Article

AMERICAN CHORAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

IJRCS

International Journal of Research in Choral Singing

The Scientific Research Journal of the American Choral Directors Association

International Journal of Research in Choral Singing
(2021) Vol. 9 68-91

Male adolescents' narratives about their choral (non)participation in public secondary music schools of Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate boys' views about their participation in secondary school music ensembles with emphasis on the factors which influenced their decision whether to join school choirs. To fulfill this aim, the researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 17 boys, students and graduates of two provincial public secondary music schools in Greece. These boys seemed to avoid their school choir, suggesting that enrollment in an instrumental ensemble and playing a musical instrument are activities of a higher social status, in comparison to participation in choirs and singing, respectively. Furthermore, according to their narratives, they seemed to choose music ensembles that (a) balance individuality with teamwork, (b) instill a sense of duty ("to feel needed"), (c) assign distinct individual roles, and (d) provide opportunities for personal expression, as well as (e) opportunities to distinguish themselves. In addition, they preferred ensembles which (f) do not have a mandatory character, (g) possess a high social status, and (h) provide opportunities for interaction with older individuals who are role models. This study aims to contribute to the international discussion about the reasons which prompt boys to avoid choral singing.

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Introduction

One of the issues that has long attracted attention in the field of choral music has been the low participation of men and boys in choirs. In one historical review, Koza (1993) cited references, from as early as 1915, on the lack of men in choirs, and since then, the female-to-male participation ratio seems to be constantly increasing (Camp, 1987; Cox & Stevens, 2010; Freer, 2010a). Several researchers have addressed this problem. Some of them have highlighted the physical age-related vocal difficulties faced by boys in singing, especially during puberty (Cooksey, 1992, 2000; Demorest, 2000; Swanson, 1984). Others have focused on the existence of gender stereotypes according to which there are musical activities that are more suitable for boys, while other activities, such as singing, are more suitable for girls (Green, 1997; Hallam et al., 2008; Marshall & Shibazaki, 2012; McKeage, 2004; O'Neill & Boultona, 1996; Wych, 2012).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate boys' views about their participation in Secondary School music ensembles with emphasis on the factors which influenced their decision whether to participate in school choirs. The participants were 17 boys, students and graduates of two provincial public secondary music schools in Greece, where the researcher worked as a teacher.

Despite a growing body of narrative research in the field of choral education, "Largely missing from the conversation," as Freer (2006) stated, "are the voices of boys who are not participating in choral music at school" (p.72). This assumption led to the adoption of a more holistic approach, which went beyond the study of choirs. Thus, in the present study, the participants were four boys who sang in the choral ensembles of their schools; four boys who had withdrawn; and nine boys who had chosen to solely participate in instrumental ensembles.

This study aims to contribute to the international discussion about the reasons which prompt boys to avoid being in school choirs. The different cultural context in which the research took place, as well as the special profile of the participants, who were students of schools that provide specialized music training, could possibly help to better understand an issue which is already well-documented.

Background

Gender division of music activities

As a number of studies, mainly from the field of ethnomusicology, have suggested, gender division of musical activities is a phenomenon that does not only exist in western societies (Wade, 2004). While investigating the position of women in music, Green (1997) maintained in her book *Music, Gender, Education,* that there are musical activities that affirm what she named *patriarchal definitions of femininity,* activities that threaten these definitions, and activities that interrupt them or simply challenge them to a lesser degree. In

western societies, in particular, the activity that affirms these definitions is singing, whereas females' instrument playing interrupts, and composition and musical improvisation by females threatens them (Green, 1997).

According to Dibben (2002), children generally show a preference for specific instruments or music activities based on their gender. More specifically, besides singing, girls seem to prefer the piano, violin, and woodwinds, while boys show a preference for the guitar as well as percussion and brass instruments (Abeles & Porter, 1978; Hallam et al., 2008; O'Neill & Boultona, 1996; Wych, 2012). These preferences primarily originate from stereotypes dictating that there are instruments of feminine or masculine nature because of their own features or because they are common in particular genres (Dibben, 2002; Marshall & Shibazaki, 2012). These stereotypes are so strong that they become apparent from an early age, as documented in Marshall and Shibazaki's study (2012) of four-year-old kindergarten children. This suggests that children learn from an early age to avoid music activities that do not seem to fit their gender.

Regarding childrens' preferences for musical instruments, a series of studies have indicated that Greek students tend to associate the flute and recorder with girls, and the electric guitar and drums with boys, as do their peers from other countries (Argyriou, 2011; Markou, 2018). Noteworthy is the case of the introduction of Greek folk instrument classes in secondary music schools in 1988; this provided girls access to the once male-dominated field of folk music. Interestingly, three decades after the inclusion of folk instruments in the curriculum of these schools, a gender division appeared, according to which, girls mostly choose instruments such as the *santouri* (instrument of the hammered dulcimer family), while boys opt for the *bouzouki* or the folk clarinet. This fact indicates the dynamic nature of gender stereotypes, as well as the human tendency to constantly create and modify them (Ververis, 2018).

After having done a historical review of literature, Harrison (2007) argued that stereotypes concerning children's music activities appear to have gradually diminished, but only for girls. Stereotypes remain strong for boys who continue to avoid the flute and singing as they did a hundred years ago (Harrison, 2007). Abeles (2009) also agreed that stereotypes have weakened in recent years, adding that this is more evident in higher education than in secondary schools. Furthermore, recent studies have suggested that gender stereotypes affect not only the music activities that students choose, but even more general decisions such as whether to pursue music. Collins (2009) pointed out that the number of girls learning music is greater than boys. McGregor and Mills (2006) attributed this to the fact that many boys believe that, unlike other school subjects, music does not impart the element of masculinity. For example, boys' greater preference for physical education (Shropshire et al., 1997) may be due to the fact that students regard it as the most masculine subject, whereas they consider subjects related to the humanities and music less masculine (Colley et al., 1994). According to Whitehead (1996), such stereotypes affect boys more than girls.

Gender, school music ensembles, and the Greek context

According to Richardson (2018), the relationship between students' gender and their involvement in school music ensembles has been a popular topic of academic research during the last thirty years. Elpus (2015) estimated that, in the period 1982-2009, girls significantly outnumbered boys in all three types of ensembles (choir, band, and orchestra) usually offered in US high schools. School choirs were the ensembles with the greatest gender imbalance; male enrolment was about 30%. This imbalance seemed to be even greater in Greek secondary schools. In one study by Meligopoulou (2009), girls outnumbered boys in school choirs by a ratio of 85:15 in public secondary Schools; 82:18 in private secondary schools; and 77:23 in public secondary music schools.

Harrison et al. (2012) argued that boys usually consider singing as a feminine activity when they refer to the classically oriented school choral ensembles, something which may not be true in other singing contexts. This became apparent in a study by Freer (2015), in which the participants were 35 boys, students from two secondary music schools of Greece. The students of both schools preferred the nearly all-male and un-auditioned vocal ensembles of Greek Orthodox chant ("Byzantine music") over classically oriented choral ensembles. When the researcher asked them why they preferred these groups, the most frequent answers were: (a) Predominance of male singers, (b) welcoming of loud, masculine singing, and (c) emphasis on melody over harmony (p. 98). Interestingly, although chant is an exclusively a cappella vocal tradition, no boy viewed these ensembles as "choirs." Durrant and Himonides (1998) observed that "although the Greeks have assimilated many Western European cultural elements, especially music, there is no sign of practice of what is called choral music in Greece" (p. 61). However, after a few lines, these authors mention that "someone in Greece could meet the practice of Byzantine music in the Orthodox church" (p. 61), a contradiction indicating the common belief that chanting is not a form of choral singing.

At this point, I would like to note that the phrase "loud, masculine singing" (Freer, 2015, p. 98) probably indicates boys' reluctance to sing in their higher vocal register. This cultural element could probably explain boys' preference for chanting over classical choral singing. This assumption leads to the work of Ashley (2008, 2009), who, having had interviews with boys from Great Britain, attempted to provide an answer to the question, "How high should boys sing?" (which is also the title of one of his books). Ashley observed that although there are boys willing to use their high vocal register, a choice resulting in the famous sound of British boy choirs, there are cases of boys who seem to resist this practice, mimicking vocal techniques used by singers of the modern music industry. As boys themselves actually decide how to sing, Ashley proposed the term *vocal agency* to describe this phenomenon, based on the common in the social science term *agency* which "denotes individual capacity for free thought and action" (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, p. 7). According to Ashley (2009), most boys avoid singing in the high register in fear of their peers' reactions. The anxiety about

their peers' approval or disapproval is a very common theme in boys' narratives. As Sweet (2010) argued, it is not uncommon for middle school boys, who participate in choirs, to experience their peers' non-accepting attitude.

Concerning the factors which affect boys' participation in choirs, a number of researchers have pointed out the physical age-related vocal difficulties which boys experience during puberty due to voice change (Demorest, 2000; Swanson, 1984). Although boys' changing voice is a well-documented research topic (see, for example, Cooksey, 1992, 2000), Freer (2007) noted a gap between research and practice, as choral educators keep reproducing traditional methods of choral instruction despite a wealth of research-based information on the subject. For example, many teachers are reluctant to provide special instruction to boys during voice change, in fear of causing harm to their students' voices. Instead, they simply tell them that it will pass, or they ask boys to quit singing during this period (Freer & Elorriaga Llor, 2017). With regards to Greek educators, Simou and Papapanagiotou (2009) conducted a research study with the participation of 43 choral educators who taught in secondary music schools. As their findings suggested, only a few teachers (11.6%) took boys' stages of vocal development into consideration when choosing repertoire for their classes. Even the most experienced teachers seemed to lack theoretical and practical knowledge concerning adolescent boys' changing voice. In addition, Freer and Ververis (2011) examined the National Curriculum of these schools. To their surprise, in the section regarding the teaching of choir, a mandatory course for seventh to ninth grades, they noted a complete absence of references relevant to voice change of boys or girls. Nevertheless, I would like to mention that the curriculum, which replaced the old one in 2015, now provides a plethora of relevant research-based information, a fact indicating a relative progress during the last decade.

According to Adler and Harrison (2004), boys avoided school choirs because of their lower status compared to school bands and orchestras, since, in a patriarchal society, any activity taken as feminine automatically gains a lower status. To support this claim, these authors relied on Connell's (1987) theory of *hegemonic masculinity*. Reflecting a more general trend in social sciences, Connell's theory attributes a performative character to gender. According to Connell, masculinity is an element that in our societies gives status, power and a hegemonic role over those who do not possess this element. It seems that a man acting on the socially acceptable, according to his gender, ways of behavior, earns his hegemonic characteristics. However, he has to constantly negotiate and claim them, since there is always the fear that he may lose them if he does not behave in the way society expects (Connell, 1987). As Harrison (2008) maintained, hegemonic masculinity is a means of oppression for everyone, irrespective of gender and/or sexual orientation. In the case of boys and men, in particular, it limits their emotional horizons, expression of sensitivity as well as their involvement in a wide range of activities, such as singing. Having investigated the ways in which Australian choirboys negotiated gender stereotypes, Hall (2015) introduced the gender/class intersection to the discussion. As she argued, it is the choirboys' middle-class habitus which enables them to configure a counter-narrative that is based on

the embodiment of an elite masculinity as opposed to an abject form" (p.54). Constructing alternative masculinities, these boys gain access to a wider range of cultural systems. However, Hall pointed out that creating gender counter-narratives is a privilege of middle-class boys only, a fact which should problematize music educators as it depicts another source of inequity.

Finally, summarizing the findings of various studies concerning boys' participation in school ensembles, Freer (2012) suggested that adolescent boys in the United States seek:

> musical experiences where their skills match the challenges; in-class competitions and learning-based games; physical knowledge of their own voice change process; the acquisition of skills rather than the perfection of a particular repertoire selection; skill-based feedback from peers and/or teachers; and challenging, highly rhythmic, multi-voiced repertoire (p. 20).

All suggestions mentioned above may benefit music teachers working with adolescent boys contributing to the improvement of choral education.

Method

Participants

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the boys' views about their participation in secondary school music ensembles with emphasis on the factors which influenced their decision whether to participate in school choirs. To fulfill this aim, I conducted individual interviews with 17 boys, students and graduates of two provincial secondary music schools in Greece, in which I worked as a music teacher. At the time of the interviews, 10 of the participants were high school students, while the remaining seven had graduated from these schools about 1-2 years before. To assure the participants' anonymity, I used nicknames instead of their real names.

Secondary music schools in Greece are (government-funded) public schools with an extended school day. Students attend classes in the same subjects as in all Greek secondary schools, in accordance with the National Curriculum, in addition to music-related subjects that include individual instrumental lessons, various theoretical courses on both Western classical music and Greek traditional music, and music ensembles (Simos, 2004). To enroll in a secondary music school, students must successfully pass an entrance exam which, among others, includes a test of their aural and vocal skills. According to their founding law, the purpose of these schools is the training of students wishing to pursue a career as professional musicians, without falling behind in general education courses, in case they decide to pursue a career in another field. However, as a series of studies has suggested, the popularity of these schools within the educational system of Greece lies more on the broader education they offer, rather than the special vocational training they provide (If-

anti & Zorba, 2010; Spyropoulou, 2009). The two schools (which I refer to as "MS1" and "MS2" throughout the rest of the paper) had much in common due to their geographical proximity and their relatively small number of students. The location of each school was in the capital city of two neighboring islands. With a similar population size of about 30,000, both cities had a tradition in the arts and letters (fine arts, literature and music), with a significant cultural life for their size, in addition to being the home of university departments.

According to Pring (2005), a case study always presents points of similarity and differentiation when compared to other case studies, due to its unique features. A study in secondary music schools of Greece presents some very unique features beyond their different cultural and social context. First, all secondary music school students participate in school music ensembles. This is to ensure that there is no conflict between music and other activities (e.g. sports) that could distract students' interest. If there is a conflict, it concerns whether the students will choose a choral or an instrumental ensemble. Second, regardless of the ensemble with which they choose to participate, all seventh, eighth, and nineth grade students attend a mandatory course on choral singing for two hours per week. This means that all boys continue to sing throughout their voice change period and receive vocal training whether they participate in the school choir or not. Third, since these students receive a more intensive training in music than the average student of a typical secondary school, their views could provide a different dimension to already documented topics.

Interviews

As mentioned above, the participants of the present study were 17 boys, students and graduates of two secondary music schools in Greece. I interviewed all the participants individually, after having fulfilled the required, in accordance with Greek legislation, procedures for conducting research studies in public schools with the participation of minors. Consequently, all the participants, as well as their parents in the case of minors, gave their written consent to take part in this project, before its final approval by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. In the present study, the interviews with the participants had a semi-structured form, as I posed a series of standard questions without limiting the conversation to them, especially when the boys were in the mood to speak. While the use of standard questions facilitated the process of data analysis to some extent, the discussion with the participants highlighted aspects that could otherwise have passed unnoticed (Beatty, 1995).

As the aim of this study was not to test the validity of an existing theory, but to explore the meanings that boys assigned to their music activities, I adopted an interpretivist approach, concentrating on the uniqueness of each boy's story, avoiding procedures that could lead to the quantification of data (Kiriazi, 2011). Furthermore, following the principles of grounded theory, I tried to avoid fitting boys' responses to predetermined theoretical categories and, thus, applied the method of open coding during data analysis (Babbie, 2011; Cohen et al., 2007).

The contribution of interviews to research is crucial as they allow the researcher and the participant "to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 349). However, the direct interaction between the researcher and the participants, which is the main advantage of this method, is at the same time its weak spot. Since each individual may interpret an event in a different way, the researchers inevitably filter participants' responses according to their own way of thinking and values (Pring, 2005). According to some social scientists, a true understanding of social phenomena occurs only when researchers "immerse" themselves so deeply in their data that they begin to think and see the world in the same way as the individuals who provided these responses (Breakwell, 1990). During the design of the present study, I decided to conduct interviews with students from the schools where I was working as a teacher of music theory and music ensembles, both choral and instrumental. My choice to study the views of students with whom I had daily contact for a long time and shared a relationship of intimacy with them, proved to be crucial for an in-depth understanding of their perceptions. On the other hand, my personal relationship with the students made it necessary to develop a reflective sight, especially during data analysis.

Research "at home" and the researcher's position

Although autoethnography, with a few exceptions (see, for example, Freer, 2006), is not a popular research method among music educators, the "study of the familiar" has been gaining ground in fields, namely anthropology and education, as the growing interest for types of research such as ethnography at home and action research, respectively, suggests. As a field, anthropology has received negative critiques for retaining a colonial nature because of its concentration on the study of "exotic" non-Western cultures. In recent decades, however, there has been a shift mainly due to: a lack of funding for fieldwork research abroad; an increasing number of foreign students who study at Western universities and return home to conduct research; and the increased dangers that Western anthropologists face in particular places of the world, especially after the 9/11 attacks (Maghal, 2015).

According to Hockey (1993), conducting research in a familiar context can be beneficial for researchers who, in this case, are less likely to experience situations that will cause culture shock or disorient them. In addition, being aware of facts that a "foreign" researcher cannot interpret, gives the "home" researchers the opportunity to assess the sincerity and accuracy of the answers they receive. The respondents tend to share information with the latter easier, perceiving them as individuals who face the same problems and sympathize with them (Hockey, 1993). In the present study, most participants seemed to trust me, recognizing, that apart from being their teacher, we shared many common features: as a male islander who attended a secondary music school when I was a teenager (specifically, MS1). This trust became apparent, not only by the ease with which the boys shared their views, but also by the questions they asked me about the period when I was a teenager and a mem-

ber of my school choir. This finding raises the question of how "local" are the researchers of "here" and how "foreign" are the researchers of "there," since in any ethnographic survey, not necessarily at home, the researcher always has features of both similarity and differentiation in relation to the participants (Hellawell, 2006; Madden, 1999). In our case, although I shared many common features with the participants, the fact that I was also their teacher and a researcher, created a distance as well. As Motzafi-Haller (1997) highlighted, something which often escapes the researchers' attention concerns the distance that their identity and academic education automatically create, despite their shared experiences with the subjects of the study.

According to Ruby (1982), in ethnographic research, researchers should develop a reflective sight: temporarily moving away from their own self, observing, and becoming aware of their own influence on the research field. When conducting research "at home", a researcher must constantly shift roles from being an "insider" to that of an "outsider," like wielding a double-edged sword (Mercer, 2007). In the present study, I used my personal relationship with the participants as a method of triangulation, which in many cases revealed a contradiction between what the boys said in their interviews and their behavior in school. For example, although the majority of boys were aware of the gender stereotypes which they criticized, their choices were consistent with these stereotypes. Thus, there was a contradiction between what should be happening, according to the boys, and what was actually happening. This conflict between their values and reality was a source of confusion for some boys. As Sudman and Bradburn (1983) maintain, it is common in interviews for participants to give false information, often unconsciously, wanting to present an idealized image of themselves or to give answers that will satisfy the interviewer.

Findings

"Singing, something that anyone can do"

Concerning the choice of musical instruments, the choices of the boys that participated in the research study appeared to be in line with the findings of most studies (Hallam et al., 2008; O'Neill & Boultona, 1996; Wych, 2012), according to which, boys show a preference for instruments such as the drums, guitar and trumpet while girls prefer instruments such as the piano, flute, and violin. Interestingly, although most boys seemed to be aware of the gender stereotypes, which they disapproved of, they did in fact choose an instrument that "fits" their gender, hence reproducing these stereotypes. Regarding music ensembles, the data suggested a general preference for instrumental ones, as 14 out of the 17 boys had selected to participate in the following: classical orchestra, contemporary-music ensemble, rock band, traditional-music ensemble, folk-music ensemble, and baroque ensemble. Only four boys had chosen to consistently participate in a vocal ensemble, whereas four other boys had done so occasionally over the previous years but then chose to quit in order to join an instrumental ensemble.

Furthermore, the boys seemed to recognize that choirs possessed a lower status in comparison to instrumental ensembles. According to Haris, it appeared that the instrumental ensembles of his school were enjoying greater recognition, something that he did not support. It is worth noting that although Haris had never attended his school choir, he found this situation unfair:

> Certain music ensembles are perceived as having greater importance and this is not good. Because basically it is unfair for the students who have worked hard to achieve something. I strongly disagree with what is happening.
>
> Which ensembles do you believe possess higher status?
>
> Instrumental ensembles are considered more important because most students in our school prefer them.
>
> —(Haris, student of 10th grade, MS2)

It is worth noting that none of the boys who participated in the study mentioned their vocal abilities as a reason not to attend choirs. In fact, when asked to rate their vocal skills, with the exception of two boys, they all argued that these ranged from average to good. This is not surprising since the participants were music school students; therefore, their vocal skills were obviously better than the average student of a typical secondary school.

An interesting point regarded the devaluation of singing which, according to many participants, is something that "anyone can do." Indicative is the following excerpt by Yiorgos:

> Of course, when you hold an instrument, you feel more excited [than when singing], since singing is easier. Singing does not demand the same effort as does an instrument.
>
> —(Yiorgos, MS2 graduate, Music Technology university student)

Furthermore, Dionysis suggested that participating in an orchestra and playing a musical instrument are activities of a higher social status, compared to participating in choirs and singing, respectively, as free access to the choir may give the impression that singing is something inferior that anyone can do without any training:

> A choir is an ensemble where everyone sings. You regard it as secondary. Even if you make a mistake, nobody will notice it except for someone with a very good ear. In general, they consider it secondary. If there are too many students in an ensemble, they say to the teacher, "Send some of them to the choir." Furthermore, others choose orchestras or bands because there they are given the

> chance to distinguish themselves, to have a solo, to play the instrument they like; unlike singing which everyone does. [This way] they do something exceptional.
>
> —(Dionysis, student of 10th grade, MS2)

According to many boys, an element that can provide status to vocal music seems to be that of singing in parts. For Argyris, part-singing was a crucial factor in differentiating between choral and *group* singing, terms which do not refer to the same thing. In the following excerpt, he explained why he did not regard his previous experiences in the Elementary School chorus as choral:

> The first time I sang in a choir with polyphonic features [several voice sections] at last, and [in a sarcastic tone] not in the first grade choir where we sang the National Anthem, was in seventh grade when we started an ensemble in order to participate in *Moussikoi Agones* [a competition for school music ensembles] and it was a multi-voiced ensemble.
>
> —(Argyris, MS2 graduate - Archaeology university student)

The fact that part-singing is a significant factor which differentiates choral from group singing is also obvious in the words of Thanasis and Christos:

> A choir is divided into four sections... the basses, the tenors, the altos, and the sopranos. In practice, not everyone sings together, but they constantly alternate with each other, creating something unique. It's very nice...
>
> —(Thanasis, student of 11th grade, MS1)

> I liked that we sang in parts. First, second voices... such things. We were divided into tenors and basses; and our sound was beautiful.
>
> —(Christos, MS2 graduate, semi-professional musician)

Individuality within groups

By examining the features that the participants preferred in a music ensemble, we can draw conclusions about the elements that could raise its status, in these boys' opinion at least. First, a constant feature in the responses of many students, regardless of the type of ensemble they had chosen to participate in, concerned their personal contribution and the importance of their presence to the ensemble. In the following excerpt, Vaggelis explained why he had chosen to participate as a drummer in an ensemble; an experience he did not seem to enjoy:

> I was there more because the ensemble needed me, since there was no one else to play the drums. I didn't like it very much… I didn't have fun… it was a bit boring… But I wanted to support this effort.
>
> —(Vaggelis, MS1 graduate, Polytechnic School student)

Similarly, in the following excerpt, Fotis expressed a sense of duty towards the ensemble as he felt his presence there was significant. In addition, he expressed his enthusiasm at having what he considered an upgraded role that year.

> This year I enjoy being the only one [in the Folk Music Ensemble] playing the *toubeleki* [percussion instrument]. Unlike last year when there were two of us. The other guy was the leading percussionist and I was a bit like an assistant… So this year, since I knew I would be alone, I just had to play in that group again.
>
> —(Fotis, student of 11th grade, MS1)

Noteworthy is the case of Alexander, who, during the research study, was the only boy in his final years of high school to participate in the school choir. In his account of his experiences in the choir, Alexandros tried to highlight the importance of his role, as he considered himself one of the "pillars" of the choir.

> The school choir is good if we overlook the fact that it is based on five individuals that sing out. But, in general, it is good. Because if there are certain individuals who are the pillars of the choir and the others lean on them to sing correctly, the result is good.
>
> —(Alexander, student of 11th grade, MS2)

This view is quite interesting if we take into account that Alexander was referring to a two-part choir of 30 singers, a fact that does not justify his self-image as a "pillar." Nevertheless, it becomes clear that his case presented nothing different from the other boys' cases, since he wanted, like everyone else, to feel that he was "important" to the ensemble in which he sang.

A way for students to contribute to a music ensemble is through collaborative rehearsals. In the case described by Achilleas, it seems that the teacher of an instrumental folk ensemble, asked older students to help the younger ones by applying a peer-to-peer teaching method. From Achilleas' narration, we realize that the older students highly valued this teacher for his trust and his decision to give them a role of responsibility.

> When five-six of us were playing folk violins, …along with the help of our teacher, who wasn't a violin player, I was helping too. That is, I would give my

> opinion. That's how I learned about giving, as well as taking.
>
> —(Achilleas, MS2 graduate, Music university student)

Apart from personal responsibility, which every group member should have, for Thodoris it was also important to have opportunities for personal expression. This explains why he chose to play the mandolin in the Baroque ensemble, where he had the freedom to improvise on several occasions:

> Even there, I didn't feel that I had any particular constraint. I could add my own stuff providing that they were correct.
>
> —(Thodoris, student of 12th grade, MS1)

Stratos also considered it important for students to have the right to add their own personal touch to the work of an ensemble:

> I liked my last year in school ensembles very much as I tried to add my own ideas, especially in the instrumental ensembles.
>
> —(Stratos, MS1 graduate – professional musician)

Furthermore, many participants referred to the opportunities that an instrumental ensemble offers its members to distinguish themselves. This element proved to be a consistent pattern in the answers of the boys, who showed a preference for activities that require personal responsibility while providing opportunities not only for personal expression, but also for self-promotion. As Elias argued:

> In the choir, you don't have the opportunity to distinguish yourself… and those seeking self-promotion, cannot find it in the choir. A choir is something totally collective… whereas in an orchestra, even if you do something collective, an individual has more opportunities to distinguish oneself. Especially in orchestras where there is only one instrument of each kind, each student plays his own part and nobody else… it seems that he is the only one who plays this [instrument] and, also, he can play with more virtuosity.
>
> —(Elias, student of 12th grade, MS1)

Argyris described this phenomenon in a much more mature way, as one would expect from the adult he had become. The use of the word *superiority* by Argyris resembles Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, in which masculinity refers to actions that provide the elements of status and power through which a man claims the hegemonic role attributed to his gender:

> I believe that men want to show superiority and to stand out. That's why they refuse to participate in choirs. In the case of playing musical instruments, we are interested in virtuosity or showing off our skills. For example, when playing the bouzouki [Greek folk instrument], the bouzouki player can interrupt the song at a certain point to demonstrate his skills… The choir is not suitable for something like that; under no circumstances does it operate in terms of competitiveness. On the contrary, if somebody stands out from the ensemble, it is not considered good for a choir. If you want to stand out, the choir is not for you…
>
> —(Argyris, MS2 graduate - Archaeology university student)

Based on their responses, boys appeared to appreciate it when they had distinct individual roles within a group, combined with opportunities for personal expression. Except for being personal, this role was distinct because boys wanted to feel that their presence was important to the operation of the ensemble. However, these two elements seemed to contradict traditional teaching approaches in the field of choral education, since the philosophy of choral singing emphasizes the absolute homogeneity of sound, where no voice stands out (Fagnan, 2008).

Finally, I would like to refer to the cases of four students, two of which had never enrolled in their school choir. At the time of the interviews, all four boys had voluntarily joined community choirs outside of school. In the following excerpt, Argyris expressed the increased status that this extracurricular music activity gave him, in addition to the importance of his interaction with other more experienced singers.

> I really liked being part of this [community] choir because it was my first serious choral experience and because I realized that I myself had chosen it, without anyone forcing me to do so. Also, I liked the fact that even though I was a student, I realized that I could interact and cooperate as an equal with people who were older than me and many of whom were my teachers [from secondary music school].
>
> —(Argyris, MS2 graduate – university archaeology student)

Similarly, Yiorgos highlighted the fact that, like all the other members, he had joined this choir by choice, not because it was mandatory. In addition, he maintained that he not only got more out of this choir due to its higher quality, but also because of his interaction with the older and more experienced singers.

> When you are in a group with child participants only, you see it as a game… There [in the community choir], you went to do really serious work and you saw that the others, who go there, have come for the same purpose too. What's

> more, there were certain experienced and knowledgeable choral singers from whom you also learned things.
>
> —(Yiorgos, MS2 graduate – music-technology student)

Discussion

The boys who participated in the present study seemed to avoid choirs, suggesting that participation in an instrumental ensemble and playing a musical instrument were activities of a higher social status, as compared to participation in choirs and singing, respectively. This finding supports Adler and Harrison's (2004) position, according to which, school ensembles did not all possess the same status. Instead, there seemed to be a hierarchy where choirs were at the bottom and concert or marching bands are at the top. Regarding the status of singing, boys reproduced the common belief that singing was something that anyone can do, even without prior training; a misconception often expressed by music educators too (Kemp, 1985; Phillips, 1996). Welch and Sundberg (2002) attributed this belief to the difficulty in coding and evaluating the teaching of singing in comparison to the teaching of instruments which students hold and see; the voice is an instrument that is not visible (Welch & Sundberg, 2002). In addition, music teachers often misunderstood the fact that some children instinctively sing beautifully without having had any previous training or lessons; a fact that one should treat as an exception rather than the rule (Kemp, 1985). For example, it is self-evident that children must learn how to use their fingers to play the piano, but when it comes to singing, many teachers believed that it was an inherent skill (Phillips, 1996).

According to some participants, part-singing was an element which added some status to singing, differentiating choral singing from the group singing that usually takes place in a general music class. Ashley (2015) made a similar division between "choir/choral work and class chorus/vocal work" (p. 117) pointing out, however, the pedagogical value of the latter, which music educators should not treat as a break from the other classes. Additionally, some boys attributed the low status of choirs to the fact that, in their schools, choirs were open to all students, since there was no audition procedure as in instrumental ensembles. I would like to note that this positive attitude towards auditions from these boys was to some degree expected considering their background; they were all students of specialized music schools, having all succeeded in an entrance exam which included an audition. However, as Ashley (2014) suggested, for most boys, an audition was a frightening procedure, which threatened their safety and which they usually tried to avoid.

Furthermore, most participants' assessment of their vocal skills ranged *from average* to *good,* while none of them mentioned difficulties associated with voice change as a reason for their non-participation in choirs. This finding is in line with Freer and Tan's (2014) study, in which none of the 12 participants, all male students of pre-university schools in Singapore, referenced adolescent voice change as a deterrent factor that influenced their

decision whether to sing in choirs. Both studies contradict the common view that boys avoid choirs because they are lagging behind girls, due to physical age-related vocal difficulties, such as voice change during puberty (Demorest, 2000; Swanson, 1984). This contradiction suggests that international research could possibly challenge themes that researchers from North America and Western Europe consider universal.

Summarizing their answers, we can assume that the participants chose music ensembles that (a) balanced individuality with team work, (b) instilled a sense of duty ("to feel needed"), (c) assigned distinct individual roles, and (d) provided opportunities for personal expression, as well as (e) opportunities to distinguish themselves. In addition, they preferred ensembles which (a) did not have a mandatory character, (b) possessed a high social status, and (c) provided opportunities for interaction with older individuals who are role models.

Concerning the degree of individuality in a music ensemble, Cottrell (2017) argued that the typical division of large mixed choirs into four parts reduces the opportunities for individual musical expression, in contrast to instrumental ensembles, where more sections usually exist. As Freer (2007) maintained, adolescent boys seemed to dislike "large-group instruction where everyone is arranged in rows and where conformity is highly valued" (p. 32). The availability of smaller chamber ensembles within a choral program could probably provide a "solution" to this problem. According to Lim (2014), each member of a typical chamber ensemble undertook a distinctive and independent role, particularly when no other member is doubling up their parts, thus increasing the degree of personal responsibility. The existence of smaller vocal ensembles within a choral program is an idea that the authors of some classical choral method textbooks have suggested (see, for example, Collins, 1993; Hylton, 1995; Roe, 1983). According to these authors, smaller groups, which operate in parallel with the main choir, can provide opportunities for students to further develop their skills. However, since the purpose of these ensembles is usually the performance of more difficult music, this practice primarily applies to advanced students, whose successful auditions lead to their participation in such ensembles. Quite often, this marks the highest achievement they can attain as members of school choirs. I propose that giving the opportunity to less advanced students to experience chamber choral singing, even at early stages, is crucial as it may assist in the development of their skills, in addition to fostering a sense of personal responsibility.

Another strategy that teachers could use to increase students' level of responsibility, is to assign them to direct the choir (Nápoles et al., 2013; Woodford, 2005). Indicative is the case, which O'Toole (1997) described, of a group of American high school students, who prepared a choral piece secretly from their teacher, in order to present it to him as a surprise. During the rehearsals, each student had the responsibility of observing a specific element, such as rhythm, tonal accuracy, diction, phrasing etc.

Regarding the opportunities for personal expression, the boys' narratives were in line with a large body of studies on the significance of creative processes as a means of democratizing the choral rehearsal. For example, educators have suggested collaborative prob-

lem-solving activities which may lead to collective decisions about the interpretation of music (Nápoles et al., 2013; Guelker-Cone, 2010). Similarly, Abrahams (2017) and Abrahams et al. (2017) have suggested the embedding of peer-directed learning strategies derived from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Lucy Green's informal music learning, respectively, in order to challenge traditional paradigms in Choral Education. In addition, Freer (2010b) has advocated in favor of improvisation in choral contexts, a practice which "challenges the traditional power structure of conductor-centered ensembles", cultivating an "atmosphere where conductors and students function as co-musicians rather than as leader and followers" (p. 22).

The boys who participated in this study also expressed their dislike for choirs that have a mandatory character, a common policy in music schools and conservatories in Greece. As Laurence (2010) argued, children appear to place greater value on music activities in which they act independently, and thus perceive them as their own. In addition, it seems that boys consider freedom of choice an element of masculinity or, as Connell (1987) argued, the privilege of those possessing the element of hegemonic masculinity. This became apparent in the narratives of the four boys who decided to join community choirs outside of school. In addition to the importance of making decisions on their own, these boys highlighted the valuable opportunities they had in these choirs for interaction with more experienced singers. As adolescent boys think about their possible future selves, older singing peers can positively influence them as role models, thus, encouraging future involvement in choirs (Harrison & Young, 2017). According to Ashley (2009), "older brothers" are more influential than adults. Additionally, Freer (2012) suggested that the influence of older peers is even greater when there is a gap of one generation; for example, when elementary school boys interact with high school boys.

Finally, the researcher did not note a particular trend towards school ensembles of Greek Orthodox chant, in contrast to Freer's (2015) findings in two other secondary music schools of Greece. A possible explanation for this contradiction may have to do with the fact that, in the schools of the present study, these were mixed-voice ensembles, unlike the nearly all-male ensembles which Freer observed. This fact may support the belief that boys feel safer when they sing without the presence of girls. Based on this assumption, Ashley (2015) recommended a *diamond model,* according to which, choral classes in secondary schools should begin with mixed-gender groups of students, split to parallel single-sex groups in the middle stages, and resume with mixed-gender in the later stages (Ashley, 2015, p. 175).

Conclusion

This study investigated the perspectives of boys, from two secondary music schools of Greece, regarding their participation in school ensembles. Summarizing the main findings, one could conclude that the boys who participated in the study seemed to mostly agree with views expressed by their peers from other places of the world as international research

suggests. Nevertheless, some of the ideas expressed in their narratives challenge commonly held perceptions among choral educators. As already discussed, in addition to its interpretivist nature, the unique context of this case study may have limited the possibilities of drawing general conclusions. These "contradictions," however, indicate the complexity of issues related to gender which researchers should not attempt to explain by using general universal laws.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight one final point. As mentioned in the beginning of the article, one of the most well-documented issues in the field of choral education, is that of boys' and men's low choral participation. On the other hand, feminist researchers have criticized the one-sided focus of the field on the issue of boys. Indicative is O'Toole's (1998) reference to the "missing chapter" of choral method textbooks; that of adolescent girls in choral singing. Comparably, as Gackle (2011) pointed out, while there is a great number of studies and publications on the issue of boys' changing voice, the limited research on girls' changing voice makes one wonder if this issue is indeed of minor importance. It is my belief that while most suggestions in this paper derive from boys' narratives, the readers should not regard them solely as strategies for the recruitment of boys. I propose that these suggestions could improve students' choral experience in general, irrespective of their gender and/or sexual orientation. Furthermore, the opposite could send a misogynist message, according to which elements, such as the personal expression of creativity in choral ensembles, are a privilege of boys. Finally, this assumption emphasizes the need for similar studies based on girls' narratives.

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