French horn since middle school. Sang in high school choir for 1 year and performed in a musical.
Danny	21	2.5	Communication	Sang in choir and performed in musicals in high school.
Kyle	20	2	English/Fiction Film Production	Sang in honour choir in 5th grade, but then stopped choral singing. Performed in musicals in high school and college.
Bryan	19	2	Chemistry	Played piano since age 6. Sang in choir since 3rd grade. Took voice lessons. Sang in a cappella group in high school.
Darrell	19	2	Laboratory Medical Technology	Played French horn. Joined choir in 11th grade. Is new to a cappella.

Interpretations by theme

Five themes emerged from the data: (1) music-making culture; (2) fraternity; (3) alumni involvement; (4) autonomy, leadership and hierarchy; and (5) value of participation.

Music-making culture

Music-making culture describes how members of the *Accafellows* make music together. It includes: auditioning, selecting repertoire, arranging, rehearsing, using technology, performing and creating recordings.

As with many collegiate a cappella ensembles, potential candidates must pass an audition in order to gain membership. The audition process, which Kyle recalled as nerve-wracking, consisted of two parts. First, he had to sing a song, tell a joke and perform a vocal and aural skills assessment. Then, during callbacks in front of a panel of current and former members, he learned and performed two excerpts from their repertoire. This process helps members select only those candidates who possess strong musicianship and performance skills and a compatible personality.

Described as 'really eclectic' (Bryan), their repertoire represents a variety of genres, artists and decades of popular music. Though they occasionally perform songs from other genres, such as the Irish folk tune 'Danny Boy', according to Charlie, 'Popular music is definitely the core of what we do'. Evan offered his perspective as to why they sing popular music:

> I think that's just the music that we are drawn to and the stuff that we listen to. As a voice major and classical music major, I don't really listen to [classical music] that much. I feel guilty about it some time, but popular music – that's the music that drives me. And I get a chance to do my classical stuff other places, so I'm perfectly comfortable with this group being a pop group. (Group Interview, 4 May 2010)

The *Fellows* identified several factors that guide the decision-making process for selecting repertoire. They generally choose well-known songs, such as 'I'm Yours' by Jason Mraz, that they think would entertain and appeal to their audience, which is 'primarily freshmen girls' (Kyle). The most well-known songs, however, 'sometimes will become dated, once they are not popular anymore', while others 'can transcend that' (Kyle). They also choose more obscure songs by well-known artists, such as 'I Can't Stay' by The Killers, and other songs by lesser-known or non-pop artists, such as country singer Josh Turner. The songs must be of interest to group members and lend themselves well to all-vocal arrangements. Though selections usually come from the listening preferences of its members, the *Fellows* take suggestions from fans and requests from alumni for special events, such as weddings.

Rather than auditioning for the lead solo for each song, members are free to request songs for themselves and suggest songs for others to perform. When a member makes requests, there is group discussion and sometimes disagreement. Charlie explains:

> Most of the disagreement or debate comes from picking our own solos. There is certainly input from members to help guide you to find a solo that's great for your voice.

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> For me, [their input] was integral for figuring out which of several songs I had in mind that I was going to pick. (Group Interview, 4 May 2010)

Once a particular song is selected, members of the group create arrangements, an expectation that has existed since the group's inception. In Evan's words, 'We cultivate arrangers'. Randy, Evan and Bryan are the primary arrangers. A few alumni also arrange for the group but encourage members to try it themselves. Bryan, for example, began arranging after an alumnus prompted him to write an arrangement of 'Walking in Memphis' by Marc Cohn. Adam wrote his own arrangement before he was an official member of the group. Randy recalled that, although Adam's arrangement 'was good, it didn't fit the way we needed it to'. Randy re-worked it, noting their 'collaboration'. Adam has been identified as an arranger for next year.

According to the *Fellows*, benefits of in-ensemble arranging are that (1) members do not need to pay for arrangements; (2) arrangements can be tailored to the particular ensemble; and (3) it is an opportunity to exercise creativity in reinterpreting the original song. In Adam's words, 'Because we want to make it our own, it's got to have a little *Accafellow* twist'.

Despite initial preparations, changes to arrangements are inevitable throughout the rehearsal process. They made several on-the-spot adjustments of syllables, changes in voice leading and the addition of rhythmic figures to sustained block chords. Other changes included take-home re-working of entire sections. Furthermore, as a song is performed over some time, it may be subject to changes in interpretation or may take on a different 'flavor' or 'character' (Randy). Distinct differences in tempo and style are apparent between their current performance of 'Yellow' by Cold Play and the recorded version on their CD Volume 3.

As music director, Evan was responsible for teaching the arrangements. During one rehearsal, the *Fellows* learned a commercially published arrangement of 'You Raise Me Up', recorded by Josh Groban, for an upcoming wedding of a former member. He facilitated music learning by playing individual parts on the piano while members read from the printed score. Because their music reading abilities vary, members relied both on the written notational as well as an aural model. Bryan, who was an accomplished high school pianist, served as accompanist to play multiple parts during the learning process. In general, they rehearsed short sections one part at a time and then combined parts. Members asked to repeat a particular section or to hear their part played. In a relatively short amount of time, they were able to master the first verse and chorus of the piece. The *Fellows* also rehearsed in separate sections learning parts by ear and with and without music before putting all the parts together.

During the rehearsals I observed, the goal was to work on the musical aspects, such as phrasing, dynamics, tone and blend, to achieve a polished performance for the upcoming concert. Though Evan led the rehearsal process, individuals freely contributed ideas and comments to improve either the arrangement or the performance. Adam, for example, suggested the addition of a decrescendo followed by a quarter rest to provide contrast to the final section of 'Black Balloon' by the Goo Goo Dolls. In 'Babe I'm Gonna Leave You' by Led Zeppelin, Kyle thought the last note should ring more and proposed singing a different syllable. The incorporation of these changes resulted in a more expressive interpretation. Other

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rehearsal techniques to encourage listening and independent musicianship included changing formations, singing in total darkness or in a different location, such as in the courtyard.

The *Fellows* used technology in several ways that related directly to their music making. New members explained that they listened to *Accafellows* CDs and YouTube videos to become more familiar with the repertoire. Arrangers used *Finale* software to create written arrangements and Midi audio files that they distributed for individual practice. In rehearsals, I observed the *Fellows* communicate with a former member using Skype™, a video communication platform on a laptop computer, and listen to an original recording of a song they were singing.

Performing live and creating recordings are also important components of their music making. The *Fellows* give numerous on-campus performances as well as off-campus performances both in- and out-of-state. In addition to performing, creating professional recordings functions as a culmination of their musical efforts and an opportunity to share their music with others through CD sales, which also generates income for expenses (i.e., concert venue rental, travel, etc.). The CDs create an historical record of the evolution of the group and are a way to connect with former members and continue the *Accafellow* legacy.

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Fraternity

The next theme refers to the extent to which members create personal connections with fellow members. 'A bro squad', (Randy) 'a family' (Darrell) and 'a fraternity' (Gavin) are words that members used to describe the sense of allegiance and bonds with each other. Randy explained that, when he first got into the group as a freshman, he instantly gained 'eight brothers' and learned what 'dude bonding' was all about. Bryan recalled initially being picked on 'so much' last year as the youngest, but by the end of the year became 'good friends' with one of the 'main instigators'. Most of the *Fellows* expressed a deep appreciation for the friendships they developed. Some members developed closer bonds with certain members than with others. Some hang out and socialise together when not in rehearsal; some members even have lived or live together.

Though most of the members felt that they were part of the group, Darrell expressed some ambivalence about fitting in, in part, because he was the only non-heterosexual. Once he came out, however, he acknowledged that his being gay 'wasn't a big deal at all' to the group. He realised, 'The group does a really good job of accepting anyone who's in the group exactly how they are. I think that's definitely something that everyone's really conscious of and does a good job of'.

Kyle explained his commitment to individual members in this way, 'I would do anything for these guys, and that's something that I always stand by, even for the ones that I'm not as close with'. Darrell concurred, 'Once you are in the group, you are in the group and people definitely have your back'. Indeed, this theme was evident both in interviews as well as the familiarity and casualness with which members interacted during rehearsals. Regardless of the level of friendship, there seemed to be a dedication and willingness to support one another. The essence of the sense of closeness and bonding is captured in the group's motto: 'Once an *Accafellow*, always an *Accafellow*'.

Alumni involvement

Alumni involvement refers to the association and contribution of former members – the alumni. Current members view the alumni as an extended family of 'older brothers'. As their predecessors, the alumni also serve as role models, who reinforce the musical and social expectations of the group and provide support in a variety of ways. Current members seek input from alumni when auditioning new members and prior to upcoming performances. As previously mentioned, during one rehearsal, the *Fellows* sought feedback from a former member via video conferencing. In another rehearsal, a different alumnus attended to offer encouragement and critique.

In general, current members value and appreciate advice from alumni. They also acknowledged that negotiating conflicting opinions between alumni and current members can be difficult. Accepting one person's suggestion and rejecting someone else's can create hard feelings. According to Kyle, 'It's difficult to please everyone . . . but in the end, I think they always approve, especially [after a successful performance]'.

In honouring their motto, 'Once an *Accafellow*, always an *Accafellow*', current members invite alumni to perform a song with them on every concert. At the concert I attended, five or six alumni joined in singing 'Yellow'. Furthermore, if current members are performing a song that previously featured an alumnus, they invite him to perform his solo.

When meeting alumni members for the first time at concerts, weddings or social events, such as the annual alumni tailgate, members remarked about the alumni's friendliness and affability. 'It's handshakes and hugs, even though you've never been in the group with them' (Randy). Darrell concurred, 'It's like family even though they've never met you . . . [and they] are ready to do anything for you'. Charlie elaborated further; 'That's something that I don't see a lot of in other groups and that really sets the *Fellows* apart'.

A spirit of camaraderie and commitment is not the only expectation that alumni impart to current members. There are expectations for quality musicianship and polished performance. There also are standards for personal conduct as a member of the ensemble: to act with self-respect; to treat others, especially women, with respect; to know when it is appropriate to have fun and goof off and when it is appropriate to act with maturity and professionalism. For Evan, 'There's a lot of learning how to be a man that comes from the group, and not in any chauvinist way, but learning how to be an adult – how to be strong, confident and a gentleman'. Gavin further clarified the expectations that have been imparted by alumni:

> It's not about comparing ourselves to other groups – other groups, here or other groups, period. It's about living up to our own standards. It's about comparing us to ourselves and to each other. It's about the respect we want to live with and remember when we listen to our CD fifteen years from now. (Group Interview, 4 May 2010)

In short, current members view the alumni as an important influence and a unique component of this particular ensemble.

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Autonomy, leadership and hierarchy

The theme of autonomy, leadership and hierarchy among members includes issues of decision-making and power within and among members of the ensemble. Members value their independence as a student-run organisation and enjoy autonomy to make decisions regarding all aspects of their organisation. When asked how they would feel about a cappella ensemble as a class for credit, Kyle's emotionless response conveyed his feelings clearly, 'As a class, there would be a professor guiding us – that's something that I would not look forward to'.

Rather than having one person in charge of all aspects of the group, there are several designated leadership positions – president, vice-president, treasurer and musical director. These positions, each with its own set of responsibilities, help ensure the success of the ensemble. The role of musical director is of particular interest, as one of my initial questions was to understand how musical decisions are made.

During a discussion of musical decision-making, Kyle was quick to comment, 'We're not Evan and the Fellows – we're the *Accafellows*'. His statement reflects the importance of the group over individual members, even if that a member is in a leadership role. Colin also shared his perspective:

> I was in another a cappella group where . . . all the musical ideas came from a very small group of people . . . I definitely felt more encouraged to put forth my ideas in this group and I really like that because you have a much large pool of ideas to choose from. (Group interview, 4 May 2010)

In general, the musical director is charged with making these decisions; yet, I observed Evan willingly take suggestions from other members during rehearsal. Evan's leadership style might be characterised as laid back, never exerting his authority over the group. Reflecting on his philosophy as musical director, he said:

> It's not so much to have my leadership or my musicianship determine the group, as much as my musicianship to guide. I try to have as much input, as much group leadership as I can because I feel we work so much better . . . Interesting ideas can come from other members of the group, who are strong musicians in their own right. No one person is going to have all the best ideas. Anytime we can get group input is a good thing. (Group interview, 4 May 2010)

Evan acknowledged, however, that on occasion members 'get touchy about their suggestions being taken or not taken' and that it is his role to 'moderate a little bit', which I describe as facilitating. Gavin asserted that, in general, those in leadership roles make the decisions, but the process is 'relatively diplomatic' and focused on the best choice for the group.

Intertwined with the issue of leadership is that of hierarchy – an unspoken pecking order among members. While some members openly acknowledged the existence of a hierarchy, others did not, suggesting that either they may not be aware of it or did not want to comment. Gavin and Evan suggested that the group's hierarchy may be a result of the very definition of leadership positions, yet, Evan pointed out that members who are not in leadership positions also can impact the group. One example is Danny, whom Evan described as 'a hidden force' of the group. According to Evan:

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> Danny has no official power, but Danny runs the groups. He doesn't know it; the group doesn't really know it. (*He grins and chuckles.*) He's easily the funniest guy in the group and it's just because he carries the most social pull and at the same time he is an astonishingly good musician. (Interview, 22 April 2010)

In fact during the third rehearsal I observed, Danny contributed feedback about an arrangement, offered reminders for performing a particular song, and gave constructive criticism, which was a surprise since I had not observed this level of participation previously. He spoke with authority and clarity, which commanded the other members' attention. Because he had earned both the musical and social status with the group, his contributions were taken seriously.

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Value of participation

Value of participation includes the positive and negative aspects of being a member of the group, and the overall meaningfulness of the experience as a part of members' college years. The *Fellows* unanimously identified a love of music and singing as the primary reasons for participation. In addition, they enjoyed positive feedback and recognition from audience, family, friends and members of the alumni. Randy's statement, 'Being an *Accafellow* means I am awesome', reflects the sense of identity, self-esteem and pride in knowing that members are part of a select group. Their reputation earns them social recognition and positive affirmation from other students on campus. Members also identified importance of the development of musical and arranging skills, singing voice, stage presence and teaching experience.

In contrast to the positives of participation, the *Fellows* also identified some negative aspects. Time commitment was unanimously identified as the biggest downside. Members generally spend between 6 and 10 hours per week in evening rehearsals and weekend performances. Balancing participation with other priorities such as school, work and social relationships is a challenge. Members cited other drawbacks including the perceived lack of support from faculty voice teachers, a perception that singing in an a cappella group is not more well-respected among students, the vocal demands of singing so much, and administrative responsibilities.

The *Fellows* recognise these negative aspects and either choose to participate in spite of them or choose not to participate. Darrell, for example, confided that he was still deciding whether to participate next year due to the time commitment. He explained that academics and preparation for medical school entrance exams were a priority and might outweigh the benefits of participation. Though, he stated, 'Some of my coolest experiences in college have been as a result of this [group]'. Other members similarly described the significance of participation and cited its positive impact on their overall college experience.

Discussion and implications for music education

The purpose of this study was to investigate the music making and culture of the *Accafellows* in order to gain an understanding of how members engaged in music making and how their shared culture supported their musical endeavours. The findings illuminate a music-making culture that has a 14-year history of producing high-quality performances in an environment of camaraderie and brotherhood

among members. While only one of the current members was majoring in music, all previously enjoyed making music enough to want to continue their involvement in college. They worked together under student leadership and relied on each other's strengths for the benefit of the ensemble. The musical success of current members was due, in part, to their individual skills as musicians, which they learned as a result of prior experiences in school music programmes and various private lessons. Though this particular ensemble is part of a larger culture of collegiate a cappella, the results of this study should not be generalised to other groups. Yet, as with other qualitative research, some of the findings of this investigation may provide helpful knowledge and strategies for music educators who lead ensembles, such as in public school or community settings.

First is the appeal of popular music in the lives of ensemble members. Popular music, in Evan's words, is what they 'are drawn to' and 'the music that drives' them. His comment sheds light on members' interest and desire to perform music with which they are familiar. While sharing about his public school music experiences, Kyle said, 'I was in honour choir in fifth grade, but from then on I never sang in [school] choir. I - didn't enjoy singing classical music in a choir . . . I never got into it'. Music educators who are interested in connecting with and engaging students might consider the music that students enjoy (Freer 2012; Harrison 2010). Taking into account students' musical tastes might be beneficial in building rapport and in helping students create music that is compatible with their musical interests and values (Firth 1996; Kratus 2007; Wells and Hakanen 1997).

Second is the issue of autonomy and the extent to which members engage in the music learning and decision-making process. The group used a combination of formal and informal music learning practices, including conductor-led and peer-led learning to teach music. Though Evan, as musical director, ultimately had the responsibility of making musical decisions, he chose to be open to suggestions from his peers, which allowed them to take ownership in the process through group learning (Green 2001). In traditional ensembles, the director typically assumes responsibility for the music learning process and makes all decisions, and the members are expected to comply. Without an opportunity to contribute to the music-making process, students may feel frustrated and discouraged (Freer 2006), which occasionally was the case with Bryan when other members of the group did not take his ideas seriously. Research by Allsup (2003), Claire (1993/1994), Scruggs (2009) and Wiggins (1999/2000) that investigated teacher- and student-centred approaches in various music settings and research with adolescent boys by Freer (2006, 2007, 2010) and Harrison (2010) support this finding. The studies suggest that students tend to take more ownership in the creative process when given the opportunity to make musical decisions. Music educators, therefore, might consider ways to include their students in making musical decisions. One strategy is to allow students to contribute their musical ideas during rehearsal. Bryan commented that when receiving suggestions, 'opinions should be validated or perhaps debated, if not taken agreeably by the rest of the group'. Exploring students' ideas to discover the pros and cons can inform students' developing musicianship. In this way, a teacher acts more as a facilitator than an autocrat. Another strategy is to have students work in smaller groups, working on either ensemble music or other repertoire, so they can take responsibility for their own music learning and decisions. Ultimately, this opportunity can help to foster both students' ownership and musical independence.

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Third is the creation of arrangements. Since the inception of the *Accafellows*, members of the group created arrangements and fostered the development of arrangers. Arranging for or with one's ensemble (a folk song or other public domain material) accomplishes at least three goals. First, it allows for creativity and development of musicianship skills. By facilitating an arrangement with one's ensemble, a director can help students to develop their musical knowledge such as voice leading, harmonic function and formal structure, while experimenting with different interpretations of the song. Another option is for the director to arrange music him/herself. When a teacher participates in arranging and/or composing, it can help create a culture of creativity both for the students and the teacher and promote teacher ownership and musical growth (Randles 2009). Second, arranging is an opportunity to tailor the arrangement to the strengths and weaknesses of one's ensemble. For instance, if there are many basses in the choir, the director may create an arrangement that would feature the bass section with the melody or challenge them with a part that divides into upper and lower bass voices. Similarly, if there are few high tenors, the director may create an arrangement where the tenor part does not exceed the range of the particular singers. Third, arranging can reduce expenditures on octavos, which any music educator with a limited budget would appreciate.

Fourth is the use of technology. The *Accafellows* used technology in several ways throughout the music-making process. Given the ubiquitous nature of technology, particularly among younger generations, music educators (perhaps, with the help of their students) might take advantage of the numerous possibilities that exist to enhance music learning. One obvious way is to use the Internet and iPods for listening to audio and video recordings. Numerous music software programmes exist for everything from music composition to recording. Video conferencing also provides numerous opportunities, such as communicating with students from other schools or a guest clinician. For more information regarding using technology to enhance music instruction, see Brown (2007) and Frankel (2009).

Also connected to the use of technology, fifth is the importance of creating recordings. For the *Accafellows*, an audio recording was one way to document personal contributions and group achievements as well as to leave a legacy for future ensembles. Members took great pride in their accomplishments and could point to the CD to show what they had created. Similarly, music educators might explore creating a recording archive for students that they can have access to and in recognition of their musical development and accomplishment.

Sixth is the role of the alumni. The influence of former members of *Accafellows* was an integral part of current members' experience. The alumni served as role models who supported their musical endeavours. Current members expressed an appreciation for and took pride in being a part of a group that was larger than their immediate nine members. They also respected the honest (both positive and negative) feedback from alumni members. Music educators might explore ways in which former students similarly might serve as role models to support current members. According to Freer (2012), role models may be most effective when college males sing for middle school boys and high school boys sing for elementary boys. Another way the *Accafellows* involved former members was to invite them to join in singing a piece in performance. Similarly, ensemble directors may designate one selection as the 'alumni song', so that former members may maintain their musical ties to the group

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by performing with current members. Also, knowing that current members are a part of a larger community may help foster their investment in the ensemble, a goal of any music educator.

Last is participation in choral singing. Members' primary reason for participating was the love of music and singing, a similar finding in previous research (Sichivitsa 2001). Aside from the musical aspects of participation is the opportunity for members to bond and develop friendships. Characterised as a fraternity, the *Accafellows* described their connection to one another as that of a family and that they could rely on current members as well as former members to support in a variety of ways. As shown in earlier music education research (e.g., Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz 2003; Hylton 1981; Kennedy 2009; Kwan 2002; Sweet 2010), a common extra-musical benefit of musical ensemble participation is that of social connections. Music educators might explore providing opportunities to enhance personal connections among members. As a result, these bonds may help students to be more willing to overcome challenges regarding participation and to contribute their personal best in rehearsal. Though some of the members of the *Accafellows* sang in choir in middle and high school, most of them did not participate continuously (see Table 1). Despite music educators' hope that students will participate in choral music throughout their entire time in school, this stance may exert pressure and prevent boys from exploring other musical opportunities (Freer 2009b). In sum, this finding reminds music educators that students participate for numerous reasons – both musical and non-musical – and make choices regarding their participation throughout their school career.

While the study suggests several practices that music educators can incorporate into their teaching, it also reveals inherent differences between informal music learning that is student-led and formal music learning that is teacher-led. Kyle's unequivocal response that he would not enjoy the *Accafellows* if it were a class led by a teacher captures the importance of the group's autonomy as a characteristic of their music-making culture. Additionally, the fact that music learning occurred among members without a teacher may challenge our notion of music education. It also raises the question of whether it is possible to institutionalise a music-making culture that exists outside of school and, by its very nature, is not teacher-led.

Future research may address pedagogical assumptions of teacher-led and student-led ensembles and classes. A study, based on the work of Allsup (2003), in a choral ensemble setting, for example, might explore how student-facilitated learning would create meaningful experiences for students. Findings from a study such as this may provide information that is useful for developing new pedagogical models for ensemble music teaching.

This discussion also prompts a variety of other philosophical and pedagogical questions that are worthy of consideration and for future research. How does knowledge of students' music making outside of school settings influence music educators' perceptions of the value of these experiences? How does this knowledge affect their instructional practices? Should music educators support music making that occurs outside of school settings, such as ensembles like the *Accafellows*? If so, to what extent is this support possible and how can it be achieved?

In closing, music educators may find value in examining the music-making culture of their own students to determine the extent to which students are involved in the music-making process, both in and out of school. Furthermore, music

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educators may consider incorporating music-learning practices that will enable students to be autonomous at each level of their development. These actions will help us, as a profession, to ensure that our students will become life-long, independent musicians.

Note

1. The names of the ensemble and its participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

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