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The impact of having to achieve 'blend' on
sopranos singing in professional ensembles.

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Project proposal form: Charlotte Mobbs – student number 2029080

Project Title:

The impact of having to achieve 'blend' on sopranos singing in professional ensembles.

1. The context

I have performed in vocal ensembles at the highest professional level for over 20 years and have developed a successful teaching practice, with a particular focus on the development of the female voice and the various factors that can influence this development. Both in the teaching studio and through personal experience, I have recognised a need to look specifically at professional choral singers, the impact of singing as part of an ensemble and the very specific skillset required.

This study will focus on sopranos. What they perceive the word '*blend*' to mean, what they believe conductors want from them, how they go about producing this and the effect this may have had on them.

There is a relatively small, but growing, body of research regarding choral blend. However, most of the research relates to conductors and their approaches to 'blend' (Knutson, 1987; Smith, 2016) or are acoustic studies of how best to create blend (Rossing and Sundberg, 1985; Basinger, 2006; Gilliam, 2021) and although Slimmings (2021) conducted research into choral blend from a singer's perspective this was looking at students, rather than professional singers and not specifically sopranos.

2. The justification

There is a need to address the use of the word '*blend*' as a direction during professional ensemble rehearsals (Slimmings, p16). Its effect on vocal production is tangible (Edgar, p42) among both students and experienced colleagues.

The word '*blend*' is often used by conductors, however, it remains unclear whether singers are fully aware of the meaning of the term, especially as conductors themselves have different interpretations of choral blend as discussed by Knutson (1987).

The limitations of the sample size for this study dictates the need to look at sopranos alone. When looking at how a group blends with itself, it is not beneficial to look at other groups. The soprano 'blend', or lack of, may be at the forefront, with "Every vocal ensemble is identified in the first instance by the sound its top line makes" (Phillips, 2003, p.132). Words such as "purity" and "clarity" used to describe soprano voices in choirs (Knutson, 1987, p31) and "small, bright, thin, floaty tone, an excellent blend" (Decker and Herford, 1973, p.44).

There is currently insufficient research available regarding these issues.

3. The intended impact

The aim of this study is to raise awareness within the choral world by addressing issues for sopranos. For example, their vocal health (Smith, p.41), continuing vocal development (Edgar, p.40), how blend is achieved and asking "is the word blend useful to singers"? This information could be used to raise awareness for choral conductors, enabling them to adjust their approaches. It could also be used by voice teachers to help singers better understand the challenges of choral environments.

4. The outlined intention

A literature review will be undertaken, looking specifically at blend in choral singing. This involves an exploration into the research of choral singing and the potential impact on vocal production, sound and singer identity (Sweet and Parker, 2009).

This project is a qualitative study, an online questionnaire will be sent to 23 professional sopranos. This questionnaire will contain qualitative questions to gather data regarding personal experiences (Brannan et al, 2022).

Four participants will then be asked to take part in an online focus group, with questions compiled from the questionnaire data. The data will be analysed and delivered in the form of a written report and presentation by July 2024. The results of the project will be made available to participants.

5. The ethics and insider research

As a choral singer and teacher of young professional singers, I am an insider researcher who possesses a true passion for the subject of this project (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). It is important to maintain objectivity as an insider researcher (Simmel, (1950). I, the researcher must separate my own experiences and subsequent analyses from those of participants (Kanuha, 2000).

With such a specific project, I believe that my inside knowledge may aid the research. Merton (1972) states that an outside researcher cannot possibly truly comprehend the matter in question and therefore may have difficulty justifying their findings.

The focus group will consist of colleagues and there will inevitably be information that may be sensitive. Consent will be sought, and data protection and confidentiality kept by means of anonymity and the use of a password protected drive.

6. Personal learning outcomes

- To be able to identify areas of need for further research.
- Use the data gathered to learn what, specifically, would help singers and enable them to progress, vocally.
- Learn more about data collection and analysis techniques.
- Learn how to create a GANTT chart and use it for further projects.

Project Report

Introduction

“Blend: to form a mixture or harmonious combination” (Chambers, 2014)

It is impossible to talk about choirs, in particular British choirs, without hearing the use of the word ‘blend’. ‘Blend’ has increasingly become a necessary component of what is considered to be good choral performance (Daffern, 2016, p.23). With listeners, reviewers and conductors giving it priority over many other aspects of choral singing (Frizzell & Windsor, 2021, p1).

The human voice is a unique instrument in that it is totally within the performer, there is no external instrument. This has a psychological impact on singers, the feeling of being totally exposed in this way by being your own instrument (Eustis, 2005). As a professional soprano, working extensively in the choral world, the issue of blend has often been the cause of anxiety and lead to vocal compromise (Higgins, 2019, p.2).

This has been an issue that I increasingly encounter when teaching and coaching singers, causing me to question how the use of the word ‘blend’ affects singers, in particular sopranos. Life as a professional soprano can often be a tight rope act and being at the top of the texture in an ensemble, the listener focus is often on the sopranos (Phillips, 2003). Indeed, performances are often classed as successful or not according to the perceived ‘blend’, or lack of, in the soprano section as demonstrated in the following reviews “The bright-sounding soprano section blended well” (Benedict, 2013), “unusually unblended soprano section” (Wilson, 2024), “the soprano blend was especially beautiful” (Wright, 2013).

The use of the word ‘blend’ has led to the expectation of a certain sound in the English choral world. That sound is one of a very clean, clear timbre associated with boy trebles, often voices without individual character or personality and a lack of variety of vocal colour (Lowrey, 2023). The question is whether this has arisen due to conductor, singer or listener and what sacrifices, if any, the professional choral

soprano feels they need to make to achieve the desired 'blend'? The word often creates a negative atmosphere among professional singers and the language used by conductors and choir leaders should be addressed and changed accordingly (Lowrey, 2023).

This project aims to examine how singers perceive 'blend' and how (if at all) it effects the singers themselves.

Literature Review

'Blend' has long been the measure as to an ensemble's success (Daffern, 2016, p.1) and is considered essential in enhancing the overall quality of choral music (Miller, 2014). Whilst the concept of 'blend' in choral singing is seen as being necessary for a good choral sound, ideas on defining features and how it is attained remain diverse (Tocheff, 1990). Indeed, there are many differences in what people perceive the word to mean.

This literature review considers the research regarding choral 'blend', focusing on its definition, what is meant by the word 'blend', methods to achieve 'blend', the roles of acoustics and vibrato, the conductor's responsibilities and the influence on singer identity.

What is 'Blend'?

The term 'blend' in choral music is notably equivocal, often carrying different meanings for different individuals. Jordan (1984, p.25) notes that "perhaps we have not taken time to clearly define blend in choral music. Slimings (2022) describes the term as "nebulous" and argues that it is often unhelpful when attempting to create a cohesive sound, an opinion that resonates with many within the field.

Wyatt (1968) conducted a foundational study involving over 100 American choral conductors, asking for their definitions and methods for achieving 'blend'. The preferred definition from this study was "the fusion of differing qualities of tone, whose various characteristics mix to produce one sound within and between sections" (p. 12). However, it is important to note that Wyatt's study reflects the choral sound preferences of the 1960s, exemplified by the Robert Shaw Chorale, which is now considered to be a very out of date ethos (Phillips, 2006). This perspective is also clearly American, contrasting with the traditional English choral sound (Lowrey, 2023) that this project seeks to explore.

'Blend' in choral singing generally refers to the uniformity and cohesiveness of sound produced by a group of singers. Daugherty (1999) emphasises that blend is vital for creating a polished and professional choral sound, influenced by factors such as vocal technique, acoustic environment, and ensemble size. Wyatt's study (1968)

disclosed a critical insight: achieving blend should not erase individual vocal colours but rather enable them to work together. This sentiment was echoed by one of Wyatt's respondents who defined 'blend' as "mix and combine, not to delete individual vocal colour."

Mayer (1964) described 'blend' as achieving a sound where "no single voice predominates," creating a tone of such beauty that it surpasses the sum of its parts. This aligns with the view that singing is unique among instruments because the instrument is within the body and therefore entirely embodied by the performer (Vitale, 2008). Thus, blend involves not just technical adjustments but also the intricate integration of individual vocal identities.

Slimings (2022) extends the discussion by proposing that 'blend' is not just a noun or a verb but an experience. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), he explored this embodied understanding and argued that the term has become diluted due to its application across various facets of choral singing. Instead, Slimings suggests that blend should be seen as a dynamic social process that facilitates an ensemble experience that is satisfying for both participants and audiences.

As identified in the mentioned authors, 'blend' is a complex concept that is open for interpretation not only in its audiological presentation, but also as a social psychological phenomenon.

How blend is achieved

The issue of how choral blend is achieved has received considerable attention in research, with varied and expanding lists of contributing attributes, including dynamics, timbre, pitch, intonation, vowel uniformity, and vibrato (Mayer, 1964).

Wyatt's (1968) research had participants rank the elements associated with blend from most to least important. Results showed the components that were perceived as most important included uniformity of vowels, intonation within sections, quality of tone and selection of voices.

Mayer (1964) believed that choral blend is achieved when timbre, dynamics, and pitch are harmonised. He observed that in a well-blended choir, the sound produced is of greater beauty than that of individual voices, emphasising that no single voice should dominate.

Swan (in Decker and Herford, 1988) however, highlights F. Melius Christiansen's belief that every singer in a chorus must prioritise the ensemble's blended sound over their personal preferences in tone production, rhythmic stress, and pronunciation (p.12). This underscores the collective responsibility in achieving choral blend.

Overall, the acoustic strategies employed in choral singing emphasise blending through the adjustment of resonance, dynamics, and formant frequencies, ensuring that individual voices contribute to a cohesive ensemble sound.

Acoustics

Ensemble singing presents unique challenges, as the goal is not individual projection but creating a unified ensemble sound. This requires singers to use their voices differently than they would in solo performance. Ford (2003), in his examination of listener preferences from his 1999 PhD thesis, found that audiences generally preferred less resonant tones in ensemble music. This preference was particularly strong among choral students, who were more likely to reject resonant tones in favour of a more unified choral sound, possibly due to their own bias due to their own engagement with choral activities.

Daugherty (2001) highlighted the complex dynamics of group singing, suggesting that individuals often behave differently in ensembles than they do alone. This observation aligns with Goodwin (1980) who investigated spectral differences between solo and ensemble singing, identifying that choral sounds typically have a stronger fundamental frequency and fewer, weaker upper partials. Specifically, choral singing showed a slightly stronger first formant and weaker second and third formants, which contributes to the characteristic blend of choral sound. In his study involving 30 sopranos from North Texas State University, Goodwin noted that sopranos, in particular, use a softer voice with weaker higher spectrum partials when blending with other voices. This adaptation underscores the significant listener preference for less resonant choral tones, as demonstrated by the contrasting styles of the BBC singers of old and the Tenebrae Choir (Ford, 1999).

In their seminal study, Rossing, Sundberg, and Ternström (1984) explored further how professional bass singers adjusted their vocal output between solo and choral modes. They also noted that in choral settings, singers produced less energy in the

"singers' formant" range and increased energy in the lower formants and fundamental frequency

It should be noted that most of the acoustic research focuses on solo singers. The small amount of research that has been done looking specifically at choral singers uses student singers (Goodwin, 1977). In one of the few studies examining professional choral sopranos, they compared solo and choir singing among singers from Sweden and the USA. (Rossing et al, 1984) There are minimal studies which look at British singers and both are in relation to students (Edgar, 2022 and Slimmings, 2021).

Vibrato

Vibrato, a natural oscillation in pitch, presents a unique challenge for achieving blend in choral singing. While it can add warmth and richness to a solo voice (Atchison, 2013), research shows that the perception is that it often disrupts the uniformity required for a cohesive choral sound (Walker, 2006). Singers who use vibrato for expressiveness may need to reduce or modify it to blend effectively, which can be tiring and may impact vocal health (Robison, 2013). Betty Jeanne Chipman states that asking singers to create a straight-tone for extended periods can lead to vocal strain, as this practice induces tension in the intrinsic laryngeal musculature, causing fatigue of the smaller muscles within the larynx (Smith, 2016, p.41). Whilst it is theoretically possible to reduce the vibrato, overall intensity, or the relative amplitude of the upper partials, this approach does not uniformly apply to all singers; what benefits one singer may not be advantageous for another (Goodwin, 1980, p.127). Miller (1996) discusses the delicate balance between maintaining vocal health and achieving blend through vibrato control, emphasising the importance of not removing vibrancy from voices in the pursuit of blend (1995).

MacDonald (2013, p.47-49) notes that during the early music revival, some choir directors misguidedly asked women to sing with a tone similar to pre-pubescent boys (trebles), leading to an "artificially straight, constrained, thin, and often sharp" sound that was psychologically and vocally traumatic for many sopranos. She contrasts this with the concept of a healthy vibrato, which she describes as a "by-product of a healthy, free singing technique", enriching choral colour, improving tuning, and contributing to a sound that is free, relaxed, and vibrant (p.48). These are important

points to note as the use of vibrato is so ingrained in the perception of how to achieve 'blend' and what choral singers recognise as necessary for 'blend'. Weston Noble's technique of seating singers with naturally blending voices next to each other is highlighted by Giardiniere (1991), who notes that this arrangement allows singers more freedom in both timbre and sound production. Ekholm's (2000, p.132) study supports this, finding that "acoustic seating" positively affects choral performance, individual vocal production, choristers' vocal comfort and sound ratings. However, it also notes that singers found it more difficult to maintain pitch accuracy, vibrancy, and resonance in a choral setting when asked to blend. Smith (1999) argues that singers with similar vibrato speeds tend to blend better, suggesting a strategic approach to where singers are placed (p.42)

Sopranos

Sopranos face particular challenges in blending due to the naturally prominent frequencies of their vocal range as noted by Silvey (2019), higher frequencies in treble voices accentuate differences, making a unified sound more difficult to achieve. Research by Smith (2019) further identifies the specific techniques sopranos must use to blend effectively, such as modifying their vibrato and adjusting their dynamic levels to align with the ensemble.

Research indicates that sopranos are often required to make more substantial adjustments to their singing techniques compared to other vocal parts (Ford, 2003) MacDonald (2013) suggests that directives to minimise vibrato are predominantly aimed at sopranos, illustrating the expectation for them to alter their natural vocal tendencies to blend with the ensemble.

Historically, the origins of choral music in the church involved boy trebles singing the top line, as women were not permitted to sing in these settings. This practice influenced the expectation that female sopranos emulate the pure, straight-toned sound of boy trebles (Day, 2018). Edgar (2022) describes the treble voice as disembodied ("pure and disconnected from the lower support system" (p.6), contrasting it with the more embodied female voice (employing "full body support"). This ongoing tension between historical precedent of the boy treble and contemporary practice of the female soprano continues to shape the strategies sopranos employ to achieve effective blend in choral ensembles.

Singer Identity

The pursuit of blend in choral singing significantly impacts a singer's identity and individual artistry. Thurman and Welch (2001, p175) highlight the intricate interconnection between voice and self, noting that voices are a primary means of self-expression, intimately tied to one's identity. This connection is particularly pronounced for professional singers and voice students, whose sense of self is often deeply intertwined with their voice's expressive capacity (O'Bryan, 2002).

Silvey (2017, p.22) acknowledges the challenge of balancing individual vocal identity with ensemble blend, suggesting that singers need not neutralise their unique vocal colours but should align them to create a well-integrated sound.

Renowned soprano Renée Fleming (2004, p.21) emphasises the personal nature of vocal critique, as the human voice is inseparable from the body and deeply personal. She asserts the importance of a supportive and psychologically informed approach from teachers and choir directors, as criticism can feel extremely personal to the singer.

The pressure to achieve a uniform choral sound can lead to a conflict between personal vocal identity and ensemble requirements. Fillebrown (1911, p.7-8) suggested that a singer's tone reflects their mood and emotion, making each voice unique. However, when singers are compelled to conform to a homogeneous choral sound, this individuality can be compromised, potentially leading to vocal strain and a loss of personal artistic expression. Reimer (2017) also discusses the delicate balance required to maintain individual vocal identity within the group, emphasising the need for choir directors to manage this balance sensitively to avoid creating a toxic environment.

Conclusion

Achieving 'blend' in professional ensembles presents both technical and psychological challenges for sopranos and is a complex topic. While essential for a unified ensemble sound, 'blend' must be balanced with considerations for vocal health and individual artistry. Most existing research focuses on amateur singers or is from conductors' perspectives, with limited attention to, specifically professional singers. For the sake of specificity, this study will focus on sopranos.

A need to clarify the meaning of the word 'blend' for singers and an understanding from conductors has been identified. The role of vibrato remains contentious with early research stating that vibrato is not helpful to the choral situation whilst more recent literature posits that a healthy vibrato can actually benefit the overall choral sound, whilst also enabling the individual singers to maintain their own vocal identity. This review highlights the need for further studies addressing gap in the current literature with the aim to help support sopranos in developing strategies that benefit their pursuit of both 'blend' and vocal excellence.

Methodology

Research Design

The research question “The impact having to achieve ‘blend’ on sopranos singing in professional ensembles” clearly dictated that this study should be one of personal, individual experiences and interpretations, thus firmly seated in the qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is a methodological approach concerned with “understanding individuals’ perceptions of the world” looking at real life, personal experiences (Bell, 2018, p.20). It emphasizes understanding subjective meanings and interpretations, aiming to uncover a deeper insight and diversity of perspectives that quantitative methods may not fully capture (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The research question “The impact having to achieve ‘blend’ on sopranos singing in professional ensembles” clearly dictated that this study should be one of personal, individual experiences and interpretations, thus firmly seated in the qualitative research methodology.

This qualitative study aligns with a constructivist paradigm, which considers that reality is constructed through individuals’ subjective experiences and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The researcher acknowledges their role in codeveloping knowledge alongside participants, highlighting understanding and interpreting the significance that individuals attach to their experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Methods

An email invitation to participate in an online questionnaire consisting of open questions (appendix 1) was sent to a selection of 25 professional sopranos. All of the invitees regularly sing with the top British vocal ensembles and have a range of age and experience – from recent graduates to singers with up to 30 years of experience. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended qualitative questions. Participants were given 10 days to complete the questionnaire and a cut off date was clearly defined.

13 participants completed the questionnaire. Participant demographic is displayed in the following Table:

Questionnaire participant demographic

Participant	Experience	Identified as
One	5-10 years	P1
Two	20-30 years	P2
Three	15-20 years	P3
Four	20-30 years	P4
Five	10-15 years	P5
Six	10-15 years	P6
Seven	30 years	P7
Eight	10-15 years	P8
Nine	20-30 years	P9
Ten	15-20 years	P10
Eleven	15-20 years	P11
Twelve	20-30 years	P12
Thirteen	20-30 years	P13

The questionnaire responses were used to identify areas of further investigation which took place in the form of a focus group. Four of the original participants self-selected to take part in the online focus group. It was important not have too many participants to allow for the opportunity to ‘share insights’ and yet still ‘provide diversity of perceptions’ (Krueger p6). The focus group situation allows for a ‘rich understanding of participants’ experiences’ (Gill et al., 2008, p.168). Denscombe (p177) notes that in order to make use of the group dynamics, Focus groups must 1) “have a focus to the session, with the group discussion being based on an item or experience about which all participants have similar knowledge. 2) emphasis is placed on the interaction within the group as a means of eliciting information and 3) the moderator’s role is to facilitate the group interaction rather than lead the discussion”. To this end, a short number of questions were prepared, but the group were encouraged to talk to each other “asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other’s experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger, 1995, p1).

Data analysis methods

All data from the questionnaires was first transcribed and initially analyzed in order to write the questions used for the focus group discussion. Once all data was received, Inductive analysis using Thematic Analysis was employed. Data was coded without any attempt to force themes in a pre-existing coding framework based on the researcher's preconceived notions about the research (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Inductive coding is a bottom-up approach where codes are generated from the data and reflect the unique contexts and experiences of participants (Thomas, 2006). This study is looking at individual singers and their understanding, therefore an inductive approach is necessary.

Braun & Clarke's 6 step data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was followed.

- 1) familiarisation of data – the participants answered were read a number of times and quotations were selected.
- 2) codes were generated using words from the data.
- 3) codes were combined into themes.
- 4) themes were reviewed.
- 5) Significant themes were determined.
- 6) findings were reported.

Ethical Considerations

As a professional choral soprano, I find myself in the position of an insider researcher. An insider researcher engages directly within the community being studied, offering unique access to embedded knowledge and perspectives (Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999). As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) highlight, insider researchers possess "privileged access" to the community's norms and meanings, enhancing the study's authenticity and depth. This is of particular benefit for data collection where trust and rapport are crucial for encouraging nuanced data that reflects the insider's perspective (Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999). However, it is important that I am aware of my bias within this position, and it is important not to be "blindsided" by any issues that arrive from my research (Saidin & Yacob p850) and I must be aware that my relationship with the participants may well influence and any information that they give (Drever 1995).

Ethical considerations in insider research are of greatest importance, ensuring confidentiality and respect for participants right (Bos, 2020). "Ethical issues must be considered in term of the power relationships involved in research and the ethical dilemmas that arise in qualitative research" (Lincoln, 2011). As an older, established

singer it is important that I consider my position The use of a focus group presents very specific ethical issues. It is imperative that the members of the focus group do not feel in any way uneasy, therefore there needs to be a 'climate of trust' established by the facilitator to enable the participants to feel able to express themselves freely (Denscombe, 2010).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, clarifying the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw at any time (Easterby-Smith & Malina 1999). It was made clear that all individual names and names of choral ensembles or conductors would be anonymised in the transcript (Appendix B), to enable participants to speak freely (Adams & Cox, 2008).

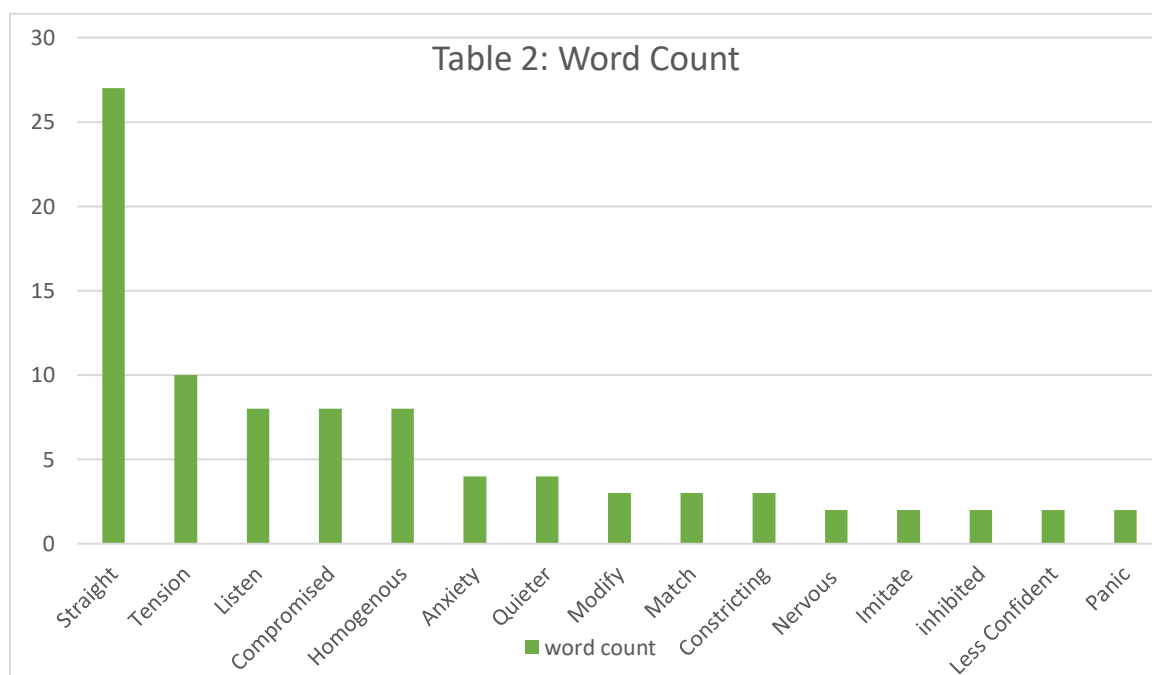
Ethical approval was attained from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Appendix A)

Findings / Results

Questionnaire

What Blend means to singers and how it is achieved

The word 'blend' evokes a wide range of interpretations, from the straightforward to those that are more subtle. When asked what 'blend' means to them, many of the participants used phrases such as "trying to find a homogenous sound" (P6)), "combining" (P2), "cohesive" (P11) and sometimes "bland" (P1) and "boring" (P1). Singers felt that they were often required to "straighten" (p5) their voices and sing "quieter" (p5), leading to a "tense, rather than free," (p5) phonation. Additionally, participants felt the need to "compromise" (p10) personal vocal qualities, to "modify" (p3) one's tone and mix seamlessly with others. While some view it as a loss of autonomy and trust, others see it as using their skill to "contribute equally to a healthy, cohesive sound" (p11). Ultimately, participants see blending as being about "containment" (p13), becoming part of a unified whole, ensuring no voice stands out. It is clear from the prevalence of the word "straight" (shown in table 2, above) that



professional singers feel that singing with straight-tone is the main objective when trying to achieve 'blend' and also what its being asked of the singers. However, there

is a number of more recent articles which state that the straight tone approach is not required in order to achieve a choral 'blend' and can be detrimental to long term vocal health (MacDonald, 2013, Katok, 2021).

Vocal Techniques, Compromises and Development

To achieve 'blend', participants made several vocal compromises that felt unnatural, including singing with a lighter, purer tone with minimal vibrato. This involved straightening their tone unnaturally and adjusting their vocal dynamics to match others. "straighten the tone" (P1, P2, P5, P8), "remove any unique vocal qualities" (P11), and "hold back" (P8). Leading to "tension" (P1, P8, P9) "constricting airflow" (P9), "hoarseness" (P8) and "tongue root tension"(P6). These issues contributed to vocal discomfort and effected overall vocal health, as previously mentioned. Aligning with the reviewed literature, many participants felt that blending requirements in choral contexts "restricted the exploration and development" (P8) of their natural voice which in turn led to "slower development compared to those who didn't do consort singing" (P1).Some respondents believed that being asked to blend has been "detrimental to vocal development"(P9).

Age

The concept of age in relation to 'blend' reveals a complex interaction between vocal maturity and singers' perceptions of their musical roles. According to the questionnaire data, when singers were younger, they often felt a strong sense of belonging and importance within the choir (P10). P9 noted that early in their career, their voice naturally enhanced the soprano section with minimal vibrato, allowing them to enjoy the harmonic effects and easily match their voice to their colleagues "When I started out singing, my voice lent itself naturally to 'blending' as it added a tone to any soprano section, without any noticeable vibrato". However, as singers age and their voices mature, the notion of blending appears to become increasingly frustrating for the participants, for example P12 "I have really struggled, and there is a lot of self-blame that I can't maintain the sounds, or straight and effortless tone I once had"

Many of the more mature singers perceived 'blend' as a demand to sing without individuality (P1), leading to feelings of being undervalued. This is particularly notable for those experiencing physiological changes, such as those brought on by childbirth or perimenopause (P9), which can make it physically challenging to maintain a pure, straight tone (Sale, 2018). One respondent mentioned that as they got older, managing and adapting the natural tone of their voice became harder, "I am not as agile or flexible as I was when I was twenty" (P12). It was noted that this situation is made worse by the "constant turnover" (P12) of younger sopranos, causing more experienced singers to potentially feel like they are being replaced. These were issues that needed further discussion in the focus group.

Emotional and Psychological impact

Participants reported frequent feeling of loss of confidence, aggravated by the anxiety and pressure to conform to a 'blended' sound. The use of the phrases "feeling less confident" and "less than I am" suggest a negative impact on their self-confidence and sense of self-worth which in turn adds to participants suffering from imposter syndrome, feeling inadequate or as though they were not singing authentically.

Participants state anxiety and pressure was associated with the expectation to achieve choral 'blend' (P7, P8, P9) for example, P9 states "...has led to too much anxiety and has effectively led to my giving up professional consort singing as the pressure not to 'stick out' has become too great". This anxiety escalated for some participants, leading to nervousness, worry (P13) and even panic attacks in some cases (P9).

Reflections

Overall, the perception of blending appears to be mixed, with many respondents expressing negative associations with many words relating to 'blend'. Participants expressed concerns about its impact on their vocal identity and development, while also acknowledging its important role in creating a unified choral sound. The challenge seems to lie in balancing the needs of the ensemble with the individual

singer's vocal health and artistic expression. These results align with the literature in highlighting the complex interplay between vocal technique, psychological factors, and choral expectations, emphasising the need for a more supportive, holistic approach to choral education and performance. The analysis of the questionnaire data made it clear that there were some issues that needed further investigation in the focus group discussion.

Focus Group Analysis

Vocal Impact of being asked to 'Blend'

The expectation of 'blending' exerts a profound influence on the vocal abilities and development of soprano singers, there are challenges that shape their vocal techniques, long-term vocal health, and overall artistic growth. The issue of aging voice was evident in the questionnaire and an area that needed discussing further.

As voices mature with age, the task of achieving choral blend becomes increasingly complex as noted by Sataloff & Kost (2020) "Typically, we are not surprised to hear breathiness, loss of range, change in the characteristics of vibrato, development of tremolo, pitch insecurities and other undesirable features". However, Sataloff & Kost is talking about the older singer, meaning 65 years plus. This is clearly a much older demographic than this study involves. Rather, the effects of pregnancy, childbirth and perimenopause are more relevant to this demographic. Whilst there has, in recent times, been research into these subjects, it remains very limited. Bos, Bozeman and Frazier-Neely (2020) lead the way. However, they are really only looking at vocational singers rather than professional and some of their suggestions are not viable in the professional environment – for example, sopranos moving down to alto when necessary.

The natural changes in vocal timbre and resonance that accompany the hormonal changes in the female voice can pose unique challenges in conforming to a prescribed ensemble sound. Participant 1 noted "the word 'blend' has filled me with dread because it has got harder...when you are in your early 20's you can get your voice to do whatever you want because you are a young gymnast". They go on to say "I have to restrict the sound I make....that has definitely got harder as I have got

older.... you simply can't maintain the sound that you made in your 20s". Participant 4 agreed "I feel more self-conscious....I find it much harder". There is a perception that the ideal choral sound favours a youthful, pure quality (Edgar, 2022) and this discussion aligns with the available literature. Participant 1 brought a recent comment on Twitter to the attention of the group. "The BBC Singers have completely changed their sound from an operatic, unblendy top line to a beautiful young, fresh sound. Gorgeous". Participant 1 goes on to say "I mean, that just sums up the issue doesn't it. Young....."

Participant 2: "young, young and fresh, young and straight, young and relaxed and free. Old and shrieky, wobbly and"

Participant 1: "Mature. I mean, mature is like an insult in that context, isn't it? Nu..... I mean it's practically saying 'ooo, they sound really nubile these days, it's much better'". This comment clearly shows the key points of this discussion: the word 'blend' in context of the perception of others combined with the singer viewpoint. Throughout their careers, sopranos encounter a dynamic evolution in their relationship with choral blending, as their voices mature and their artistic perspectives shift. For some, the passage of time brings a newfound sense of vocal freedom, as they embrace the unique qualities of their aging voices and feel less constrained by the demands of rigid ensemble aesthetics (Participant 4). Others, however, may experience heightened vocal challenges as they navigate the changes that accompany aging, requiring them to continually adapt their techniques and redefine their approach to choral singing. "It feels as though the only way that I have been able to maintain a career is by going through periods of huge change and identity over the last 20 years. And the identity I have now as a singer, as a choral singer is completely different to what I had in my 20s." (Participant 1).

Vocal Techniques, Training and Vocal Health

To find their way around the demands of blending, sopranos employ a range of vocal techniques and adaptations (Olsen, 2010). These may include adapting vibrato, adjusting vowel shapes, and controlling dynamics to better align with the ensemble sound (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3). However, these adjustments can also breed a sense of self-criticism and vocal restriction (Olsen, 2010). Participant 4

observed: “if I’m trying to produce a particular type of sound, I quite often do that by, essentially, trying to stop my support from doing what it really wants to do. And that means, kind of, tension in my body because I’m trying to stop my decent support muscles from doing that and, if I do, then the sound that I think they don’t want will come out. So I’ve got to hold.. kind of hold everything to keep everything in check.”. The sensation of “holding” and creating “tension” was echoed through the whole group. The phrase “tie up in knots” was first mentioned by Participant 2. This was discussed further with Participant 1 clarifying what it meant to them: [with hand on larynx] “It’s literally, for me, it’s literally a feeling in my throat, of constriction and tightness in my tongue, tongue root, jaw, tension here [holds upper larynx] like gripping and locking to kind of stay on the tight rope...I feel it in my throat and it’s becoming much more problematic....when we have a difficult, high, straight week, I really do feel it...sore. Here [gestures to larynx]”. Participant 2 agreed with the feeling and added that it “makes them feel very anxious”. They went on to add the possibility that “it’s more psychologically constricting rather than a vocal issue.”. This was echoed by Participant 3 who agreed it was more of a psychological issue, citing it as “second guessing, questioning, you know, what’s being asked of you and whether you’re delivering it and whether or not it’s actually... the reality. That’s what tying up in knots means to me and I could definitely say that it has happened”. For participant 4, it was very much a physical feeling: “it’s like a body thing for me..essentially trying to stop my support from doing what it really wants to do, and that means, kind of, tension in my body”. This brings in the question of vocal health and the necessity for singers, vocal instructors and choir directors to ensure that they are taking steps to ensure vocal health is a priority. This resonates with the literature found, in particular Sataloff and Smith (2003, p238) who advocate for the active participation of vocal health professionals working with ensembles to create a “kind of interdisciplinary collaboration” that would lead to “effective voice building and healthy vocal performance”.

Participant 4 shared an example where she endeavoured to find a way to sing in a healthy way but was made to feel that her healthy sound would not be considered appropriate in that particular ensemble. “I remember very specifically working for a group...where a lot of stuff that was shifted really high for the top line and I took, I took a piece to my teacher, you know, a piece that is not hard notes but I said I NEED to find a way to sing this for 2 weeks without killing myself. And, I had a

lesson on it and, you know, got to the end of it and he said “that’s great, it sounds great, sounds really free and, you know, that’s fine you can take that like that” and I said “no I can’t, I can’t”. Because I know exactly what reaction I will get the first time I try to sing it like this, in this restrained but healthy way. It will be a big fat uh, uh [waves finger]. No thank you. You need to cut that right down”. Here, the indication is that the “free” sound participant 4 finds, would not be acceptable to the conductor.

Conductor and Gender Dynamic

Issues in relation to conductors were noted. The fact that many choral conductors are instrumentalists, not singers (Sataloff & Smith, 2003) and therefore may not have a full understanding of how the voice works and what is best for singers long term vocal health. Participant 3 commented on a well-known conductor, who was also a singer, having a “fundamental misunderstanding” of how the voice actually works”. Welch and Howard (2002, p117) speculated that singers voices were largely influenced by their conductor’s musical background, acknowledging the tendency for “cathedrals’ choral directors to be ex-choristers”. Therefore, they have grown up in a choral world where the top line of the choir is sung by boys and it is more likely that they will (consciously, or not) require that ‘blend’ from their singers. This gives an insight into the sound that choral conductors may want from their sopranos. Participant 2 acknowledged the varying degrees of how conductors interpret the word ‘blend’, resulting in “the different degrees of either relaxation or misery”. Going on to say that there are “certain individuals that make it very, very difficult”. Participant 2 then contrasts this when talking about working with “a conductor who works in a more collaborative way.... You’re gonna sing in a much more relaxed way” Participant 2 added it “allows you to maintain your own vocal identity as well”. It was noted that, on the whole, in the professional choral scene, the conductor is male which adds a level of gender dynamic between them and the female singers. A number of issues come in to play here. Firstly, the fact that sopranos tend to be in the front row “under the close gaze of the conductor” (Participant 2), a position that she says she doesn’t like because it makes her feel “constricted”. With regard to the use of ‘blend’ and recognising the gender dynamic, Participant 1 works with a female conductor who “will not use the word ‘blend’. It is banned from

her vocabulary. – she knows the voices she works with and the “colours that are available to her and... it’s much freer....easier”. This aligns with the literature, in which MacDonald states her desire to work in this way where it “creates a fresh, colourful, free, well-tuned, and most importantly healthy choral sound to which every singer contributes individually and naturally”(2013, p.49). Interestingly, also a female conductor.

The gender dynamic extended to the way sopranos are spoken to which reveals a stark contrast shaped by gender norms. It was noted that the language used to describe their voices is often more critical compare to male counterparts.

Participants shared a comment about the BBC Singers sopranos “sounding like Rhinemaidens under duress” in comparison to the basses who would be described as singing with a “warm, full blooded sound” – a term that is essentially complementary as opposed to the “unpleasant” nature of the soprano comment.

Participant 2 added that sopranos “are also accused of shrieking, or the word wobble is used, you know it is quite derogatory, sort of with derogatory implications of us being like harridans.” “shrill or strident” “words that have negative connotation....it’s horrible”. In the experience of Participant 2, those words are never used for men.

Participant 3 concurred that there was always an element of joviality when the tenors or basses were spoke to with less critical words such as “agricultural” and “sour” being used. This discrepancy in language not only reveals an ingrained gender bias but also suggests that the decision-making process and communication within choral settings might subtly lean on stereotypical understandings of gendered behaviour and sound production. This, in turn contributes to the general anxiety felt by participants.

Participant 3 talked about ‘Invisible Women’ by Caroline Criado Perez and the issue of the gender data gap and speculated that by participating in the focus group, all participants are filling in a data gap, with “everyone’s experiences actually told”. This aligns with Koza’s experience of researching choral method texts. Where she found herself asking “who is not at the table and what is not being discussed here?” with the current literature being “strongly influenced by masculinist discourses” and the fact that there are “long overdue conversations” about issues that are “of critical importance to women and girls”.

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to explore the impact of having to achieve 'blend' on sopranos singing in professional ensembles. The pursuit of 'blend', a hallmark of ensemble singing, presents a complicated array of challenges for professional sopranos. As this research has illuminated, the expectation to merge one's unique vocal timbre into a cohesive, unified sound has far-reaching ramifications through the psychological, and vocal spheres of a soprano's artistry. Through a rigorous analysis of these considerations, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of being asked to 'blend'.

Psychologically, the pressure to conform to a prescribed choral aesthetic unveils a sense of anxiety, self-doubt, and a perceived loss of individual expression. Sopranos often find themselves navigating a delicate balancing act, striving to maintain their authentic vocal identities while adhering to the collective demands of ensemble singing. The impact of conductors' leadership style emerged as a pivotal factor, with those who embrace an inclusive environment, where vocal colours are celebrated and encouraged, empowered sopranos to enjoy their own unique qualities. While those who seemingly prioritise 'blend', perpetuate feelings of low self-worth (P3 &4). Vocally, the demands of 'blending' can have a profound impact on a singer's technique, development and overall vocal health. The issue of gender dynamic was an unexpected outcome but, clearly had a marked impact.

Future research is needed to contribute to the broader conversations surrounding gender equality, conductor influence and the celebration of diverse voices within the choral sphere. There is a recognised need to clarify what is desired from singers and to adapt language that is used. The role of conductor gesture was outside the scope of this study but should be considered for further research. It is hoped that the results highlighted by this study could inform training of choral conductors, with the desired impact of empowering conductors and, in turn, empowering their singers.

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Appendix

Appendix A) Ethical approval

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically. A researcher may not be covered by the University's insurance if ethical approval has not been obtained prior to commencement.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications”. As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the “principal researcher”.

Ethical approval is not required for routine audits, performance reviews, quality assurance studies, testing within normal educational requirements, and literary or artistic criticism.

Please read the notes for guidance before completing ALL sections of the form.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity.
Please see Checklist for details of process for different categories of application.

Delete the Guidance Notes at the end of the form BEFORE submitting your application

SECTION A: About You (Principal Researcher)

1	Full Name:	Charlotte Mobbs			
2	Tick all boxes which apply:	Member of staff:	☐	Honorary research fellow:	☐

3	Undergraduate Student	☐	Taught Postgraduate Student	☒	Postgraduate Research Student	☐
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4	Institute/Academic Discipline/Centre:	WAPPAR
5	Campus:	Carmarthen
6	E-mail address:	charlottedougan@googlemail.com
7	Contact Telephone Number:	07710488357
For students:		
8	Student Number:	2029080
9	Programme of Study:	MA in Professional Practice (Voice Pedagogy)
10	Director of Studies/Supervisor:	Nick Samuel

SECTION B: Approval for Research Activity

1	Has the research activity received approval in principle? (please check the Guidance Notes as to the appropriate approval process for different levels of research by different categories of individual)	YES	☒	NO	☐
				Date	
2	If Yes, please indicate source of approval (and date where known): Approval in principle must be obtained from the relevant source prior to seeking ethical approval	Research Degrees Committee	☐		
3		Institute Research Committee	☐		
4		Other (write in) WAPPAR Ethics Board Representative	☒		

SECTION C: Internal and External Ethical Guidance Materials

	Please list the core ethical guidance documents that have been referred to during the completion of this form (including any discipline-specific codes of research ethics, and also any specific ethical guidance relating to the proposed methodology). Please tick to confirm that your research proposal adheres to these codes and guidelines.	
1	UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice	☒
2		☒

	UWTSD Research Data Management Policy	
3	This may include codes of conduct of professional bodies or overseas laws (particularly for data protection).	☐

SECTION D: External Collaborative Research Activity

1	Does the research activity involve collaborators outside of the University?	YES	☐	NO	☒	
2	If Yes, please provide the name of the external organisation and name and contact details for the main contact person and confirmation this person has consented to their personal data being shared as part of this collaboration.					
3	Institution					
4	Contact person name					
5	Contact person e-mail address					
6	Has this individual consented to sharing their details on this form?	YES	☐	NO	☐	
7	Are you in receipt of a KESS scholarship?	YES	☐	NO	☐	
8	Is your research externally funded	YES	☐	NO	☐	
9	Are you specifically employed to undertake this research in either a	Voluntary	YES	☐	NO	☐
10	paid or voluntary capacity?	Employed	YES	☐	NO	☐
11	Is the research being undertaken within an existing UWTSD Athrofa Professional Learning Partnership (APLP)	If YES then the permission question below does not need to be answered.	YES	☐	NO	☐
12	Permission to undertake the research has been provided by the partner organisation	(If YES attach copy) If NO the application cannot continue	YES	☐	NO	☐

Where research activity is carried out in collaboration with an external organisation

13	Does this organisation have its own ethics approval system?	YES	☐	NO	☐
14	If Yes, please attach a copy of any final approval (or interim approval) from the organisation				

SECTION E: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	A study into the use of the word 'blend' in British choral singing		
2	Proposed start date:	4/03/2022	Proposed end date:	17/06/2022
3	Introduction to the Research (maximum 300 words)			

	Ensure that you write for a <u>Non-Specialist Audience</u> when outlining your response to the three points below: • <i>Purpose of Research Activity</i> • <i>Proposed Research Question</i> • <i>Aims of Research Activity</i> • <i>Objectives of Research Activity</i> Demonstrate, briefly, how <u>Existing Research</u> has informed the proposed activity and explain • <i>What the research activity will add to the body of knowledge</i> • <i>How it addresses an area of importance.</i>
4	Purpose of Research Activity The purpose of this study is to raise awareness and to develop a resource for choral conductors to help them improve how they think and talk about the use of the word 'blend'. (this box should expand as you type)
5	Research Question How does the use of the word 'blend' effect professional Soprano choral singers? (this box should expand as you type)
6	Aims of Research Activity - To question professional soprano choral singers regarding their perceptions of 'blend', what they think the conductor means or wants from them in order to create a 'blend'. How they feel this has affected them both emotionally and in their own vocal development. -To question professional choral conductors as to their perceptions of 'blend'. What it means to them and how they go about achieving it, especially with regards to sopranos. (this box should expand as you type)
7	Objectives of Research Activity -To raise awareness as to the affect that a conductors words and actions has on singers, particularly in a choral situation. -To develop a resource for choral conductors and choir leaders to enable them to use language that may be more appropriate and helpful to Sopranos. This could be in the form of CPD or a document detailing the findings. (this box should expand as you type)

8	Proposed methods (maximum 600 words) Provide a brief summary of all the methods that may be used in the research activity, making it clear what specific techniques may be used. If methods other than those listed in this section are deemed appropriate later, additional ethical approval for those methods will be needed.
9	I will be using a mixed method approach with triangulation of methods, in order to validate any claims that may arise from this study and to mitigate my own research bias from having seen singers in action and also having my own experience. I intend to employ 3 different methods of data collection. Methods: 1) Questionnaire The main method of data collection for the Sopranos will be in the form of an anonymous questionnaire using both closed and open questions. 2) Focus Group A smaller number of participants will be selected using answers from the questionnaire. The focus group will take place online, via Zoom. This will be recorded and transcribed. 3) Semi-structured interview The conductors will be asked a series of questions in the form of semi-structured interviews which will be recorded and transcribed or by questionnaire.

10	Location of research activity Identify all locations where research activity will take place.
11	The research will be conducted online via zoom or via email. (this box should expand as you type)
12	Research activity outside of the UK If research activity will take place overseas, you are responsible for ensuring that local ethical considerations are complied with and that the relevant permissions are sought. Specify any

	local guidelines (e.g. from local professional associations/learned societies/universities) that exist and whether these involve any ethical stipulations beyond those usual in the UK (provide details of any licenses or permissions required). Also specify whether there are any specific ethical issues raised by the local context in which the research activity is taking place, for example, particular cultural and/or legal sensitivities or vulnerabilities of participants.
13	N/A <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

14	Use of documentation not in the public domain: Are any documents <u>NOT</u> publicly available?	NO	☒
		YES	☐
15	If Yes, please provide details here of how you will gain access to specific documentation that is not in the public domain and that this is in accordance with prevailing data protection law of the country in question and England and Wales. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		

SECTION F: Scope of Research Activity

1	Will the research activity include:	YES	NO
2	Use of a questionnaire or similar research instrument?	☒	☐
3	Use of interviews?	☒	☐
4	Use of diaries?	☐	☒
5	Participant observation with their knowledge?	☐	☒
6	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☒
7	Use of video or audio recording?	☒	☐
8	Access to personal or confidential information without the participants' specific consent?	☐	☒
9	Administration of any questions, test stimuli, presentation that may be experienced as physically, mentally or emotionally harmful / offensive?	☐	☒
10	Performance of any acts which may cause embarrassment or affect self-esteem?	☐	☒
11	Investigation of participants involved in illegal activities?	☐	☒
12	Use of procedures that involve deception?	☐	☒
13	Administration of any substance, agent or placebo?	☐	☒
14	Working with live vertebrate animals?	☐	☒
15	Other primary data collection methods, please explain in this box	☒	☐

	For example, 'focus groups'. Please indicate the type of data collection method(s) in this box and tick the accompany box.		
16	Details of any other primary data collection method: I will be using focus groups. (this box should expand as you type)		

If NO to every question, then the research activity is (ethically) low risk and **may** be exempt from **some** of the following sections (please refer to Guidance Notes).

If YES to any question, then no research activity should be undertaken until full ethical approval has been obtained.

SECTION G: Intended Participants

1	Who are the intended participants:	YES	NO
2	Students or staff at the University?	☐	☒
3	Adults (over the age of 18 and competent to give consent)?	☒	☐
4	Vulnerable adults?	☐	☒
5	Children and Young People under the age of 18? (Consent from Parent, Carer or Guardian will be required)	☐	☒
6	Prisoners?	☐	☒
7	Young offenders?	☐	☒
8	Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or a gatekeeper?	☐	☒
9	People engaged in illegal activities?	☐	☒
10	Others (please identify specifically any group who may be unable to give consent) please indicate here and tick the appropriate box.	☐	☒
11	Other – please indicate here: (this box should expand as you type)		

12	Participant numbers and source Provide an estimate of the expected number of participants. How will you identify participants and how will they be recruited?	
13	How many participants are expected?	I expect a maximum of 20 participants in total. (this box should expand as you type)
14	Who will the participants be?	There will be 15 sopranos in the questionnaire group. 5 of these will be chosen to take part in the focus group. 5 conductors will also be participating. (this box should expand as you type)

15	How will you identify the participants?	I will identify the participants by my knowledge of professional sopranos that sing with professional choirs. I will recruit from fellow colleagues. I will identify the professional conductors from my professional experience. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
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16	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
17	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☒	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☒	☐	☐
19	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☒	☐	☐
20	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☒	☐	☐
21	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☐	☐	☒
22	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☒	☐	☐
23	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☒	☐	☐
24	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☒	☐	☐
25	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☒	☐	☐
26	If NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation			
27	<i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>			

28	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
29	Will participants be paid?	☐	☒	☐
30	Is specialist electrical or other equipment to be used with participants?	☒	☐	☐
31	Are there any financial or other interests to the investigator or University arising from this study?	☐	☒	☐
32	Will the research activity involve deliberately misleading participants in any way, or the partial or full concealment of the specific study aims?	☐	☒	☐
33	If YES to any question, please provide full details			
34	I will be using my Mac computer with an external Yeti microphone to conduct the focus group and semi-structured interviews via zoom. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>			

SECTION H: Anticipated Risks

1	Outline any anticipated risks that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the University, and the steps that will be taken to address them. If you have completed a full risk assessment (for example as required by a laboratory, or external research collaborator) you may append that to this form.		
2	Full risk assessment completed and appended?	Yes	☐
		No	☒
3	Risks to participants For example: emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information		
4	Risk to Participant: I will be recording the focus group and interviews and transcribing the data so there is a risk of some personal data disclosure. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How will you mitigate the Risk to Participant</i> I will mitigate the risk by ensuring I used a code for the participants and having all data stored on my password secured desktop which is available only to me. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
5	If research activity may include sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) or issues likely to disclose information requiring further action (e.g. criminal activity), give details of the procedures to deal with these issues, including any support/advice (e.g. helpline numbers) to be offered to participants. Note that where applicable, consent procedures should make it clear that if something potentially or actually illegal is discovered in the course of a project, it may need to be disclosed to the proper authorities		
	N/A <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
6	Risks to investigator For example: personal safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harm/impropriety, conflict of interest		
	Risk to Investigator:	<i>How will you mitigate the Risk to Investigator:</i>	

	There may be a risk to my own professional standing being affected due to questioning conductors who I work for. There is potential for personal relationships to be affected <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	I will minimise any conflict by using conductors from ensembles that I do not sing with, or no longer sing with. I will ensure that all participants are aware that all data will be treated as confidential. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
7	University/institutional risks For example: adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection	
	Risk to University: The risk to the university will be of data protection. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How will you mitigate the Risk to University:</i> This will be mitigated by all data being coded to ensure anonymity and securely stored on my computer which is password protected and is only used by myself. All data will be destroyed at the end of this project. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

8	Disclosure and Barring Service			
9	If the research activity involves children or vulnerable adults, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate must be obtained before any contact with such participants.	YES	NO	N/A
10	Does your research require you to hold a current DBS Certificate?	☐	☒	☐

SECTION I: Feedback, Consent and Confidentiality

1	Feedback What de-briefing and feedback will be provided to participants, how will this be done and when?			
	I will provide my email address to the participation and offer them a copy of my final report to read. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>			

2	Informed consent Describe the arrangements to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating. Describe the arrangements for participants to provide full consent before data collection begins. If gaining consent in this way is inappropriate, explain how consent will be obtained and recorded in accordance with prevailing data protection legislation.
	For the online questionnaire I will put a page at the beginning of the questionnaire that will act as a consent form, informing participants that by clicking on the NEXT button they are providing consent. For the focus group and interviews, I will provide a written consent form that will be sent via email. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
3	Confidentiality / Anonymity Set out how anonymity of participants and confidentiality will be ensured in any outputs. If anonymity is not being offered, explain why this is the case.
	I will use a code for each participant, the key for the code will be stored in a password protected file on my computer. I will not name the participants or the ensembles or conductors that they sing for. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

SECTION J: Data Protection and Storage

In completing this section refer to the University's Research Data Management Policy and the extensive resources on the University's Research Data Management web pages (<http://uwtsd.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/>).

1	Does the research activity involve personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 "GDPR" and the Data Protection Act 2018 "DPA")?	YES	NO
	"Personal data" means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person ('data subject'). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person.	X	☐
2	If YES, provide a description of the data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
	Personal data that will be collected includes the email addresses and names of participants, the signed consent forms and the visual/audio recordings made and the transcripts of those. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
3	Does it involve special category data (as defined by the GDPR)?	YES	NO

	“Special category data” means sensitive personal data consisting of information as to the data subjects’ – (a) racial or ethnic origin, (b) political opinions, (c) religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature, (d) membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992), (e) physical or mental health or condition, (f) sexual life, (g) genetics, (h) biometric data (as used for ID purposes),	☐	X
4	If YES, provide a description of the special category data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
	(this box should expand as you type)		

5	Will the research activity involve storing personal data and/or special category data on one of the following:	YES	NO
6	Manual files (i.e. in paper form)?	☐	☒
7	University computers?	☐	☒
8	Private company computers?	☐	☒
9	Home or other personal computers?	☒	☐
10	Laptop computers/ CDs/ Portable disk-drives/ memory sticks?	☐	☒
11	“Cloud” storage or websites?	☐	☒
12	Other – specify:	☐	☒
13	For all stored data, explain the measures in place to ensure the security of the data collected, data confidentiality, including details of password protection, encryption, anonymisation and pseudonymisation:		
	All data will be kept in password protected computer storage on my personal MAC desktop which will not be shared. Audio/visual data will be transcribed and would be shown to participants to check accuracy of reporting. Any stored data will be password protected. All participants will be given a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality and this list will be kept securely in the password protected folder. (this box should expand as you type)		
14	All Data Storage		
15	Will the research activity involve any of the following activities:	YES	NO
16	Electronic transfer of data in any form?	☒	☐
17	Sharing of data with others at the University?	☒	☐
18	Sharing of data with other organisations?	☐	☒
19	Export of data outside the European Union or importing of data from outside the UK?	☐	☒

20	Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, emails or telephone numbers?	☒	☐
21	Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals?	☐	☒
22	Use of data management system?	☐	☒
23	Data archiving?	☐	☒
24	If YES to any question, please provide full details, explaining how this will be conducted in accordance with the GDPR and DPA (and/or any international equivalent):		
	This includes data such as drafts of your work as well as experimental or survey data. An example of suitable text is given below. All data will be encrypted and kept on my password protected personal MAC desktop computer which will not be shared. All data will be stored in a password protected folder. All data transfers will be encrypted and password protected. All participants will be given a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality and this list will be kept securely in the password protected folder. The data will be stored until the completion of the project and then deleted. In accordance with the DPA2018, participants will have the right to ask to see what data is held relating to them, and this data will be deleted immediately if the participant requests this, in which case the data will not be used in the project. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
25	List all who will have access to the data generated by the research activity:		
	Only myself, the principle researcher. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
26	List who will have control of, and act as custodian(s) for, data generated by the research activity:		
	Only myself, the principle researcher. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
27	Give details of data storage arrangements, including security measures in place to protect the data, where data will be stored, how long for, and in what form. Will data be archived – if so how and if not why not.		
	It is unlikely that Bachelors or Masters projects will need to be archived. All data will be encrypted and kept in password protected storage on my personal MAC desktop computer which will not be shared. Any stored or transfer data will be password protected, and will be reformatted at the end of the project in order to destroy the data. The data will be stored until the completion of the project and then deleted. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
28	Please indicate if your data will be stored in the UWTSD Research Data Repository (see https://researchdata.uwtsd.ac.uk/). If so please explain. <i>(Most relevant to academic staff)</i>		
	N/A <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
29	Confirm that you have read the UWTSD guidance on data management (see https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/)	YES	☒
		NO	☐
30		YES	☒

	Confirm that you are aware that you need to keep all data until after your research has completed or the end of your funding	NO	☐
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SECTION K: Declaration

31	The information which I have provided is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge. I have attempted to identify any risks and issues related to the research activity and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants. In submitting this application I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which is published on the website: https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/		
	Signature of applicant:	C Mobbs	Date: 21/01/2022

For STUDENT Submissions:

32	Director of Studies/Supervisor:		Date:
33	Signature:		

For STAFF Submissions:

34	Academic Director/ Assistant Dean:		Date:
35	Signature:		

Checklist: Please complete the checklist below to ensure that you have completed the form according to the guidelines and attached any required documentation:

☒	I have read the guidance notes supplied before completing the form.
☒	I have completed ALL RELEVANT sections of the form in full.
☒	I confirm that the research activity has received approval in principle
☐	I have attached a copy of final/interim approval from external organisation (where appropriate)
☐	I have attached a full risk assessment (and have NOT completed Section H of this form) (where appropriate) ONLY TICK IF YOU HAVE ATTACHED A FULL RISK ASSESSMENT

☒	I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice.
☒	I understand that before commencing data collection all documents aimed at respondents (including information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, interview schedules etc.) must be confirmed by the DoS/Supervisor, module tutor or Academic Director.
☒	I have deleted the guidance notes before submitting the PG2 for consideration

RESEARCH STUDENTS AND STAFF ONLY

All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.

You will be informed of the outcome of your claim by email; therefore **it is important that you check your University and personal email accounts regularly.**

STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) via systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

This form is available electronically from the Academic Office web pages:

<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/academic-office/appendices-and-forms/>

Application Process

All staff research projects and all research students must submit the Ethical Approval Form to the **University Research Ethics Committee** via the Academic Office (pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk). Staff research directly in relation to personal study for taught undergraduate or Masters programmes should be submitted via the Institute procedures explained below.

Taught masters and taught undergraduate research Ethical Approval Forms are considered **within Institutes**. Institutes will provide details of the specific processes for this. Where the Ethical issues within any single ethical application are of particular concern the Institute will refer these to the University Research Ethics Committee. Any student activity that involves the collection of primary data needs to undergo Ethical approval, this includes assignment work as well as dissertations.

Appendix B)

Module 3 questionnaire questions

- 1) How does being asked to 'blend' make you feel?
- 2) In what ways (if any) do you feel that you have had to compromise, vocally, in order to 'blend'?
- 3) What affect to you feel 'blending' has had on your vocal development?
- 4) In what ways (if any) do you feel being asked to 'blend' has affected you psychologically?
- 5) What does the word blend mean to you?
- 6) What do you think the word 'blend' means to a conductor?

Appendix C)

Focus group 21st May 8pm (4 participants) Transcription

Moderator: I'm going to give us a few topics to talk about so it can be an open discussion. Whilst this is about the word "blend", what I'm interested in is the effect that it has on professional choral sopranos. I want to know this from the singer's perspective. There is some research, but it is nearly all from a conductors point of view.

One thing that came up from the questionnaire answers was to do with the changing voice through age and the relevance of that with regards to 'blending' and any challenges.

Participant 1: Yep

Moderator : so if anyone would like to comment on that

Participant 2: Right, ok, yep, I'll go I. I think that in relation to just growing older, I think there's definitely an effect that I care less what conductors think of me, in a way. So I suppose that plays a sort of psychological element into thinking about the word blend is that I feel that I don't need to, um, subjugate myself to what their version of blend is. So I suppose that as I get older, I give less of a flip about exactly what they think of me, if you know what I mean? So I feel, yeah, less scared about sticking out or about them sort of...yeah, I suppose. If that makes any sense.

Participant 3: yeah, I think, yeah, I feel exactly the same. I think it kind of, you feel.... You realise that there's actually a bit more leeway, like its not, you just... I think that when starting out you think 'oh, that means me, I had better do everything that I can to make it like this (gestures hand to show something straight), and actually you realise that sometimes, depending on where you are, sometimes you can give a bit more without actually there being a disaster and kind of see where you go. I think that comes with experience, well it did for me anyway.

Participant 1: I think that as I've got older, the word blend has filled me with more dread because it has got harder because, you know, when you are in your early 20's you can get your voice to do whatever you want it to do because you are like a young gymnast. But actually, as you kind of grow into your voice and it matures and then someone says "oh, can we keep it nice and blended" you are like, ok, that means I have to restrict the sound that I make in order to match the people sitting next to me and that has definitely got harder as I have got older. So, I sort of feel the opposite in a way.

Participant 4: yeah. I was going to say exactly the same. I feel completely the opposite. I feel like, when I was 20, I could do whatever I wanted to kind of fit into the sound if that's what they were asking, but now, as my voice has got bigger, I feel more and more self conscious about the way that I am singing around my

colleagues, regardless of whether a conductor quite often says they want blend or not. It's just feels so much like I'm much more aware of the sound that I assume they might want and I find it much harder to do that.

Participant 1: and blend, the word blend, definitely indicates a wish, in my brain, indicates a wish for a specific set of perimeters

Participant 3: yeah

Participant 1: which is straight, generally.

Participant 3: yes, I felt like that it is almost misused. Cos actually, to me, what it really means to me is that everybody sings properly and finds a way to sing together, nicely, where we are all singing properly. But I don't think that's what it means to any one that uses it, like any conductors who have used it at us.

Participant 1: yeah

Participant 3: actually, I think it is just a code for "I want it to be straight". Maybe that's not true of everybody but I, certainly, that's my experience.

Participant 1: No, I agree.

Participant 2: I agree too. I think it is used like this sort of

Participant 3: yeah

Participant 2: it's used in quite a threatening way sometimes.

Participant 1: yes, yeah

Participant 2: and It's used to indicate that some conductors want this anaemic, pale, bloodless sound on the top line.

Participant 1: yeah

Participant 2: and I feel SOME conductors (which we are all aware of these people). Umm, yeah, use it in quite a threatening way for sopranos. So it is used as like a psychological tool to kind of dampen the character of..

Participant 3: yes

Participant 2: of woman's voices in a, obviously in a very unhealthy vocal (I think) way and, even more so, psychological way.

Participant 3: yes, because, because the opposite of it is sticking out and sticking out is really, you know, is very, is, that's death, isn't it. So we kind of...

Participant 1: you may not have a personal identity.

Participant 3: exactly.

Participant 4: but if you use the word blend, you don't have to say vibrato. Nobody has to hear the word vibrato, which really sets everyone's backs up. So it's kind of a .

Participant 3: Yes, it's like a musical, like a musically acceptable thing to say..

Participant 2: Mmmm

Participant 4: yep.

Moderator: so, following on from that, what is it about sopranos? Is it just sopranos or do other voice part feel this? Or is it unique to sopranos?

Participant 1: awww, that's a good question. I think it, I think it is a specific set of issues for sopranos because they are the top of the picture and I think, you know, I suppose tenors possibly get asked..well.... Do tenors get asked to blend? I suppose they do, but not in the same way. Generally, I think lower voices have more freedom to, to sing freely because they're not so.... It's just not so immediately present. I saw this, umm... I sometimes look at the radio 3 message boards and something that has stuck with me that I saw once – in reference to the BBC Singers sopranos was that we sounded like Rhinemaidens under duress and I think that is such a... it really encapsulates what is the problem for sopranos in particular . If I ever write a thesis, that's what I'm going to call it!

Laughter

Moderator : ha! I might actually steal it!

Participant 1: it's just extraordinary cos you wouldn't say that about basses, for example because that's a kind of, like, a 'warm full blooded sound' if the men do it. If the women do it, it's unpleasant.

Participant 3 : it's unpleasant and, I don't know, is it threatening? As well, just because it is so womanly? I don't know.

Participant 1: it's such a big topic, isn't it? What do people want from their women, from their girls?

Participant 3: well, that 's possibly another psychological issue in a conducting situation. In a choir situation because the conductor is, for the most part, and I think the ones we are all talking about are male. The ones we are all thinking bout are male. So there's this gender dynamic that you don't have with the tenors for instance. You say the tenors may get asked to blend but it doesn't have the same..... because they are in a level.

Participant 1: for what it's worth, and I know this is all being anonymised but a female conductor that I know and work with regularly, will not use the word blend. It is banned from her vocabulary and she has got a big problem with it.

Participant 3: consciously? Consciously banned?

Participant 1: Yes. Absolutely consciously bland, banned.... And bland!

Participant 2: Freudian slip!!!!!!

Participant 1: (laughs) Yeah!

Everyone laughs

Participant 1: yeah, she knows the voices she is working with and she knows the colours that are available to her and, and umm... yeah, it's much freer....easier. I mean she'll still get the colours that she wants and that are required and if they need to be on the straighter side of things and particularly homogeneous for something, then she'll get there but she won't use that word. Which I really like.

Participant 3: and she is clearly, consciously creating an effect that she wants which we are all capable of doing every, now and then, and that's what...that makes it useful because it is a tool.

Participant 1: yeah, and I think if you sing in a choir, you've got to expect that is going to be required at times and that sometimes that IS the best sound for what you are singing but that shouldn't be a kind of carte blanche sort of Farrow and Ball off white for every available piece of music.

Moderator: and so, do you ever feel like there is a situation where there are different things expected of different sections?

Participant 2: Yeah. All the time. I mean it sort of, I understand that because, as we talked about before, I think that, depending on repertoire, that's appropriate. Obviously, we all know that and we have to work out ways of how to sing a renaissance bit of polyphony and if you have too many women singing with too much colour, it just sounds a mess. It sounds wrong. In my opinion.

Participant 1: I agree

Participant 2: On the other hand, if you've got... you know, something else, that sounds equally wrong if women are singing without colour, without warmth. It sounds wrong. I don't want to hear people singing Sacred and Profane [Benjamin Britten] with a tiny thin sound. It just sounds wrong. I want to hear that sort of vibrancy and colour.

Participant 1: or Brahms' Requiem. Yeah, absolutely.

Participant 2: yeah. But, I think, going back slightly to what we were talking about with the difference between how sopranos might be asked, or talked to, in relation to a blended sound, some of the language that's used, or commonly used to describe the sound. So, even if they might say the word blend – a conductor, umm... we are also accused of shrieking, or the word wobble is used, you know it is quite derogatory, sort of with derogatory implications of us being like harridans. Or...

Participant 1: shrill

Participant 2: yes, shrill or strident. All very kind of words that have negative, forceful connotation. Which I hate. It's horrible. And those words, in my experience, of the choirs I work with are never used for men. The most kind of negative words I have heard used is, tenors..... a conductor I work with, for example, uses the word 'sour' when talking about tenors. Well, one tenor in particular just not singing particularly well in tune. And then, he sometimes, very jovially, might say oh the basses are bellowing a bit, or something. But that's the most negative things I have heard.

Participant 3: agricultural is something that comes up but that's funny and everyone is kind of (participant laughs). It's got this kind of like joviality about it.

Participant 2: yeah. But shrieking and wobble isn't funny. It's quite nasty.

Participants 1 & 2: yes.

Participant 1: but also, the thing about.... There is one choir that I can think of that has the pyramid of sound. If you want to just see it in a nutshell, that's what it is. You have the little, like, sprinkles on the top and you've got to look pretty and light and not be a full blooded as the people standing behind you.

Participant 3 : what's interesting with that is that there's this kind of, it's caged in this way of - let's give this really rich sound at the bottom so we can 'support' this tiny sound at the top. You know, that's supposed to be HELPFUL!

Participant 1: So, the conductor of that choir came in to work with a choir that I work with. They were singing Rheinberger, so you'd think that if it's Rheinberger you may open the tap somewhat. So they opened the taps and he said "Oooo, I can hear all those expensive singing lessons".

Participant 3: Ooo yeah! Oh no, we don't want any of those!

Participant 1: How dare you have trained your voice in this way!

Participant 2: I can hear that person saying those things and it is deeply offensive. I mean, that's awful.

Participant 1: It is. Because, we are actually quite highly trained, experienced individuals. I mean, everybody in the profession has actually worked really hard to get to the point where you can be a professional singer. So, of course they have had expensive singing lessons.

Participant 2: and continue to sing for their career. You know, not be sacked 3 years later because they're singing in an unhealthy way for a certain conductor.

Participant 1: and if you spend your life only singing in that... in the way that's required from you in a choral setting, your career will be short. You are never exercising your muscles fully, you're never opening out and doing things in a healthy way. You have to be able to go home and sing whatever, you know, a Mozart Aria or something, to get things moving freely. That freedom allows you to pare it back when you need to. I think.

Moderator: that takes me on to vocal identity. Do you feel that your vocal identity is ever compromised by just singing in choirs?

Participant 1: I definitely do feel that, every single day.

Participant 3: yep.

Participant 1: maybe it's a personality thing as well, I think I work hard to... I do this in every social setting as well. I work hard to fit in with people around me and to be... you know, so I make myself vocally try to match what's around me, often to the

detriment of my own sound and identity. So that's me imposing blend on myself I suppose, even if nobody else says it.

Participant 4: that's part of the problem, isn't it? I have come home from so many things now and I say to [my husband] "well, they didn't ask me to sing in this way, but I feel like there is an unwritten rule these days, that this is how we are supposed to produce our sound. And so, it is just compromise all the time.

There are probably 2 conductors that I have worked for that I get to the end of the project and I realise that I've actually been able to sing properly and my voice still feels completely healthy at the end of this.

Participant 1: yeah.

Participant 4: it's just slightly soul destroying, isn't it, really.

Participant 3: Yes. And there's that feeling that, probably, perhaps we impose on ourselves, that you can't every try. Just see what happens.

Participant 1: yeah, I agree.

Participant 2: that's interesting, isn't it? Because, before, we were talking about what effect the use of the word...when blend is used, or words that are equivalent. What that does to us psychologically, what does it mean? Umm... and then, so we have that to contend with. But then, our own self. Our own voice in our head telling us what we should and shouldn't do and what is or isn't expected and that's like a whole other thing, you know.

Participant 1: yeah.... And I think also, along side that, it's the expectation of your ear, that's listening to yourself, that you can still sing it like you did 15 years ago and you...your brain expects the same sound to come out and, actually, your voice doesn't want to do that so you tie... well, I tie myself in total knots. Especially revisiting repertoire that I haven't sung for a long time. Your brain wants you to do what you did whenever you last sang it, 1-5 years ago.

Moderator: do you think, for example the basses, go through this?

Participant 2: I think so. If you are talking about this sort of vocal identity, yes, I think so. Being married to one, yeah definitely. I think he still has that voice in his head that is sort of going "oh god, this feels bloody impossible today". You know, why is that? You know. "Oh god, I can't sing with this person, this is a nightmare". Umm...and feels compromised at times and is self critical, you know, analytical. Yeah, I think so. I think there would be very few people that could honestly say that isn't an issue. I think it's obviously a greater issue for some people than others, for sure. But....

Participant 1: do you think that he feels as restricted as we so often do?

Participant 2: No, no not necessarily, no. Not at all. No, he is very aware and it is something we have talked about at home. About how much more difficult it is for the top line than for any other line. For all the reasons we have just talked about. So, no, absolutely not. He is aware how much you can get away with on the bass line. But i

mean, in terms of his own vocal identity, then, it is certainly something he is aware of and thinking about and has changed over time and gets frustrated with. And that's his own self, that's not a feeling that has been given to him by a conductor.

Participant 3: but that's when it feels like it comes back to what you were saying [participant 1] about the social.... doing that in social life as well, just wanting to fit in to things. And that's kind of a personality trait across the board of men and women and so you probably get those things carried over. I think I probably think that about my partner as well. Just having that trait anyway, and singing is a sociable thing and that just comes out. So, yeah, wanting to change things to be like people around you.

Moderator: So, related to that, with regards to blend, there is not much research from a singers perspective. There is a fair amount from a conductors perspective though and when you look at it, they talk about the ways they try to achieve blend. One of those is through where you are placed, who you are standing next to. I know you all sing with different groups so you are often standing next to different people. How does that effect you?

Participant 1: do you mean within the soprano section?

Moderator: Yes, or even standing next to other voice parts.

Participant 2: how does it effect you in what way?

Moderator: so, if you are constantly having to 'blend' and you are adapting in a similar way to your social adapting.

Participant 3: I slightly found myself, recently, getting frustrated (and this is probably a failing of my own), but getting frustrated if standing next to people, usually the younger ones who (like I was once) are able to just do that with it [gestures straight line with hands]. Straighten it out, you know. So therefore they do. And I'm there just thinking, feeling like, well, I know better now. I know that if we all give it a bit of colour we will actually blend nicely together. So I feel myself getting frustrated that I know that and I'm trying to do that. But if the person next to me is giving that absolutely straight thing, there's no way that we can, unless I did the same and completely kill myself. Like, we can't come to an agreement that will actually, probably, be fine for the conductor because they don't realise that probably what will be fine. Umm. But because this person is perhaps a lot younger, very keen to please and very able to just do it and you know, obviously you are not going to say anything. So, that definitely is a feeling that I have about singing with people.

Participant 1: I like being on the end of a section. If I'm on the end of the section, it will be next to the altos cos I sing second. I just find it much easier to hear myself and maintain some sort of track on what, on the sound that I, specifically, am making if I don't have a soprano on either side of me. And yeah, there are definitely people I prefer to stand next to and people that I don't. That must be really common.

Participant 4: I like to stand next to another part because then you are not feeling like you are surrounded by a sound you've got to match. You can actually sort of

sing with another part as well and that allows you to just... it makes me feel a bit freer in the way that I produce my sound, I think.

Participant 2: yeah, it's funny that isn't it? About who you like singing with or standing next to. I find it unquantifiable. I don't really know why it works with some people and not with others. I don't know.

Like you [participant 1], I stand on the end. I really like standing on the end for various reasons, mostly psychological reasons. I too like the freedom of that bit of space at the end. I don't like being under the, you know, the close gaze of the conductor because I feel constricted.

Participant 1: Yes.

Participant 2: I don't feel it from him, I feel it from myself. It makes me just do that [leans back]. I feel much freer standing on the end so that definitely works for me.

Participant 4: do you think that's partly to do with the distance actually from the conductor? Cos, quite often, if you are in the middle of things you are actually much closer, aren't you? Whereas on the end you can just, it feels like there is actually distance from the conductor as well as your own sort of singing space on the end, isn't there?

Participant 2: yeah, definitely. I feel I have a better connection with the audience at the end and I just prefer being on the, on the periphery. Just vocally, I find it just ties me up in fewer knots.

Moderator: can I ask? When you say "tie me up in knots" or "constricted" or "tight" – these are all words that came up through the questionnaire as well – what, can I ask what, exactly, you mean by that?

Participant 1: [with hand on larynx] It's literally, for me, it's literally a feeling in my throat, of constriction and tightness in my tongue, tongue root, jaw, tension here [holds upper larynx] like gripping and locking to kind of stay on the tight rope. That's... I feel it in my throat and it's becoming much more problematic. Having had two throat surgeries, as well, the muscles are delicate and a bit unpredictable and much more susceptible to tiredness and tension now so, you know, when we have a difficult, high, straight week, I really do feel it...sore..here [gestures to larynx]. It's really annoying, actually.

Participant 2: but unsurprising.

All agree

Participant 1: do you feel it there? [holding upper larynx]. Do you feel tension in your tongue?

Participant 2: I definitely feel, I can definitely feel that. But, I don't think that because of how I'm feeling from or being made to feel by someone else. It's purely a kind of vocal...knackered....singing a, you know, a high, quiet, floaty Media Vita for, you know, four hours, is just nothing I want to do at this stage in my life. Umm... and so if I feel constricted or...then, yes, I have that feeling of actually... you know, my larynx

is so far up my own arse that it just, it hurts and there's not much I can do about releasing it anymore, at that stage. But, when I was talking before about feeling constricted or feeling that I was just too close to the conductor or feeling a bit like..Urrrr....it's more a kind of, sort of feeling of 'I just need to move away'. It's all too close. I feel under scrutiny and I... I feel very anxious. So I suppose it's more psychologically constricting rather than a vocal issue.

Participant 3: Yeah, the tying up in knots things resonates for me but that just, that is a mental thing just kind of constantly feeling that i need to check in with everything and make sure every single thing is ok. That nothing is out of line. Nothings...then second guessing, questioning, you know, what's being asked of you and whether you're delivering it and whether or not its actually, that's actually the reality. That's what tying up in knots means to me and I could definitely say that it has happened.

Participant 4: I quite often find that it's umm, it's like a body thing for me because, actually, if I'm trying to produce a particular type of sound, I quite often do that by, essentially, trying to stop my support from doing what it really wants to do. And that means, kind of, tension in my body because I'm , trying to stop my decent support muscles from doing that and, if I do, then the sound that I think they don't want will come out. So I've got to hold.. kind of hold everything to keep everything in check.

Participant 1: Yeah

Participant 4: which, you know, is really tiring in a concert, you start to feel vocally tired and your body is also getting, getting more tired, you know. You come off and you've got a really sore shoulder because I have clearly been like, gripping a folder to try and, you know, keep everything Grrrrr.....

Participant 3: on the point of the technique that you have just raised, and like how, how you feel your body makes (I'm using this term already) Vibrato. How that happens, and how you stop vibrato from happening. Going back to a certain conductor we were talking about earlier, umm, seems to have a kind of fundamental misunderstanding of how that actually works! And seems to suggest that the straight noise is the relaxed one that happens and you [shows quote marks with hands] put vibrato on the sound. So that constantly gets said to people... "don't put vibrato on there, just relax, just let it, just" you know. And that just really makes me rage inside. Ummm...but umm, I don't think that's something I'm going to change in that persons point of view but I don't know how universal that is. I've heard that used in a real, like, in that particular context I've never heard it from anyone else, specifically, but I don't know whether that's indicative of lots of other....I mean, that conductor was a singer, is a singer. There are plenty who aren't who may well have that misconception. That there's this kind of effect that you are creating when you sing with vibrato and it's...

Participant 1: it's SO frustrating because...

Participant 3: "it gets in the way, let's get rid of it".

Participant 1: that, that group, in particular, is one that kind of works it's way, on a practically yearly basis, through young female voices. There's this constant turn over

of women at the beginning of their career and that's their launch pad into other things. So that is just so unhelpful and infuriating, that.

Participant 2: it's disgusting. I... and they turn up, you know, on my doorstep. Certainly on [moderator's] doorstep and in they come for an hour consultation and I sit on the sofa with them, making them tea and giving them a cuddle because they are so f***ed over and have been psychologically tortured by this person, made to feel useless and awful... and they can't do it and they are too frightened to sing and no confidence. It's absolutely awful. He's not alone. There are other people too.

Participant 3: I feel very lucky that particular outcome hasn't happened to me, given how much I have sung for that person, early on. But I do feel, going back to talking about vocal identity, I DO feel that, as the result of doing lots of work for that particular group and other groups that are similar, at a time when I thought that was my 'thing' and that was what I was good for. I would go along to my singing lessons and sing in this completely other way which would really take me by surprise and I'm gonna get a bit emotional now. [pauses]. Really take me by surprise. And the teacher would be like "woah!!, where's that come from? That's fantastic" (sorry to....but, you know). And I would, I would make this noise that I wasn't even, wasn't very familiar with and be like, ooo this is exciting. But I never had a chance to actually explore that.... Not that I felt like I wanted to at that time. I don't think I wanted to then.

Participant 1: that's so familiar

Participant 3: but now, I feel like I wish I had and I wish somebody else had kind of said maybe you should. Yeah. The balance was not right between the kind of, umm.... Not that there should be a balance maybe. It's just that it shouldn't be allowed at all. For me, I didn't have the self-confidence and the self...the will to make other things happen for me with that other voice. And then, as time has gone on, I just kind of...that's what's taken over. This..this is what I do, what I've done and, which makes me very un... um.. very nervous and unconfident about singing in the way my voice actually sounds because I'm just a bit scared of it.

Participant 1: it feels as though... I've got two thoughts. It feels as though the only way that I have been able to maintain a career is by going through periods of huge change and identity over the last 20 years. And the identity I have now as a singer, as a choral singer is completely different to what I had in my 20s. And a lot of , you know a lot of people don't.... I'm, I'm lucky on the job that I have in that I'm able to do that and I am able to sing in a way, at least some of the time, that suits my age. But, it's like, if you don't.... If you're not prepared to reinvent yourself in the different decades of your career in the choral world. Then you're stuffed. Because you simply can't maintain the sound that you made in your 20s and you can't expect to continue working for the same people because of what THEY want. And also, I was going to say, (and this is unrelated to my previous point), does it actually, this kind of need for a very specific way of singing and perhaps being slightly bullied is too strong a word, but within certain universities and university choirs, there is an expectation of a very specific sound from some conductors who are quite influential. And that sort of sets

you off on a path as well. You might end up being in their professional group once you've graduated from their choir. You know what I mean?

All participants agree

Participant 2: there are several places like that, aren't there?

Participant 1: yeah

Participant 2: I do find... this is an aside and not particularly relevant Charlotte, I'm sorry! I do find it, ummm.. you know, this is something we never talk about. We have these feelings as singers and I, I'm...I feel particularly supported by the people I work with and I'm very grateful and hugely lucky and appreciative of that. But I know that isn't the case for everyone.

Participant 1: mmm

Participant 2: you know, it makes me yeah. It's just really, really valuable to hear other people's experiences and to hear your feelings about....because, you know, we all have these feelings don't we and we sort of go through this stuff on a regular basis of, sort of, this awful self criticism. Umm... is it just part of the course? Is that just what it is? If we are in a sort of choral world where it is a very difficult one to maintain. I don't know. I'm not really making much sense

Participant 1: No, you are

Participant 2: I just think it is very interesting to hear people being incredibly honest. Um...and, you know, I can really resonate with that.

Participant 4: mmm. Following on from what [participant 3] said as well, I remember very specifically working for a group and they were, you know, there were a lot of stuff that was shifted really high for the top line and I took, I took a piece to my teacher, you know, a piece that is not hard notes but I said I NEED to find a way to sing this for 2 weeks without killing myself. And, I had a lesson on it and, you know, got to the end of it and he said "that's great, it sounds great, sounds really free and, you know, that's fine you can take that like that" and I said "no I can't, I can't". Because I know exactly what reaction I will get the first time I try to sing it like this, in this restrained but healthy way. It will be a big fat uh, uh [waves finger]. No thank you. You need to cut that right down.

What it's meant for me, you know, I've only been singing professionally for 15 years but, very rapidly, the number of groups that I feel I can work for and probable want to book me has just reduced and reduced and I feel like I am left with so few options now that it's, well, how can I carry on doing this long term? Because I can't just work for one or two groups to make this a sustainable career, enough to live off, whatever that means for you. It's, just, there's no other, I don't know where to go next. So.....

Participant 1: it's so tough. Just, this conversation has just reminded me of a Tweet that I saw about 3 days [ago] about the BBC singers [shows mobile phone with tweet on]. Can you see that? If not I'll read, I'll read it out if you can't see it.

Moderator: could you read it out

Participant 1: it says “The BBC Singers have completely changed their sound from an operatic, unblending top line to a beautiful young, fresh sound. Gorgeous” and that’s just some woman whose name is [*****] well, that’s her Twitter handle. I’ll send it to you Charlotte. I mean, that just sums up the issue doesn’t it. Young

Participant 2: young, young and fresh, young and straight, young and relaxed and free. Old and shrieky, wobbly and

Participant 1: Mature. I mean, mature is like an insult in that context, isn’t it? Nu..... I mean it’s practically saying “ooo, they sound really nubile these days, it’s much better”.

Participant 2: yeah. Yeah, yeah

Participant 3: yes.

Moderator: so that’s interesting and that takes me on to the final point. Which is. I want to try and find a solution, I want to find some way of helping. So, is there another word that a conductor can use or is there something else they can do? Or is it a bigger problem? A bigger issue that, for example, society perceives choral blend or the soprano sound in a particular way?

Participant 1: yeah, I think the closer that women can sound to trebles, the better – for a lot of ears. Including my parents. You know, they’ve commented on.. my Dad, even up to quite recently was saying “there’s a lot of vibrato” and I was like “well, yes. I’m 40 and I’ve got 2 children. So, I don’t sound the same as I did when I was 17”.and I think society does, that’s what people want to hear. Unless, you are quite a sort of, unless you are somebody that listens to a lot of music and goes to Opera. If you’re not used to hearing full female voices regularly, then you’re not going to like it. Because....

Participant 4: I was thinking that... sorry!

Participant 1: No, go ahead. I’ve run out!

Participant 4: I was going to say, that’s sort of part of the problem, isn’t it. They think they want to hear it because that is all they hear now because this is the way that it’s gone. Whereas, actually, the more groups like the one that you work for where you’ve got a little bit more freedom. Then they would be hearing that sound a lot more often.

Participant 1: yeah

Participant 4: I mean, cos I don’t know what the situation is in other countries. But, for example, you know, you go to European boys choirs and the boys are all singing with vibrato.

Participant 1: yeah, big time

Participant 4: and that’s what they expect. Um. There’s very much the sense, isn’t there, of the ‘English sound’. You go over to America and they go mad for the

English sound which basically means, yeah, the sort of pale.... Top line because they are thinking of all these lovely choristers, or....

Participant 1 & 3: yeah

Participant 3: it's very unimaginative, quite frankly! [laughs]

Participant 1: I mean to answer your question, Charlotte. I don't think there's one word that can be used instead. I don't know how.... I think there's got to be a change of taste in what people are willing to listen to really. And what is presented across the....

Participant 3: and what people...

Participant 1: industry

Participant 3: sorry! And what people think that people want to listen to as well. Because, actually I think a lot of it is driven by just being safe about what you think people want as well. There are people like your lady on Twitter and there are plenty of people like that. Also, I think I just feel like maybe it could be...yeah... it doesn't have to be so black and white. And..

Participant 1: I agree

Participant 3: I think that a lot of conductors probably, they like what they like and they also expect that the audience is going to like that too. And don't necessarily, don't realise that maybe they would be fine with it being more interesting. [laughs]. I'm using very loaded terms!

Participant 2: but there is, you know, there are degrees of... of how conductors interpret the word blend. I mean, and ...and, you know, so, of the groups we've been kind of talking about and other ones that several of us work for and...the different degrees of, kind of, either relaxation or misery. Depending on how you're kind of guided by the conductor. And, you know, I don't want to hear, I don't want to hear women singing in a way that sounds competitive with each other. That's not great, I don't think anyone wants to hear that.

Participant 3: No

Participant 2: but, singing with warmth and colour and freedom. Absolutely. And being able to change the way you sing and adapt to different styles. Great. And I think the use of words like, you know, warmth and colour..umm.... Listen to each other, umm, support each other.

Participant 3: yes, agreeing on a colour. Finding a colour. Maybe, you if you're feeling like, yes, we need to blend in the actual real sense that doesn't mean straight. Actually use a phrase like, finding a similar, find the same colour.

Participant 2: in my experience... sorry, go on.

Participant 3: sorry. Inviting people to, inviting singers to kind of explore it themselves. Like, through listening to each other. Rather than just saying "I want it like this and this is how you will sing".

Participant 1: do you think... I wonder whether also volume is an issue because you can sing in a straight and 'blended', or whatever adjective you want to use for it. You can sing in a very homogenous and straight way with your colleagues more easily if it's not pianissimo. So, maybe part of the problem is that we are all being asked to sing very quietly a lot of the time. And, with a bit more sort of freedom of... not saying do it loudly but it's less restricted and restrictive if it's not a tiny sound. Because you can still support and sing straight without making it all about a clamp in your throat. I don't know.

Participant 2: yep. We've done, umm... ok, so a programme that *Choir* has done, as some of you know - let's stop pussyfooting around! I've sung for three different conductors in the last month, the same programme. Umm, and... really, really interesting. All absolutely different styles. No mention of the word blend from any of them. And...I, I feel the same sort of, sort of vocal worries or anxieties with every conductor because they're to do with me not the conductor. But, it is a really interesting exercise, and I'm..I'm really pleased that I don't think ***Conductor*** uses the word blend. Or if he does, very, very rarely. I don't think... am I right in that? Am I making that up?

Participant 3: No, I think you're right

Participant 2: I don't think he does. That's not to say that I don't think he can make life difficult. I think he sometimes...you know, we have a laugh about how he uses his hand [puts hand up in a stop gesture]. Umm, which, you know, is awful. Cos that makes you just go 'hurgh' [puts hand up to throat and moves backwards]. Uh...but.. I don't think that HE, you know, he doesn't want that white, soulless soprano line.

Participant 1:No

Participant 2: so I think it really depends on who you're working for.

Participant 1: yep

Participant 2: and I think there are certain individuals that, that make it very, very difficult. It shouldn't be like that, but what can you do about that? I don't know. I don't know how...I don't know.

Participant 1: we did a We sing..... We do conductor workshops at the Royal Academy every year and ...I don't know if you want to put this in your thing or not.... **Conductor** was teaching them and She talked a lot about the difference that gesture can make. It's just when you talked about the hand, it made me think because her signal for too loud is that [places hand horizontally], not that [places hand in a stop signal]. And the way she conducts... she got the students...she said "if you are conducting with your hands in front of your body, you are not inviting a supportive breath. Whereas If your upbeat is to the side of your body, you are inviting a full bodied breath in", and the hands going up in that way [gestures upwards with hands to the side of body]. She's so, she is so conscious of the effect that her gesture has on the sound that she hears. And, I..I had no idea that that was a conscious thing on her part but, once she pointed it out and got these students moving in a different way. It made a massive difference to the sound that they

elicited from us. So perhaps that is something that...um, that the industry could work harder on. I thought that was really clever – especially the breath thing. Because if it's there [hands in front], then that's how you are gonna sing. If it's little, and if it goes down rather than up, for example.

Participant 2: Charlotte, maybe you just need to get Conductor to do a whole series of ??? talks and leave her to do it

All agree

Participant 1: if you were to ask her, her thoughts on it – she would be a really good person to talk to. For what you're working on. It's... she's got a lot to say on it. It's, it's really refreshing. She the other thing that I think she..... this is not relevant to this conversation at all really, but she has this incredible ability to read the people in the room. She knows when.... How people are feeling and what they're thinking. She is very tuned in to dynamics between people socially and....there's this awareness of the group dynamic which really feeds in to the way that she works from day to day which I find quite refreshing in comparison to a lot of other conductors who are...that everybody goes to what they want. You know, they are in charge of the whole mood of the room and you work, you work to how they are feeling. But it's much more.... I think a conductor who works in a more collaborative way and can read the temperature of the room and the way people are feeling around them... you're gonna sing in a much more relaxed way if, if that's, if that's what's in front of you.

Moderator: absolutely... and that's mentally more healthy and vocally more healthy.

Participant 1: absolutely

Participant 2: and then that achieves, then, the aim of singing as one.

All agree

Participant 2: the conductor is trying to... you know, wants a [does quote fingers] blended sound, then...that is the way to achieve that. Because then it also a degree of trust. That you trust your singers that actually, that we're not totally stupid-most of the time! And, we do all have ears and we do want it to be a good product. You know. 99%, on the whole, that's what we think and we want. So, it's that kind of trusting your singers that they are really, really, really good at what they do. And if the conductor can absolutely do gestures that...that help us breathe well, help us be free, help us express the music, the text. Umm...without trying to control every single aspect of the performance. Then, that has to be a healthy way forward.

Participant 1: yes

Participant 2: without using any words. You know, hardly using any words at all.

Participant 1: yep, yes. And that in turn allows you to maintain your own vocal identity as well, I guess. If you feel that you are part of a collaboration rather than living in a dictatorship or working in a dictatorship. Cos, ultimately you are making music together aren't you? You're ..maybe the way we have all worked with, for such a long time, with so many people of there being one person in the room who is in charge of every aspect of it is, maybe that's part of the problem. It's fascinating.

Participant 4: we've talked about the fact that, you know, there are some conductors who just don't really understand actually how the voice actually works. You know, they are asking you to do something. They might not specifically be telling you to do something technical but they are really asking you to do something that is....like, completely opposite to the way you make your sound. You know, it's lucky that when you've got some younger people in there, then they can sort of do that. Or their sound is maybe more naturally that way at that stage in their career anyway. But, you know, you had a conductor in front of an orchestra, they're not going to know how everybody, you know, the best technique for all the instrumental things. You wouldn't ask them "well, I like this sound where all the violinists hold their arms really high and hold....". If you want the sound that that's making, you find another way to get them to make that sound. Don't you? You don't, you know. Cos they would all go "sorry but that really, really hurts my arm. I can't really make that sound that way".

Participant 3: or a good conductor will say "oh sorry" will say "I'm not a violinist. Can somebody...can you kind of find a way?" And actually defer, because they know that that's not....it's not reasonable to expect they do know everything. So they defer to someone who does.

Participant 4: yeah

Participant 2: that's why all choral conductors need to have singing lessons. You know, a good choral conductor has singing lessons. **Conductor** has a singing lesson twice a week with the choir's singing teacher.

Participant 1: yep, yep.

Participant 2: So he can understand. So he understands what to say to the boys..and the men.

Participant 3: ooo, I'm going to suggest that at the Cathedral. I'm going to teach the director of music.

Participant 2: yeah, it should be an absolute no brainer, you know. So they can speak the same language as the singing teacher. They would all communicate in the same way and there's no mixed messages. Yeah, no brainer.

Participant 1: yeah, absolutely. It should be mandatory.

Participant 4: yeah.

Participant 3: just a quick thing on, um, you were just asking about how we can.. we were just talking about... how we can move things on. Ah... I've actually just finished that book 'Invisible Women' by Caroline Criado Perez, which is about 4 years old now. But it's about the gender data gap and we have just been talking about how this is really refreshing hearing peoples opinions and it just doesn't happen very much. You've also talked about the studies that are out there by conductors or reports that are by conductors who, for the large part, are probably male. Um, and that's all out there. Their opinions are all out there. Their..the things they....their findings are there. Um.. but this is, but this is perhaps not. And there you go. We are

filling in a data gap as well. So if we are keeping on doing that, it will help. Finding, having more experience, just the wealth of everyone's experiences actually told.

Participant 1: yep.

Participant 2: there's a book in there, Charlotte!

Moderator: yep! Talk about it and get everybody talking about it.

Participant 3: and filling in the gaps in other people's...because people only know what they experience. But if you have more people in the room who have different experiences, giving their experiences then you've got a richer, wealth of sort of...um...I'm not going to say the word experience again! But.....

Participant 4: point of view!

Everyone laughs

Moderator: yes. Putting it out there and therefore also helping future generations when they get to this point and they suddenly find themselves in a situation that nobody's talked about and you daren't talk about it to your neighbour in case they don't feel it as well. "Oh, is it just me?". So, thank you for talking about it all.