

“This circle of joy”:

Meaningful musicians’ work and the benefits of facilitating singing groups

Submission for *Music Education Research* special issue on musicians’ livelihoods

Abstract

The complex realities of musicians' portfolio careers highlight the need for research on musicians' wellbeing. Musicians may include community work within their portfolio such as the facilitation of singing groups for health and wellbeing. Until recently, research on these groups has focused primarily on health and wellbeing outcomes for group participants with little discussion of these factors for the facilitators as professional musicians. We recruited eleven facilitators for semi-structured interviews to investigate their work experiences. Informed by positive psychology and the PERMA model for wellbeing, reflexive thematic analysis of interview data produced themes indicating positive wellbeing outcomes for facilitators. Facilitation was experienced as a unique relationship and mode of performance, and as work ideally suited to facilitators' skills and interests. Facilitators' experiences exhibited all five PERMA elements constitutive of wellbeing: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). These findings align with other research on the positive experiences of professional musicians, music educators and singing group participants, while contributing new understanding that facilitation of these groups can offer wellbeing benefits that compliment musicians' livelihoods. This is important knowledge for the facilitators themselves and for university educators who seek to inform the career choices of their students.

Introduction

Increasingly, educators in university settings are being exhorted to prepare students for careers which will almost inevitably involve work beyond the performance stage (Bennett 2008; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; López-Íñiguez and Bennett 2020). There is now substantial evidence that professional musicians in Australia navigate diverse portfolios of work to sustain their careers (Bartleet et al. 2019; Bartleet et al. 2020; Bartlett and Tolmie 2017; Bennett 2008). Bartleet et al. (2019, 285) discussed the complex realities of portfolio careers, and noted musicians' health and wellbeing as an area of concern. Accordingly, music higher education needs to consider issues of health and wellbeing when preparing musicians for portfolio careers (Bartleet et al. 2019, 285; see also Teague and Smith 2015 for the UK context).

This special edition journal publication is framed by an expansive notion of musicians' "livelihoods" as encompassing meaningful work which satisfies both material and non-material needs. Bartleet et al. (2019, 285) reported that some musicians receive regular payment or honoraria from community groups within their portfolio of work (see earlier Schippers and Bartleet 2013). Hallam et al. (2016) found that community music facilitators working with older people found the work musically, personally and professionally rewarding (see also Jin 2016). Community singing groups for health and wellbeing require skilled musician facilitators, yet little is known about their work experiences. We propose that exploring singing group facilitation through the theory of wellbeing (Seligman 2011) can provide a new perspective, and illuminate the psychological benefits of this work. This knowledge may assist educators to mentor music students who seek to incorporate community health and wellbeing work in their portfolio career.

Positioning Singing Group Facilitators

We have chosen the word “facilitator” to subtly distinguish community health and wellbeing singing group work from community choir conducting and community music teaching. Undoubtedly, singing group facilitators possess skills like those of the choral conductor, including strong musical-technical and interpersonal skills (Durrant 2002). As with conducting and teaching, effective facilitation calls for pedagogical expertise in building musical skills for group participants (Forbes and Bartlett 2020). Despite these similarities, we propose that community singing group facilitation for health and wellbeing differs from community conducting and music teaching in subtle yet important ways. Dingle et al. (2019) argue that the overall purpose of the group is related directly to the effectiveness and skills of the group leader. If, as Durrant (2002, 90) notes, a conductor holds “expectations of the highest [musical] standards possible”, then we agree with Dingle et al. that expert conducting skills are needed (even in the community context). Similarly, if participants have joined a singing group to improve musical skills, then the group leader is more likely to act in a teaching role, carefully scaffolding learning (see Creech et al. 2014 on facilitating music activities with older people).

Like many community choirs, community singing groups for health and wellbeing tend to emphasise inclusion, diversity, and acceptance of members, regardless of musical skill or background (Lamont et al. 2018; Dingle et al. 2013). Group formats generally incorporate recognisable “choral” and “teaching” activities such as warming up and breathing exercises. Facilitators work collaboratively with their groups, commonly using informal modes of instruction for repertoire work such as demonstration, call and response, and recordings to assist group members to learn repertoire by ear rather than requiring them to read sheet music (Forbes and Bartlett 2020). However, unlike community choirs for musical learning or artistic excellence, facilitators of health and wellbeing singing groups may require a working understanding of a range of physical and mental health conditions (Dingle et al. 2019; Dingle

et al. 2013). Musical goals and achievement are still important for these groups (see e.g. Lamont 2018), but these must be finely balanced with the primary need for group members to feel supported, engaged, cared for, and empowered through music making.

To distinguish facilitation further, we situate this work “...between several defined fields and professions, including community music, music therapy, and community music therapy” (Daykin 2012, 65; see also MacDonald, Kreutz and Mitchell 2012). Rather than being formal therapeutic workers, we conceptualise facilitators as “community music leaders” who are called to serve and are competent in facilitation and leadership (Willingham and Carruthers, 2018, 601-602). Facilitators exhibit leadership within the full spectrum of professional musicians’ activities from, “...the creative act through to collaborative engagement and creating and sustaining a career” (Bennett, Rowley and Schmidt 2019, xiii; see also Rowley, Bennett and Schmidt 2019). We therefore argue that facilitation requires its own unique combination of skills and attributes: leadership based on personal values of service, care, diversity and social inclusion; an understanding of a range of health conditions; and strong musical, pedagogical and interpersonal skills.

Theoretical framework

To date, research has primarily focused on wellbeing outcomes for singing group participants (for reviews see Daykin et al. 2018; Clift et al. 2010), rather than the facilitators themselves. For the purposes of our study, the PERMA model was applied as a framework for investigating experiences of wellbeing in a group of community singing group facilitators. The PERMA model comes from the field of positive psychology and has been used by other researchers in the fields of music education and community music research (discussed below).

The emergence of the field of positive psychology during the 1970s and 1980s saw a shift in focus away from addressing psychological illnesses towards providing a positive framework to help people thrive and flourish (Seligman 2002, 2011). Positive psychology is not exclusively the domain of psychologists but is a broad approach to understanding what it means to live well (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009, 195). The intent is to identify and describe those things in life we choose to pursue for their own sake (Seligman 2011, 11). Beginning with “authentic happiness” theory and later revised as “wellbeing theory”, wellbeing is theorised as a construct comprised of various elements (Seligman 2011, 15). No single element operationalizes wellbeing, but each element must contribute to it, be pursued for its own sake, and be independently measurable (Seligman 2011, 16). The five elements described as contributing to wellbeing are summarised in Table 1: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A), resulting in the mnemonic “PERMA”. Underpinning “wellbeing theory” are strengths and virtues which, when deployed to meet our highest challenges, can lead to an increase across all five elements of PERMA (Seligman 2011, 24).

P	Positive emotions	Subjective	“The pleasant life”; the affective dimension of wellbeing; <i>dispositive</i> in that the person experiencing the positive emotion “cannot be wrong” (Seligman 2011, 16-17)
E	Engagement	Subjective	Complete absorption or immersion in the present moment/task; flow state is high form of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2000); measured retrospectively because “thought and feeling are usually absent in the flow state” (Seligman 2011, 17)
R	Relationships	Subjective and objective	Can be accompanied by other elements of PERMA, yet evolutionary perspectives provide that because of a fundamental drive to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995) we pursue positive relationships for their own sake (Seligman 2011, 22-24)
M	Meaning	Subjective and objective	“belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (Seligman 2011, 17); not dispositive, in that one’s subjective experience may be displaced by objective judgment.
A	Accomplishment	Subjective and objective	May be pursued for its own sake absent meaning, positive emotions or relationships; includes external markers of success and mastery as well as the perception of accomplishment (Seligman 2011, 18-20)

Table 1: Snapshot of the PERMA model for wellbeing

Recent research has applied PERMA to a wide range of contexts including: early-career music teachers (Ballantyne and Zhukov 2017), professional classical musicians (Ascenso, Williamon and Perkins 2017; Ascenso, Perkins and Williamon 2018), music programs in Australian schools (Lee, Krause and Davidson 2017), professional popular music singers (Heyman, Perkins and Araújo 2019) and older people who participate in community singing groups (Lamont et al. 2018; Lee, Davidson and Krause 2016). The PERMA element of *engagement* has been explored in many studies on music and flow (Tan and Sin 2019), including in education (Custodero 2002) and jazz singing (Forbes 2020). These studies demonstrate that the PERMA model is an illuminative lens through which to explore the complex processes of music practice and participation (see further Croom 2015). In a number of these studies, the PERMA element of social *relationships* was central to positive engagement with music activities constitutive of wellbeing (e.g. Ascenso et al. 2017; Ballantyne and Zhukov 2017; Lamont et al. 2018; Lee, Krause and Davidson 2017). Beyond PERMA studies, a recent meta-ethnography of the ways in which musical engagement

supports wellbeing found, *inter alia*, that music facilitates connections between people (Perkins et al. 2020). Camlin et al. 2020 describe group singing as providing "...an opportunity for participants to rehearse and perform 'healthy relationships'". Building on these and previous PERMA studies, we deploy the PERMA model to "support, modify, or reject" (Fletcher 2019, 185) the hypothesis that singing group facilitators' work is comprised of wellbeing elements.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews through an online qualitative survey which profiled community singing group facilitators in Australia. Of the twenty participants who completed the survey, eighteen volunteered to be interviewed, and eleven participated in the follow-up interview. Participants reported working with a range of needs-based singing groups represented as: people with Parkinson's and their carers; people with disabilities; people with mental health issues; older people and those with dementia; and, a number of groups formed to address social inclusion and to reduce loneliness.

Table 2 (below) summarises facilitators' demographic information. The gender distribution of the interviewees was two males and nine females with an average age of 48.8 years (N=11). Their facilitation experience ranged from one to twelve years. Nine interviewees were self-employed predominantly and eight had university-level qualifications in music. One participant was a qualified music therapist. This information was gathered through Part 1 (the initial survey) and again in Part 2 (interviews) of the study. For the eight participants who reported music training at university level, qualifications ranged from Diploma and Bachelor degrees to Graduate Diplomas and Masters degrees.

Human ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was required for participation and no incentives were offered. Participants have been de-identified and given pseudonyms for the reporting of results.

Pseudonym	Interview (minutes)	Approx age	Gender	Employment status	Number of groups	Years facilitating	Level of university music qualification	% income derived from facilitation
Aster	42:24	48	F	Self-employed (other)	1	9	N/A	Covers costs
Dusty	34:55	51	F	Full-time (other)	1	3	Bachelor	Covers costs
Kay	42:10	55	F	Self-employed	2	1	Diploma	40%
Gillian	35:29	49	F	Self-employed	1	5	Bachelor Graduate Diploma	80%
Olivia	24:29	72	F	Retired	1	2	Masters Graduate Diplomas	Covers costs
Sarah	28:27	48	F	Self-employed	3	12	Bachelor (Theatre and Music)	95%
Alex	42:27	31	M	Self-employed Casual employment	3	10	Bachelor	60%
Frances	33:53	59	F	Self-employed	2	1	Masters	40-50%
Cedric	54:12	40	F	Self-employed	2	5	N/A	50%
May	30:18	25	F	Self-employed	1	1	Masters (Music Therapy)	7%
Richard	28:29	59	M	Self-employed	2	12	N/A	18%

Table 2. The Participants

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were designed to explore facilitators' experiences of working with their singing group(s). To ensure a continuity of approach, all interviews were conducted by the first author, who had no prior relationship with participants apart from one facilitator who worked with a singing group at the interviewer's institution. Interviews followed a schedule (Table 3) and prompts were used to guide facilitators to focus on their own subjective experience of facilitation. Interview questions were broadly formulated with reference to a previous qualitative study exploring musicians' wellbeing using the PERMA model (Ascenso, Williamon, and Perkins 2017), and, in keeping with a critical realist approach, were informed by wellbeing theory (Fletcher, 2019). Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were provided to participants for review and amendment.

What does working with your group/s feel like? What emotions do you experience?

Do you ever feel completely immersed in facilitation? Can you describe what this feels like?

Tell me about the relationships you've formed as a result of facilitating your group/s? What is the nature of those relationships?

What does it mean to you to be able to facilitate your singing group/s?

To what extent do you feel your facilitation is valuable and worthwhile?

Do you feel like you are accomplishing something with your facilitation? If so, what?

Does your facilitation work align with your personal values and beliefs? If so, how?

Are there any other aspects of your experiences of facilitation that you would like to mention?

Table 3: Example interview questions

Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a cluster of heterogeneous approaches to data analysis which is used to identify patterns within a data set (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2006). Themes are conceptualized as "patterns of shared meaning" (Braun and Clark 2020, 4), "united by a central concept or idea" (Braun and Clarke 2020, 14). Here, *reflexive TA* (Braun and Clarke

2019) was used to analyse transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with facilitators. Reflexive TA “emphasises the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity as analytic *resource*, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation” (Braun and Clarke 2020, 3, emphasis in original). In contrast to other approaches to TA which rely on multiple coders for “reliability”, reflexive TA “fully embrace[s] qualitative research values and the subjective skills the researcher brings to the process... a research team is not required or even desirable for quality” (Braun and Clarke 2020, 6). Given the emphasis on qualitative values and researcher subjectivity in reflexive TA, a sole analyst is not necessarily an impediment to quality in reflexive TA.

The first author worked within a critical realist paradigm where existing literature and theory drive the research question/s and inform the coding process, which is largely deductive, yet flexible (Fletcher, 2019). The positionality of the first author/analyst as a professional musician, music and singing voice educator, and her desire to investigate meaningful work pathways for music graduates were influential on the research aim, design, and analysis. Analysis was guided by the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020) but occurred creatively, actively and flexibly in response to the analyst’s evolving interpretation. During data familiarisation, initial notes were recorded on hard copy transcripts. Data were first coded in hard copy. This initial coding was deductive, using a provisional coding scheme derived from the PERMA model for wellbeing, and then adjusted and added to inductively in response to participants’ experiences and the analyst’s emerging interpretation of these experiences. Coding focused on exploring meaning dynamically, moving between surface and latent levels. All data and coding were inputted into NVIVO (a software program for qualitative data analysis) for the final stages of analysis. Where there was substantial intersection of meaning between codes, codes were clustered together. Finally, themes were developed through a writing process, reviewed, refined, and named (Braun and Clarke 2020,

4). Themes are presented below as capturing “multiple facets of a particular meaning or experience” for facilitators of singing groups for health and wellbeing (Braun and Clarke 2020, 13). Rather than simply “topic summaries”, themes in reflexive TA should be “fully realised...patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central concept” (Braun and Clarke 2020, 18). It is for this reason that the themes presented are not merely topic summaries of each element of PERMA, but rather capture the complexity of participants’ experiences which evidence multiple elements of PERMA. Reference was made throughout the analysis and reporting of results to the assessment guide for quality reflexive TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020).

Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data resulted in three themes (Table 4), each of which corresponds to elements of the PERMA model. In presenting the results, italics are used to refer to the relevant elements of the PERMA model.

Themes	PERMA
1. Facilitating is a unique relationship which transcends “work”	R relationships, P positive emotions, M meaning
2. Facilitation is a unique mode of music performance	R relationships, E engagement
3. Facilitation is ideal work <i>for me</i>	M meaning, A accomplishment

Table 4: Themes and corresponding elements of PERMA resulting from the reflexive thematic analysis of facilitators’ interviews

Theme 1: Facilitating is a unique relationship which transcends “work”

The relationship between facilitator and group is the beating heart of facilitators’ work experiences. Facilitation transcended “work” because it is first and foremost a unique *relationship* between facilitators and their groups, not merely a “job” (note, however, that most facilitators in this study *are* paid for this work—see Table 2).

The nature of this relationship was described variously by the interviewees as family (Alex, Aster, Dusty, Gillian, Sarah); friendship (Cedric, Dusty, Richard; Alex—“They are all friends in a way. I don’t say that lightly”; Frances—“like old mates”); loving (Alex, Aster, Kay, Gillian; Sarah—“deep love and affection”; Dusty—“it’s like walking into a hug”); empowering (Alex); caring (Olivia); “delicious sharing” (Frances); stable (Frances—“being consistent in the way we show up”); and intimate (Kay). Some facilitators were overt in their views that the nature of the relationship took the work beyond the status of “a job”: “They’re not a job for me. It was never about a job...I can’t imagine not being around them” (Dusty); “I think it definitely goes beyond a job and it definitely goes beyond what I’m paid to do” (Sarah).

Much like any healthy relationship, for participants facilitation is based on immediate and unconditional acceptance, respect, trust, and an innate sense of belonging. It is a “non-judgmental relationship” (Aster); “total acceptance” (Sarah); “they accept us as we are” (Frances); “these are my people” (May). As a musician, Frances herself feels she is a social outsider, but within the group “we are celebrating [being on the outside] and that we are free...it’s a very liberated space”. The relationships they describe are built on a freedom to be authentic and true to oneself rather than an adherence to societal expectations: “What’s so beautiful about that is everybody starts to get to know each other as a person, as them, rather than as a label. The singing acts as a front for that social change” (Sarah). As Sarah and others observe, singing plays a vital role in creating an atmosphere of openness and acceptance:

It’s just like—it feels very like a family atmosphere, even when there are new people in the group. They feel like they can belong to it without much effort. They feel like they’re part of it, just the first time they enter. (Alex)

I hardly know the members of my choir, but I absolutely love them. So a real sense of being loved and wanted and cared about. Yeah, it's pretty groovy. (Aster).

This sense of feeling loved and cared about by people who are *not* family, but feel *like* family, appears to engender a deep feeling of belonging. Yet Frances cautions that this feeling of belonging must be held lightly, because “people come and go”. Therefore, facilitators must strike a delicate balance between caring for their group, and investing too much of their own happiness in the group’s success. As Frances describes: “you love them while they’re there and you have this intense time and you share a lot of stuff, then it’s over—it’s gone, it’s over”.

In recognising the depth of this relationship, just as with friends and family, facilitators and their groups must deal with the vicissitudes of life. There is genuine care and concern for group members (for example, birthdays and other milestones are celebrated) and members know that there is “someone else out there that gives a damn” (Dusty). Conversely, when groups experience the passing of a member everyone must process this loss: “we deal with it through singing and we dedicate songs and we talk about the person” (Dusty). Facilitators “walk with” their groups, sharing their journey, be that dealing with chronic illness, mental health issues, loneliness and isolation, or simply the desire to feel joy regularly. The burdens carried by facilitator and group are borne equally, even if just for a brief time each week.

This is not a hierarchical, but rather a communal relationship: “being actually a part of the community has seemed way more important than just being that person up the front who has the expertise” (May). Nonetheless, as with any healthy relationship, facilitation is characterised by clear and firm personal boundaries: “We have really clear rules of interaction in choir” (Aster); “[you have] to create a reasonable boundary between your own emotions and their emotions” (Frances); “it’s important to keep a professional boundary in

place” (Gillian). This element of leadership is extremely important to manage expectations within the group: “you let them in too far, they develop expectations of you, you invariably let them down and things get really messy and unpleasant, so we've had to learn to love them but from a little bit of a distance sometimes” (Gillian); “I sometimes have to draw the line...I’ve just had to be more careful about my boundaries, so I’m not burned out” (Sarah). This non-hierarchical yet clearly defined relationship provides a mutuality of benefit for facilitator and group: “I learn from them and they learn from me...I receive as much caring from them as I hope they receive from me” (Gillian); “Just like I give them support, they gave me all that back as well” (Kay) (see also Jin 2016).

Within this unique relationship, facilitators felt a “quite weighty” (Alex) responsibility for generating “energy” and positive emotions—“I feel a huge responsibility for them having a positive experience every week” (Gillian). The facilitators used their own positive emotions to gain the emotional pulse of the group. They expressed that through their work they felt many *positive emotions* including joy, love, feeling uplifted, fun, enjoyment, satisfaction, reminiscing, curiosity and even euphoria. Ultimately, Aster said that if each individual is looked after and feels good, “that is what makes the group well”. Yet, whilst there is responsibility for providing a positive experience for their groups, not one facilitator said that this was a result of group expectations. As Gillian noted, “no one’s saying to you, this is how you do it”.

The depth of facilitators’ work experiences as *relationships* which engender *positive emotions* reveals elements of PERMA constitutive of wellbeing. Perhaps the relationship of facilitator to group is best described by Sarah who calls it “this circle of joy”. Aster runs her group in the round, and finds this an important part of relationship building, because it signals “we’re all equal...there’s no hierarchy”. Aster also ends each session with the group holding hands in a circle: “it is unbelievable how good that makes you feel, that sense of belonging”.

The metaphor of a circle for the relationship between facilitator and group is apt: the bond is interconnected, continuous, unbroken, non-hierarchical, and equal—it is “being a part of something where everybody’s the same” (Kay). The “circle of joy” not only evokes the strong *positive emotions* experienced by facilitators; it is also a fitting symbol for the *meaning* derived from this work by facilitators—when individuals come together to sing in these groups, the community is much greater than the sum of its parts (“the goal is to increase the group” —Dusty). The depth of facilitators’ work experiences captured in this theme reveals elements of PERMA constitutive of wellbeing as *relationships*, *positive emotions* and *meaning*.

Theme 2: Facilitation is a unique mode of music performance

According to the PERMA model, *engagement*—that is, absorbing or immersive activities—mediates wellbeing. The “flow state” is an example of peak or high engagement. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that facilitators experience their work as a form of music performance, with attendant peak moments of engagement or flow, but in a somewhat different way to traditional concert-style performance. Facilitation is a “different mode” (Aster) of performance as it involves the co-construction of musical moments collaboratively with facilitator and group (in the role of audience), where group feedback and group participation is vital to the success of the session.

On an individual level, nine of the eleven facilitators’ responses contained descriptions indicative of the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 2000). Facilitators described losing a sense of self and time, or time flying (Alex, Aster, Dusty, Frances, May, Richard, Sarah), being in the present (Aster, Cedric, Gillian, Richard, Sarah), complete immersion (Alex, Aster, Dusty), absorption (Frances), like meditation (Sarah), experimentation and play (Gillian), focused concentration (Alex, Dusty, May, Sarah), matching challenges with skills

(Alex, Aster), a feeling of effortlessness when things are going well (Alex, Aster), and improvisatory (Dusty—“we just make stuff up and it’s just great”). Alex sums up this experience most eloquently:

I enter into the music and just lose myself a bit, in the sense that I'm just so interested in the music itself and how I can bring people along that journey that I end up just going to this place where it's like the hour and a half goes by so quickly, and then I come out of it feeling better like the others do, as well...the time passes very quickly for me and I always feel better afterwards.

And, “I don’t really have the space to step outside myself and say, I’m feeling really immersed right now. I don’t even notice it because I’m immersed.” Typical of the “flow state”, this experience is not something that facilitators are necessarily aware of in the moment.

To enter flow, it is important to have access to clear, unambiguous and immediate feedback (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 2000). Richard scans the room looking for a tapping toe, or hands moving with the music, so that he can “see that the music has gone inside the person”. These cues help him to feel relaxed, happy and joyful because he likes to know “that it’s all working the way it’s meant to be working”. Aster runs her group as a circle so she can use her “radar” to “see the reaction of each individual. So, if they’re frowning, then I will reteach the part to the whole group”. There is a synergy or positive feedback loop which occurs during sessions which is described as a “mutual giving of energy” (Alex). Frances taps into “signs of warmth” such as “wheelchair dancing”, or mouthing of lyrics where group members are non-verbal. Tying into the notion of facilitation as performance, Aster feels as if the group—through providing continuous feedback as to “what needs to happen next”—is “guiding it just as much as I am”. Through this continuous feedback loop facilitators and

groups co-create a complex musical and psychological performance which is characterised by peak moments of engagement or flow for facilitators.

As noted above, facilitators feel a responsibility to their groups for having a positive experience. Some facilitators also report that this positive experience can include drawing the group in to feeling a similar “buzz” for both facilitator and group as would be felt in “regular” performance (all but two facilitators are also performers). As Sarah says, “I need to engage people and excite them and take them on a journey, which is what I do as a performer.” Frances notes that, “if I’m really absorbed, they become really absorbed and then we’re all really absorbed and then we’re doing something together” and reflects, “to share that state in that setting, they love it—they just love it. People love it.” Frances continues:

So if my stock-in-trade [as a performer] is to become really focused on the sounds and the meaning of what I’m doing so that I get lost in that because that’s what’s contagious about what I do, then being able to do that with all those other distractions is actually the—that’s the gig.

Alex too describes the energy and momentum of being “swept up” in musical moments for both himself and the group:

It's like you're slowly building the elements of the music together, part by part, moment by moment until eventually, it's there. I think that sweeps people up, too. They feel like they're part of that narrative. Whatever that word is, I feel that one very strongly.

This group momentum is possible because this is an environment where it is acceptable for facilitators “to make mistakes” (Gillian). Aster also notes that “If I do stuff up, they’re not going to judge me”. Gillian feels “very comfortable in that space which allows me very easily to...just be myself and just be creative and experiment”. She goes on to say that “It's really energising, it's incredibly satisfying, it's fun, it's really safe, it's the best place to be. It's really

probably what I would like all of my work to feel like...”. Facilitators thus draw their groups into a performance experience through *engagement* with group members within an environment of continuous feedback and psychological safety.

Theme 3: Facilitation is ideal work for me

Within the PERMA framework, *accomplishment* not only includes external indicators of accomplishment but the perception of accomplishment (Seligman 2011). Facilitators’ experiences demonstrated their perception of accomplishment in several ways. Facilitators described their work as comprising the perfect match of personal skills to the context. This congruence of skills matched to challenges is also a feature of *engagement* and flow, as discussed above. This could be seen in broad terms as facilitators’ fully utilising their “signature strengths” (Seligman 2011), although an in-depth, detailed examination of facilitators’ signature strengths was beyond the scope of this study.

Facilitators sense of the work being just the right fit for them was evidenced by their ability to creatively problem solve (Alex, Aster) and feeling pride in creative achievement for themselves and their group/s (Alex, Aster, Cedric, Gillian—“I feel intensely proud of their work”: Kay—“that’s priceless to me that I’ve actually made a wee bit of difference, just because I’ve been singing”), and having the skills to respond naturally and intuitively to group needs and challenges (Alex, Aster, Cedric, Dusty—“I’ve made a good choice here”; Frances—“I feel really well suited to it”; Gillian—“I’m the most creative and the best musician I can be [with the group]”; May—“choir leading aligns [all my interests]”; Sarah—“it makes sense of the skills I have”). These experiences engendered within the facilitators a strong satisfaction and gratitude for the opportunity to optimise their unique skills and attributes in a meaningful way (Dusty—“This is like me using the gifts I have and it’s to the advantage of these people”; Frances—“at this phase of my life, at my age, with my skill base,

I don't think there's anything that would suit me better, to tell you the truth"; May—"I'm finally here and this is working and I'm really good at it and it's really cool").

The nature of their singing groups provided the opportunity for facilitators to share the joy of music making without the musical expectations of an auditioned choir. This was liberating for a number of facilitators. For Alex, this means he can work "with that spirit of just the joy of singing, rather than the pressure of, this is what performance must be like". Aster says that "even if it falls apart, then we have a laugh and it's alright". Cedric finds satisfaction in turning a "group of oddball characters into a cohesive team who are all working towards an outcome together...it's the very best of humanity." As a professional a cappella singer, he is no longer "looking for groups of people who are excellent that we can sing really easily with", he's just "looking for a challenge". Kay is able to get a great response from "non-singers": "that's just me being me and doing the things that I do".

The groups' level of skill does not undermine the musical goals which many facilitators set for their groups; however, a high level of musical skill is required of facilitators to achieve certain musical goals with groups such as these. For Alex, the very challenge of teaching his extensive knowledge in an accessible and easy to understand way was at the very core of his sense of satisfaction and accomplishment: "all those ingredients come together to create what this is, and it's very addictive." Alex' high technical ability can co-exist in a community setting in a way which was uniquely satisfying to him; these things "don't have to be contradictory to each other". For Alex, this unique combination is core to his identity as a musician and he therefore finds this work very affirming. Cedric feels pride in knowing that he works with a "mixed abilities group" where his ability to construct harmonies "in his head" translates at times into a wonderfully cohesive group sound. For Cedric, this is the "superpower" of group singing. When the group achieves something musically challenging,

their sense of accomplishment feeds the facilitators' own satisfaction in achieving a musical goal. Gillian also feels she has a "superpower":

...when I see them stand in front of me and do this really complex stuff and do it really convincingly, really well, musically, it's intensely satisfying to know that they could but also to know that I could.

Gillian says that in performance, audience expectations are often quite low, yet the feedback is always "wow, don't they make a great sound, they sound amazing!" Gillian finds the progress made by her group as deeply satisfying:

Seeing that progression, seeing them change, seeing their creativity, seeing them learn to use their voice, feel more confident using their voice, therefore feeling more confident in other aspects of their life, makes me really happy to see that there's such a difference for them.

Facilitators' reports of achieving challenging musical goals with their groups belie the assumption that artistic excellence must necessarily be compromised within arts and health settings.

For one's life or work to have *meaning*, according to PERMA, we must have the experience of making a contribution to something larger than the self. Using their unique skills the facilitators experienced the opportunity to serve their group/s: "a privilege...something very profound to me" (Alex); "the privilege of being able to facilitate a choir" (May); "being part of that whole, losing yourself in the whole" (Aster); "you're part of something bigger" and "my skills mean nothing without other people" (Cedric); "I feel really valued, I feel really valuable" (Frances); "I think we all want to know that the work that we do makes a difference to someone...this is work that really matters" (Gillian); "It means the

world to me” (Kay). Gillian went on to say that facilitation is “the best and most important work of my entire life”.

The ability to focus on others’ needs, rather than one’s own, is an important facet of *meaning* that the facilitators derived from their work—Gillian acknowledged that this outward focus is “really beneficial to me as a person”. May agreed: “I just know that everything that we do [as facilitators] is of great importance to these people [in the group]”. Richard realised that “what I’m doing is very significant. It’s very important in people’s lives”. For Olivia, it is important for her to be able to do this work “to give something to someone who hasn’t got what I’ve got”. There is a very strong sense of vocation, service and purpose for work in facilitators’ reflections on the meaning of their role. For Sarah, facilitation has “given my life incredible purpose”. The opportunity to contribute to something larger than the self in a way that is perfectly tailored to facilitators’ skillsets, and the gratifying achievement of musical goals, reveals *meaning* and *accomplishment* within PERMA as wellbeing elements of these musicians’ work experiences.

Discussion

The complex reality of musicians’ portfolio careers warrants research on musicians’ need to seek meaningful work which sustains them psychologically, whilst providing a living wage. Musicians in all forms—educators, performers, community workers and others—overwhelmingly pursue a music career because music is what they love (Bartleet et al. 2020). Earlier studies have explored the rewards of facilitation (Hallam et al. 2016; Jin 2016), and an earlier PERMA study on group singing included a single facilitator, but with an overall focus on group members (Lamont et al. 2018). The novel contribution of the current study is the addition of the collective voice of singing group facilitators to reveal that their work is comprised of wellbeing elements.

Participants reported their role as facilitator as a unique *relationship* between themselves and their groups. This finding resonates with previous PERMA studies of professional musicians (Ascenso et al. 2017), early career music teachers (Ballantyne and Zhukov 2017), community singing for older people (Lamont et al. 2018) and school music programs (Lee, Krause and Davidson 2017) in which *relationships* were reported as foundational to participants' positive functioning. In the current study, facilitation experienced as *relationship* had a deeply humanising effect to the nature of the facilitator's work. This is not perfunctory, meaningless work to be endured; rather, this work was described as a treasured relationship—like family or friendship, yet unique—which engenders *positive emotions* and a strong sense of *meaning*. We agree with Camlin et al. (2020) who contend that community group singing affords the opportunity to meaningfully “perform” healthy relationships. This experience of “work as relationship” challenges the dominant neo-liberal view of work as exclusively contributing to material wellbeing. Whilst it is clear that skilled facilitators need to be appropriately remunerated for their work (Forbes and Bartlett 2020), the relationship with their group members engenders wellbeing and, as such, can be viewed as a non-material, but important career benefit for facilitators.

Facilitators experienced their work as a unique type of music performance in which the group acts as a “mutually reinforcing and complex adaptive process” (Camlin et al. 2020, 3). The opportunities facilitation affords for *engagement* and *flow* also echo research on music and flow, with the majority of facilitators experiencing a flow-state during group sessions. The opportunity for continuous feedback and interactions between facilitator and group produced a situation where the singing was experienced almost as a form of improvised performance. Rather than striving primarily for musical excellence, as might be the case in other choral and educational contexts (although this is not entirely discounted by facilitators), facilitators worked to maintain group energy and synergy, and were comfortable to allow

mistakes within a safe work environment. This supports Camlin et al.'s (2020) notion of “safe danger” within community singing activities where facilitator and group experience psychological and musical safety. A reported lack of personal and musical judgment within the facilitator/group *relationship* (supported by healthy personal boundaries) permits an atmosphere of experimentation and play, leading to the facilitator's experience of *flow* and *engagement*.

Further to the notion of facilitation as a form of performance, we agree with a growing opinion in the literature that the complex terrain of musicians' portfolio careers renders the focus on traditional performance in higher music education “less relevant” (e.g. Bartleet et al. 2019, 289; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; López-Íñiguez and Bennett 2020). Based on our findings, particularly as they relate to flow and engagement, we propose that “performance” is an expansive concept, and that singing group facilitation *does* in fact provide highly skilled musical performers with an opportunity for rewarding performance experiences on whatever “stage” they choose.

Facilitators in our study reported that they experienced a strong sense of *meaning* from their work. They attributed this to a subordination of their personal needs to that of the needs of group participants. In the process, they gained a positive perspective on, and gratitude for, their own lives. An important contributing factor to a feeling of *achievement* was their ability to work with a “broad church” of non-auditioned singer participants to achieve musical goals despite the odds (see also Hallam et al. 2016). They did this by employing expert musical, pedagogical and interpersonal skills which produced positive outcomes for individuals and for the group as a whole. Ultimately, facilitators experienced their work as the highest expression of their personal values and skills—the very essence of wellbeing expressed across the PERMA model.

Conclusion

We acknowledge several limitations to this study. The focus here was on one aspect of facilitators' working life—broader implications for wellbeing were not investigated. A much larger and comprehensive study would be required to explore wellbeing across the full range of a facilitator's portfolio of work. The study's hypothesis and design were informed by wellbeing theory and the PERMA model, therefore there was a distinct focus on positive aspects of experience. Dingle et al. (2019) discuss this as a common limitation to much of the research around group singing generally.

The complex realities of musicians' portfolio careers warrant ongoing research to investigate avenues of meaningful work; that is, work that supports musicians' wellbeing as they strive to maintain a living wage. Whilst earlier studies have explored musicians' wellbeing in the context of education and performance, this current research contributes new understandings of the ways in which singing group facilitators might experience their work as meaningful and psychologically rewarding. Engagement with community singing groups and “the circle of joy” offers a unique opportunity for musicians to infuse their careers with additional meaning and purpose as they negotiate an increasingly stressful livelihood pathway.

References

- Ascenso, Sara, Aaron Williamon, and Rosie Perkins. 2017. "Understanding the Wellbeing of Professional Musicians through the Lens of Positive Psychology." *Psychology of Music* 45 (1): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735616646864>.
- Ascenso, Sara, Rosie Perkins, and Aaron Williamon. 2018. "Resounding Meaning: A PERMA Wellbeing Profile of Classical Musicians." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01895>.
- Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh, Christina Ballico, Dawn Bennett, Ruth Bridgstock, Paul Draper, Vanessa Tomlinson, and Scott Harrison. 2019. "Building Sustainable Portfolio Careers in Music: Insights and Implications for Higher Education." *Music Education Research* 21 (3): 282–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2019.1598348>.
- Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh, Dawn Bennett, Ruth Bridgstock, Scott Harrison, Paul Draper, Vanessa Tomlinson, and Christina Ballico. 2020. "Making Music Work: Sustainable Portfolio Careers for Australian Musicians." Australia Research Council Linkage Report. Brisbane: Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University.
- Bartlett, Irene, and Diana Tolmie. 2018. "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life? A Profile of Jazz/Contemporary Voice Graduates." *International Journal of Music Education* 36 (2): 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761417714606>.
- Ballantyne, Julie, and Katie Zhukov. 2017. "A Good News Story: Early-Career Music Teachers' Accounts of Their 'Flourishing' Professional Identities." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 68 (November): 241–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.08.009>.

- Baumeister, Roy F., and Mark R. Leary. 1995. "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (3): 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Bennett, Dawn Elizabeth. 2008. *Understanding the Classical Music Profession: The Past, the Present and Strategies for the Future*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Bennett, Dawn, and Ruth Bridgstock. 2015. "The Urgent Need for Career Preview: Student Expectations and Graduate Realities in Music and Dance." *International Journal of Music Education* 33 (3): 263–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761414558653>.
- Dawn, Jennifer Rowley, and Patrick Schmidt, eds. 2019. *Leadership and Musician Development in Higher Music Education*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11 (4): 589–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2020. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Advance online publication: 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.
- Camlin, David A., Helena Daffern, and Katherine Zeserson. 2020. "Group Singing as a Resource for the Development of a Healthy Public: A Study of Adult Group Singing." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00549-0>.

Clift, Stephen., Jennifer Nicol, Matthew Raisbeck, Christine Whitmore, and Ian Morrison.

2010. *Group Singing, Wellbeing and Health: A Systematic Mapping of Research*

Evidence. Kent, UK: Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury

Christ Church University.

Creech, Andrea, Maria Varvarigou, Susan Hallam, Hilary McQueen, and Helena Gaunt.

2014. "Scaffolding, Organizational Structure and Interpersonal Interaction in Musical

Activities with Older People." *Psychology of Music* 42 (3): 430–47.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735613478313>.

Croom, Adam M. 2014. "Music Practice and Participation for Psychological Well-Being: A

Review of How Music Influences Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships,

Meaning, and Accomplishment:" *Musicae Scientiae*, December.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864914561709>.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1975. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 2002. *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*.

Rev. ed. London: Rider.

Custodero, Lori. 2002. "Seeking Challenge, Finding Skill: Flow Experience and Music

Education." *Arts Education Policy Review* 103 (3): 3–9.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632910209600288>.

Daykin, Norma. 2012. "Developing Social Models for Research and Practice in Music, Arts,

and Health: A Case Study of Research in a Mental Health Setting." In *Music, Health,*

and Wellbeing, edited by Raymond MacDonald, Gunter Kreutz, and Laura Mitchell,

65–75. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Daykin, Norma, Louise Mansfield, Catherine Meads, Guy Julier, Alan Tomlinson, Annette Payne, Lily Grigsby Duffy, et al. 2018. "What Works for Wellbeing? A Systematic Review of Wellbeing Outcomes for Music and Singing in Adults." *Perspectives in Public Health* 138 (1): 39–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913917740391>.
- Dingle, Genevieve A., Christopher Brander, Julie Ballantyne, and Felicity A. Baker. 2013. "‘To Be Heard’: The Social and Mental Health Benefits of Choir Singing for Disadvantaged Adults." *Psychology of Music* 41 (4): 405–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735611430081>.
- Dingle, Genevieve A., Stephen Clift, Saoirse Finn, Rebekah Gilbert, Jenny M. Groarke, J. Yoon Irons, Alice Jones Bartoli, et al. 2019. "An Agenda for Best Practice Research on Group Singing, Health, and Well-Being." *Music & Science* 2 (January): 2059204319861719. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204319861719>.
- Fletcher, Amber J. 2017. "Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research: Methodology Meets Method." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 20 (2): 181–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401>.
- Forbes, Melissa. 2020. "Giving Voice to Jazz Singers’ Experiences of Flow in Improvisation." *Psychology of Music*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735619899137>.
- Forbes, Melissa and Irene Bartlett. 2020. "‘It’s Much Harder than I Thought’: Facilitating a Singing Group for People with Parkinson’s Disease." *International Journal of Community Music* 13 (1): 29–47. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ijcm_00009_1.
- Hallam, Susan, Andrea Creech, Hilary McQueen, Maria Varvarigou, and Helena Gaunt. 2016. "The Facilitator of Community Music-Making with Older Learners:

- Characteristics, Motivations and Challenges.” *International Journal of Music Education* 34 (1): 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761415617039>.
- Heyman, Lucinda, Rosie Perkins, and Liliana S. Araújo. 2019. “Examining the Health and Well-Being Experiences of Singers in Popular Music.” *Journal of Popular Music Education* 3 (2): 173–201. https://doi.org/info:doi/10.1386/jpme.3.2.173_1.
- López-Íñiguez, Guadalupe, and Dawn Bennett. 2020. “A Lifespan Perspective on Multi-Professional Musicians: Does Music Education Prepare Classical Musicians for Their Careers?” *Music Education Research* 22 (1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2019.1703925>.
- Jin, Sil. 2016. “Giving and Gaining: Experiences of Three Music Facilitators Working and Musicking with Asylum Seekers in Australia.” *Australian Journal of Music Therapy* 27 (May): 13-26.
- Lamont, Alexandra, Michael Murray, Rebecca Hale, and Katie Wright-Bevans. 2018. “Singing in Later Life: The Anatomy of a Community Choir.” *Psychology of Music* 46 (3): 424–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735617715514>.
- Lee, Juyoung, Jane W. Davidson, and Amanda E. Krause. 2016. “Older Peoples Motivations for Participating in Community Singing in Australia.” *International Journal of Community Music* 9 (2): 191–206. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.9.2.191_1.
- Lee, Juyoung, Amanda E. Krause, and Jane W. Davidson. 2017. “The PERMA Well-Being Model and Music Facilitation Practice: Preliminary Documentation for Well-Being through Music Provision in Australian Schools.” *Research Studies in Music Education* 39 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X17703131>.
- MacDonald, Raymond, Gunter Kreutz, and Laura Mitchell. 2012. “What Is Music, Health, and Wellbeing and Why Is It Important?” In *Music, Health, and Wellbeing*, edited by

- Raymond MacDonald, Gunter Kreutz, and Laura Mitchell, 3–11. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nakamura, Jeanne and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 2009. “Flow Theory and Research.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 195–206. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perkins, Rosie, Adele Mason-Bertrand, Daisy Fancourt, Louise Baxter, and Aaron Williamon. 2020. “How Participatory Music Engagement Supports Mental Well-Being: A Meta-Ethnography.” *Qualitative Health Research*, August.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320944142>.
- Rowley, Jennifer, Dawn Bennett, and Patrick Schmidt, eds. 2019. *Leadership of Pedagogy and Curriculum in Higher Music Education*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Schippers, Huib, and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet. 2013. “The Nine Domains of Community Music: Exploring the Crossroads of Formal and Informal Music Education.” *International Journal of Music Education* 31 (4): 454–71.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761413502441>.
- Seligman, Martin. 2002. *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Seligman, Martin. 2011. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Tan, Leonard, and Hui Xing Sin. 2019. “Flow Research in Music Contexts: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Musicae Scientiae*, Advance online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864919877564>.
- Teague, Adele, and Gareth Dylan Smith. 2015. “Portfolio Careers and Work-Life Balance among Musicians: An Initial Study into Implications for Higher Music Education.” *British Journal of Music Education* 32 (2): 177–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051715000121>.

Willingham, Lee and Glen Carruthers. 2018. "Community Music in Higher Education." In *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*, 595–616. Oxford: Oxford University Press.