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Choral conducting education: The lifelong entanglement of competence, identity and meaning

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Abstract
Choral singing is one of the most widespread musical activities, and choral conductors work in a variety of social settings that involve every imaginable type of choir and musical genre. The conductor role draws on a number of skills and competencies that are partly acquired through education but, equally importantly, through experience. Choral conductors shape their practice in highly individual fashions as amalgamations of background, formal education, career development and working situation. The present qualitative study seeks to uncover how choral conductor practices arise and unfold, by using Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice and situated learning as the key analytical framework. The study elucidates the choral conducting practice as an ongoing educational project and theorises the dimensions of variety in choral conductors' trajectories. The study situates the conducting practice in a Western choral tradition, based on interviews with a diverse sample of 20 conductors in Norway. The theoretical framework proved to be highly appropriate; however, applying it to the choral conducting practice requires the explicit positioning with regard to the academic debates on the theory's development following Wenger's original conceptualisation. The study therefore contributes to knowledge development in three ways – (1) by shedding new light on the theory, (2) by proposing a sub-structure to the main theory for its application to choral conducting and (3) by tracing some initial implications for choral conducting education. One of the key findings is that a conductor's background continues to impact competence and identity throughout a conductor's work-life, while practice seems to be predominant over formal education.

Keywords
choral conducting, communities of practice, situated learning, music education, identity

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Introduction

Choral singing is one of the most widespread musical activities, and choral conductors work in a variety of social settings that involve every imaginable type of choir and musical genre. Conductors draw upon multiple skills and competencies (Jansson, 2018; Durrant, 2003) that are acquired through formal education and experience. A recent quantitative study of choral conductors in Norway (Jansson, Elstad & Døving, 2019) revealed that conductors' self-perceived competence to some degree depends on their formal education, but that other contextual factors are just as important. The two factors that explained most of the variation were years of experience and the artistic level of the choir in question. The present study is a qualitative follow-up that seeks to uncover how conductor careers arise and unfold, viewing learning as an amalgamation of formal education and practice.

The choral conductor role

The conducting phenomenon emerged from the ensemble member role and has been shaped by the needs of the music and the ensemble, reflecting its music-cultural era (Durrant, 2003; Schonberg, 1967). Prominent conductor-writers, orchestral and choral, have contributed to the shaping of the modern conductor role (Bowen, 2003; Chesnokov, 2010; Inghelbrecht, 1949; Jordan, 1996; Malko, 1950; Seaman, 2013; Thomas, 1935). The majority of academic writing has been within an educational frame (Cox, 1989; Geisler, 2010; Grimland, 2005; Gumm, 1993; Scott, 1996; Skadsem, 1997; Wis, 2002; Yarbrough & Madsen, 1998). Researchers have explored specific aspects of the role, such as conducting gestures (Billingham & Chamberlain, 2001; D'Ausilio et al., 2012; Fuelberth, 2003; Gumm, 2012; Luck & Nte, 2008), ensemble relations (Atik, 1994; Bonshor, 2017; Garnett, 2009) and leadership (Apfelstadt, 1997; Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996; Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012; Davidson, 1995; Goodstein, 1987; Koivunen & Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Mintzberg, 1998; Wis, 2007). Only a few have attended to the musical leader as a whole – the "gestalt conductor" (Jansson, 2018; Durrant, 2003, p. 65).

Choral conductor mastery is more context dependent than what is reflected in formal conductor education (Jansson, Balsnes & Bygdéus, 2019). At the same time, there are clearly universal features of the role that make the choral conducting appear as a single practice field, despite its diversity (Jansson, Elstad, and Døving, 2019). The present study situates conducting in a Western choral tradition.

Formal education and practice

Conductor education was, at the outset, indistinguishable from music education, and the specifics of conducting were learnt in a master–apprentice relationship. In the course of the 20th century, choral conducting became part of academy and university curricula, and the master–apprentice format has to some degree been retained, especially at advanced levels. Varvarigou and Durrant (2011) have proposed a framework for discussing conducting curricula based on six parameters; learners, tutors, music repertoire and choir, process and learning outcomes. Considering the same parameters for lifelong learning, the present study focuses on two of these, a select group of *learners* – apprentice choral conductors – and it specifically investigates the *process* – from whatever entry point to the current level of mastery.

Choral conductors enter the practice in different ways and at different stages in life. In principle, there are six different starting platforms for a choral conductor's career, which might

appear in combinations: (1) the educated instrumentalist, (2) the educated singer, (3) the church musician, (4) the music educator, (5) the musicologist,[1] and, not least (6) the apprentice ("uneducated") choral singer (Jansson, Balsnes & Bygdéus, 2019). A host of combinations of academic education, choir jobs, seminars and courses shape conductor competence, in addition to the innate musicality and generic musical competencies. Academic education matters but is not necessarily targeted effectively in those working situations in which conductors find themselves (Balsnes, 2009). Although practice is a vital learning ground, there is limited research on choral conductors' development (Durrant & Varvarigou, 2008; Silvey & Major, 2014).

Research questions

The study aims to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the choral conducting praxis and the nature of the learning that continues throughout a conductor's work-life. The gaps are related to the educational entry platform, the situatedness of learning and the dynamics of an evolving career. Specifically, we pose the following research questions:

> *Research question 1.* How might we understand the mastery of choral conducting in real-life working situations as an ongoing educational project?
>
> *Research question 2.* What are the dimensions of variety in how choral conductors' professional development paths evolve?

The first question explores various ways that conductors enter the profession, what role formal education plays, the nature and blend of their conductor jobs, and how they view their own work-lives. The second question seeks to find a structure to the individual accounts. Such a qualitative exploration cannot be expected to saturate the topic but nonetheless is able to span the canvas and systematically elucidate the key issues in choral conductors' learning paths.

Theory

We have chosen Etienne Wenger's (1998) notion of *communities of practice* (CoP) as the analytical framework for the research questions. His theory of *situated learning* based on practice and learning trajectories lends itself well to studying learning that takes place over a longer period of time – in the case of choral conductors often throughout a life-time. CoP has had a great influence within the social sciences as a way of exploring learning processes (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014). It has been applied to education (Korthagen, 2010) and also specifically to music – primary education (Kenny, 2014) as well as academy settings (Virkkula, 2016). People who mutually and jointly engage in choral singing with a shared repertoire satisfy Wenger's (1998) definition of a community of practice. The choir could even be seen as an archetype of a CoP, by the emblematic role of symbols (such as gestures and scores), verbal imagery in rehearsals (Black, 2014), and by how rituals (such as warm-up and staging) "reify something of that practice in a congealed form" (Wenger, 1998, p. 59). On top of this, music exemplifies the notion of sociocultural repertoire in CoP in the form of stylistic conventions and artistic expression (Virkkula, 2016).

CoP theory grew out of a master–apprentice view on learning in non-academic settings, where the peripheral role of newcomers and their trajectories towards full membership was in focus (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, a newcomer may come in *not* as the apprentice,

but the expert. Arthur (2016) has proposed four categories of CoP, based on the relative competence level of the newcomer and the existing community. The situation regarding an expert newcomer is labelled by Arthur (2016) as a *challenged CoP* and is very common when a conductor is hired by an amateur choir. A professional ensemble in which everyone is an expert is called a *distributed CoP*. The converse situation is also possible, when one of the singers in an amateur choir steps up and takes on the choral leader role and has to earn the right – an *emerging CoP*. The only situation which is highly unusual in choirs is the *traditional CoP*, where the conductor comes in with less competence than the singers. Arthur's framework is therefore a useful elaboration of the theory that reminds us about the special role that the conductor takes in the ensemble. It should be noted, though, that an asymmetry in competence (or power) does not imply that learning cannot flow both ways. For example, when Kenny (2014) studied music education in primary school by using a CoP framework, an analytical issue arose: "were the students teaching the children or the children teaching the students?" (p. 406).

Wenger's theory grew out of the limitations of a purely individual and cognitivist view of learning where social and corporeal aspects are neglected. Instead, learning was conceptualised as a process that is social and relational, which plays out in practices people engage in. According to Wenger, learning is a generative process, it does something to us, it transforms who we are and what we are able to do. As he depicts the four elements of learning – practice, community, meaning and identity – he immediately underlines how we might "switch any of the four peripheral components with learning, place it in the center as the primary focus", and the concept would still make sense (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Taking advantage of this interchangeability, because our study focuses on choral conducting as a profession, we put practice in the center and use the following categories in our analysis:

1. competence – learning as mastery
2. community – learning as belonging
3. meaning – learning as experience
4. identity – learning as becoming

We have for our purpose re-labelled learning to specifically reflect the comprehensive set of knowledge, skills and competencies that enable the masterful enactment of the conductor role (Jansson, 2018).

Humans engage in multiple CoP that more or less overlap in terms of membership and purpose. Wenger's original conception was oriented towards single practices and processes within such communities. Others later attended to the boundaries between CoP as loci of negotiating and transforming knowledge (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Attention then shifted back to learning within several interconnected practices (Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Omidvar & Kislov, 2014). Choral conductors belong to several communities that are quite distinct, although they overlap: the choir (possibly more than one); conductor peers (fellow students, tutors and colleagues); and, the wider local community (constrained to the music sector or in more geographic terms). The significance of these communities is not so much in the boundaries between them but rather how they provide multiple arenas for a conductor's development, which amalgamate with more or less friction into one coherent professional practice.

Method

The research questions call for a qualitative approach, where the key to understanding the conductors' work-life is their own stories. From a related quantitative study (Jansson, Elstad &

Døving, 2019) with 294 respondents, 36 respondents volunteered to be interviewed. Of these volunteers, 20 were chosen with the aim of obtaining the broadest sample possible, in terms of location, type of conducting practice and formal education. The sample was not intended to be representative in a strict sense, but merely offer a rich variety of experience among choral conductors.[2]

The conductors were video-interviewed individually during the spring of 2018, each interview taking 30–60 min. The interviews took place as structured peer-conversations (as both authors are active conductors), following a simple guide with open questions about their current working situation, formal education, own development and views on conducting competencies. The recorded sound was subsequently transcribed by two assistants.

The initial analysis involved coding of transcriptions, using Wenger's (1998) four pillars of situated learning: community, meaning, learning and identity. The computer software *HyperRESEARCH* was used for the analysis.[3] The initial analysis involved extensive over-coding, so that a particular interview theme could appear from different angles. The second stage of analysis involved the compilation and re-reading of text within each of the four categories. For this stage, a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach was used (van Manen, 1990), seeking to uncover and understand the phenomenon; specifically, to identify categories that provide a meaningful structure to the variety of development paths in the sample. The detailed coding evolved throughout the reading process and eventually resulted in a set of sub-dimensions for each of the four Wenger categories (shown in Table 2). The third stage of analysis involved the writing and re-writing of text for each sub-dimension. The iterative nature of this stage sought to express exhaustively the meanings the data had to offer. The result then takes the form of a meta-narrative – written interpretations by the researchers, substantiated by rich exemplifications, of which only a few were included in the final article format. The few quotes selected for the present article were chosen because they saliently illustrate the main points. Key data on the interviewees are shown in Table 1.

Analysis

Competence – Learning as mastery

Entry point. For every conductor, there was a *pre*-conducting situation, where the individual was an ensemble member of some sort. A striking observation from our interviews is how *coincidental* the initial exposure to conducting seemed to be – moving into conducting never seemed to be premeditated. It could have been caused by a void in the choir, school or community, or there might even have been a financial motive. The encounter with choral conducting in secondary school (16–19 years of age) seems particularly significant. For several informants who were lucky to meet an ardent teacher, such modest introductions were crucial door-openers to a conducting career.

It is rare that someone becomes a choral conductor without having been a choral singer, and this is the primary learning ground and the most common entry platform for a conducting path:

> *Michelle:* *You learn a huge amount, about vocal technique and choral leadership, how the choir works like a group, and the interaction between conductor and choir.*

Elisabeth goes as far as to call her adolescence in choirs her "real education", taking place prior to her academy education.

Table 1. Sample overview.

Pseudonym	Adolescent exposure	Academic Degree 1[a]	Academic Degree 2[b]	Music instrument(s)	Conductor[c]	Courses, seminars, master classes	No of choirs	Level of choir(s)	Type of choir(s)	Years of experience	Financial share of conducting (%)	Main job
Alexander	Choral singing	Music performing	Opera performing	Voice	60 ECTS[d]	Private tutor	2	Amateur	Male, female	10	50	Conductor, freelance singer
Benjamin	n.a.	Music performing	Voice	Voice	Private tutor	Yes	4	Professional advanced	Mixed	19	100	Conductor
Camilla	Choral singing	Opera performing	None	Singer	Embedded	Yes	2	Amateur	Mixed, gospel	15	50	Freelance singer
Charlotte	Choral singing	Musicology	Music production	Euphonium, voice	60 ECTS	Yes	2	Amateur	Mixed, male	28	20	Non-music educator
Daniel	Choral singing	Music education	None	Voice	Embedded	n.a.	2	Amateur	Mixed, female	25	n.a.	Non-music
David	Choral singing	Musicology	Master in vocal music	Voice	Embedded + 30 ECTS	n.a.	2	Advanced amateur	Mixed, female	14	30	Music educator
Maria	Choral singing	Music education	Church musician	Piano, organ	Embedded	Yes	1	Advanced amateur	Church choir	41	30	Church musician
Peter	Choral singing	Music education	Church musician	Organ	Embedded	n.a.	2	Advanced amateur	Church choir, children	20	20	Church musician
Emma	Conducting	Music education	Flute	Flute	30 ECTS	n.a.	2	Amateur	Church choir, mixed	24	20	Flutist, freelance organist
Elisabeth	Choral singing, piano, violin	Musicology	Music therapy	Piano, violin, voice	Embedded	Yes	1	Amateur	Rhythmic	11	30	Music therapist, conductor, singer
Jacob	Choral singing	Music education	None	Piano	Embedded + 60 ECTS	Yes	1	Advanced amateur	Mixed	14	20	Music educator

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Pseudonym	Adolescent exposure	Academic Degree 1[a]	Academic Degree 2[b]	Music instrument(s)	Conductor[c]	Courses, seminars, master classes	No of choirs	Level of choir(s)	Type of choir(s)	Years of experience	Financial share of conducting (%)	Main job
Paula	Conducting	Music performing	Clarinet	Clarinet	30 ECTS	No	1	Amateur	Female	5	20	Band conductor, music educator
Johanna	Conducting	Music education	Opera performing	Voice	Embedded	Yes	2	Advanced amateur	Mixed	48	40	Singer, conductor composer
Lily	n.a.	Music performing	None	Voice, clarinet	120 ECTS (rhythmic)	Yes	2	Amateur	Mixed, female	8	35	Non-music
Michelle	Prestige choir	Music performing	Opera performing	Singer	Embedded	n.a.	1	Amateur	Gospel	6	25	Concert producer
Noah	Conducting	None	None	Organ	None	no	1	Amateur	Church choir	43	15	Non-music
Olivia	n.a.	Music education	None	Voice, piano	30 ECTS (rhythmic)	No	2	Amateur	Rhythmic, children	8	15	Music educator
Sebastian	Conducting	None	None	Guitars, keyboard	Self-taught	No	1	Amateur	Male	14	20	Freelance band musician
Victoria	Broad musical	Drama pedagogy	Music education	Percussion	None	Yes + private tutor	2	Amateur	School choirs	n.a.	40	Music educator
William	n.a.	Music education	Musicology	Voice	Embedded	Yes	2	Amateur	Mixed, workplace	30	20	Music educator

n.a.: data not available.
[a]Academic Degree 1: Initial studies, Bachelor's or Master's.
[b]Academic Degree 2: Master's or another Bachelor's.
[c]Conductor Education: Embedded means conducting courses within another music programme.
[d]European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

Table 2. Dimensions of choral conductors' situated learning.

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Indicators	Range of variation
Community	Ensemble community	Integration with the choir	Central–peripheral
	Conductor peers	Engagement with coaches, tutors, role models	Central–peripheral
	Local community	Engagement with wider cultural arena	Central–peripheral
Competence	Entry platform	Competencies underlying conducting path	Categories A–F[a]
	Academic education in conducting	Structured, formal qualifications	Master, Bachelor, other
	Evolving practice	Experience, exposure, coaching	(unspecified)
Meaning	Purpose	Reason for engaging	Existential–financial
	Achievement	Source of pride	Internal–external
	Reciprocity	Blend of "give and receive"	Balanced–unbalanced
Identity	Transformation	Degree of assuming a full conductor identity	Partial–complete
	Intensity	Position of conducting in work-life	Central–peripheral

[a](A) educated instrumentalist, (B) educated singer, (C) church musician, (D) music educator, (E) musicologist, (F) choral singer.

Formal education. It is conceptually difficult to distinguish between a conducting education that includes a host of generic music subjects and a more general music education with conducting embedded. While the various types of conductor education in Scandinavia have common features, they also cater for different target groups and work-life needs (Jansson, Balsnes & Bygdéus, 2019). Most variants of education are found in the sample, including not having any formal education at all.

The data show that there is a gradual transition between formal education and practice. Several informants were active conductors in the course of their conducting education:

> Jacob: *That's how a musician's life is. It's not like you study until a date and then you start to work. My first student job was in fact my first choir job, in a community choir [. . .].*

Although formal education is valued, conductors realise that it was only a beginning. Often, the learnings from university years materialise a long time afterwards, as practice engenders reflection on past tutoring.

Evolving practice. The interviews highlight the prominence of practice in building conductor competence. Although the informants do not discredit their formal education, practice nonetheless rules. A more problematic issue is how conductors experienced a discrepancy between formal education and practice. Here, two aspects were particularly salient – the relational competencies and the level of choir at which their education aimed:

> Maria: *There was a lot missing in my education. We never touched the inter-personal aspects, which I find very important. How you deal with people.*

Alexander: *Unless you get a really advanced choir after your education, you have not learnt much of what you need.*

Another aspect of practice is participation in various types of courses, seminars and master classes. The most prominent motivations for taking part include enhancing their gestural proficiency, learning more about vocal technique and being inspired to expand their repertoire. One benefit of such events is to nurture a sense of community within the conductor peer group, which in turn confirms and reinforces a conductor identity and belief in their own conducting practice.

Community – Learning as belonging

The ensemble community. The only situation where the conductor may learn the impact of their competence, is when they encounter an ensemble. It is the singers who make the sound, and the choir is literally a mirror where conductor competencies are reflected. The co-dependence of choral leadership and the impact on singers induces communality. The main source of the conductor's sense of belonging comes from guiding, inspiring and lifting each singer, thereby enabling a unified team:

Elisabeth: *The most important is the shared pulse, experiencing community, the shared sound that captures me [. . .]. Being one organism, the small signals work and we are one.*

The dichotomy of the conductor as ensemble member and leader manifests itself in how the desire to lead combines with humility and gratitude when it works. Informants reiterate that choral leadership requires a certain courage and will power to drive the ensemble forward, as well as cope with contrasting opinions or even outright resistance. Conductors also naturally experience conflicts of interest with regard to ambition levels and repertoire. The dichotomy also plays out as a balancing problem between distance and intimacy. At the same time, they acknowledge the involvement and competence of their singers in shaping their choral leader practice.

The conductor peer group. The sense of belonging to the conductor peer group starts with participation in a conducting class, and therefore includes also the tutors. Some conductors continued to be choral singers in parallel ensembles, and sang in choirs above their own conducting notch as is way to nurture peer learning. There was great variety in terms of how peripheral the interviewees were in the conductor peer group. Some were on the outside, whereas others were closely connected, even having a conductor parent or spouse. Conductors in this study appeared to take deliberate steps to learn from peers. The most readily available option seemed to be informally observing and meeting other conductors at festivals or concerts, or cooperation between two choirs set up in order for the conductors to meet, share tasks and coach each other. However, the most common option seemed to be participation in courses, seminars and master classes organised by choral associations. An organised mentoring scheme has also been important for several of the interviewees.[4]

Learning from one's peer group is not always a positive experience. Daniel found that a conductor coach he used was highly competent, but somewhat condescending. Michelle had two well-renowned conductors as her tutors, but had great difficulty making the coaching meaningful to her:

Michelle: *They had their ways of doing things, sort of 'the way' [. . .] hang-ups in terms of beat patterns and the shape of my hand. I was completely inhibited, was not able to make music and feel good with the ensemble I had [. . .]. When conducting, I had to put on a sort of a 'guise' that was really constricting [. . .]. I couldn't be myself.*

Her experience reminds us that peer learning is, ultimately, a question of personal fit, whether same-level peers or between master and apprentice. The continuation of Michelle's story is that a much less renowned coach had a more open approach and was in fact able to build on her strengths and make her secure as well as effective in front of the choir.

The local community. From Table 1, we observe that the informants are spread across a variety of choir types in terms of age group, genre and ambition level. The choir types also involve different organisational structures and affiliations and are therefore connected to the wider community in different ways and to different degrees. For some informants, the local community does not matter much. At the other extreme, Benjamin takes on the role of building an entire structure of choral singing in his town. For most conductors, their practice unavoidably extends into a network of collaborators, musicians, organisers, funders and venues.

Meaning – Learning as experience

Purpose. The deep meaning from engaging with music is a common theme, from simple enjoyment to being a vital necessity. Music has the capacity to assume an existential role, where meaning is expressed as a transcending experience:

Daniel: *The feeling I have when I am with the choir and work intensely is that I disappear. I don't think about myself. I don't think about who I am. [. . .] It is not self-obliterating, that's not what it's about, but time ceases [. . .].*

Such sensations of blurred boundaries between ensemble members in peak moments have also been found in other studies (Jansson, 2019; Marotto, Roos, & Victor, 2007). The immersion into the musical experience becomes the very purpose of being a conductor. In stark contrast, the complete opposite might also be the case, as was the case with Lily, for example, explicitly emphasises her need for remuneration in order to make an acceptable living. The dichotomy between existential meaning and money is not only a question of purpose for choral conductors. It is also indicative of the working conditions in the choral sector as well as the professional identities of conductors. Choirs are often poor payers, and with a sizeable number of choral conductors academically uneducated, choral conducting struggles to be viewed unequivocally as a profession – beyond leisurely fun.

Achievement. Achievement is a double-edged sword in the realm of music. In one respect, it is at odds with the existential nature of the music itself. On the contrary, success and failure go hand-in-hand with development and progression, for a single piece of music, for a particular concert or for a career span. For a capable conductor, improving amateur singers is low-hanging fruit:

Jacob: *I have always found great fun in mediocre choirs, because there is nothing as powerful as a choral conductor when you make them perform to their very best, and even some more.*

Choral conductors tend to be ensemble builders, partly because they often have to build from scratch, and partly because it is the only way they get to perform the music they really want to.

The flipside of achievement is not meeting one's own expectations. Camilla started with very high ambitions, but realised that she could not deliver on this with her choir. The self-image that came from being well-educated was just as much a threat as an opportunity, although she did not take all the blame for it herself. All in all, achievement is crucial to the conductor's sense of purpose, but with it comes an inherent conflict between an existential and an instrumental motivation.

Reciprocity. From the meaningfulness of music grows the desire to share and allow others to take part in the experience. The conductors in the sample are better educated and more skilled than their singers, and they see it as their mission to invite them into their own experiential realm. They take great pride in enthusing singers and enabling mastery beyond what they expected. Conductors naturally give of themselves, a key component of meaningfulness, but equally important is how this is reciprocated:

> Maria: *I get so inspired by them, I must say. I can arrive exhausted at the choir rehearsal, and then become so inspired by that gang.*

The conductor's contribution in amateur choirs may unleash an array of well-being and health benefits associated with choral singing (Balsnes, 2018). At times, the conductor contributes to radical change, for example, one of Sebastian's singers, who told him that he could simply stop seeing his psychologist after he joined the choir.

Such relational intimacy, while in some respects positive, is also problematic. When the intimacy-distance balance is tilted, it not only confounds the conductor role, but is also found to be invasive. Sebastian stopped going out for a drink with the singers after rehearsals. He did not want to be the closest person to them in the singers' personal lives, and was scared by their devotion to him. Although reciprocation in some cases may be just too much, it remains a key element in how choral conductors find meaning in their work. The conflict is not between giving and receiving, but rather the intensity of the exchange.

Identity – Learning as becoming

Transformation. A common theme in the sample is how closely identity is associated with the type of educational entry platform, even after many years of conducting. Several informants retain their singer identity as conductors, for example, Noah who enjoys conducting but prefers singing. The impact of entry platform becomes even clearer when the basis is not the voice or choral singing. Paula has a band and orchestra background, which comes with a certain gestural identity. Working with choirs is a "different way of waving", she says. The trivial observation is that background determines the competence base. It is less obvious that several of the informants strongly retain their original identity as they progress on their choral conducting paths. Two of the conductors in the sample have combined master's degrees in conducting and organ. They express a mixed identity from the outset, in contrast to the rest of the sample, where the conductor identity emerged from practice. Although this process might be gradual, for Jacob, the realisation that "I am a conductor" struck immediately when he started to conduct a community choir. Camilla assumes a conductor identity as an added feature to her solo singing:

Camilla: *I am first and foremost a singer. But I am also a conductor, and that is growing stronger and stronger.*

Sebastian is a rock musician, playing guitars and bass in several bands. His choir of "rockers" reinforce his band identity.

Sebastian: *I am a freelance musician. [. . .] That is my main source of income. I play weekly in three to four rock bands. [. . .] Often I pull in [the choir] in band settings.*

We also observe other blends, for example, Emma who assumes a *leader* identity, conscious of the musical-technical and the inter-personal requirements of the role, taking pride in being both very decisive and convivial. Benjamin, who operates in the professional domain, clearly sees himself as a conductor with the identity of a *musician* in a wider sense, drawing on his combined instrumental and voice education.

Moving towards a conductor identity is not only a question of mix of competence and working situation, it is also about the courage to label oneself conductor. Maria has a degree in music education and church music, but not in conducting. She is proud of her educational skills, but is rather timid with respect to her conducting:

Maria: *I have deep respect for competent conductors. I feel that I am not one of those super conductors, but it is good enough for the choir I have.*

At the extreme end of conductor identity spectrum, we have the ageing conductor who cannot let go. Peter warns against being too dependent on one's conductor identity, which might lead to a flawed conception of one's own contribution:

Peter: *Are you really a conductor for others, or do the others have to be the choir for you, in order for you to continue to be a conductor? You shouldn't overidentify with the role.*

Identity is also shaped by position in the peer group, for example, David, who has the identity of an outsider because he feels that the establishment does not fully accept his conductor education from abroad.

Intensity. Conducting takes varying positions in the informants' work-lives, as share of time and money, or as degree of passion. For Benjamin, conducting is his entire work-life, but for most, choral conducting constitutes a minority share of the total work-life. As Table 1 shows, informants combine conducting jobs with all kinds of full-time or part-time musical or non-musical jobs. The conductor work may also be explicitly embedded in another position. The intensity of the conducting identity is closely related to achievement, which for several of the informants is about ensemble-building:

Emma: *It has been my lifework, that I was able to build a choir from nearly scratch to become a great choir.*

A lifework signals a highly intense conductor identity. Conversely, several informants have been in and out of choral conducting throughout their careers, which suggests a more moderate intensity. A moderate or mixed identity may also arise from how it is embedded in related music-jobs, for example, teaching music, arranging music, music therapy or producing concerts.

Some informants want conducting to be a stronger part of their identity but face obstacles in the environment. Lily, for example, felt that she was not accepted in her community as a *professional*, because her conducting job is part-time, indicating that it would be more accepted if it was the only thing she did.

Discussion

CoP as a framework for choral conducting practice

The analysis shows that the four elements of the framework are indeed applicable when we capture the essence of how a choral conducting practice evolves. This calls for a discussion of how these findings might inform some of the academic debates on the theory. First, we must recognise that choral conducting is an integral part of the choir, as it has no meaning without it. Many choirs have no conductor, and there is a continuum between ensemble singing and assuming some degree of leadership responsibility, where the non-signing designated leader is an end-point. Geilinger, Haefliger, von Krogh, and Rechsteiner (2016) argue that *leading* is often neglected in CoP and that it must be added as a distinct element in addition to learning – through being, knowing and doing. Choral leadership clearly demonstrates this point: the fluidity between leading and learning is ever-present when our informants talk about their development.

While the choral conducting practice resides within the choral singing practice, it cannot be contained within it, because conducting is an open-ended practice, reaching directly into other choirs, the conductor peer group and various types of local communities. Our results align with Yakhlef (2010), who argues that the sources of learning extend beyond narrowly defined communities and include other places, other times and other generations. Our study does not concur with the original picture of the compartmentalisation of practices, which implies one identity per community, as pointed out by Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006). Rather, our study seems clearly positioned in the recent phases of CoP-development and aligns with Wenger's notion that "a complex, multifaceted, dynamic identity reflects a sense of belonging to multiple communities of practice" (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014, p. 273).

The significance of the pre-conducting platform as well as formal education plays right into the tension between a Wenger versus a Bourdieu view of practice (Mutch, 2003). Conducting may be one of the most visual manifestations of the notion of *habitus*, because the full set of predispositions are ultimately embodied in the leader act. The conductor cannot escape his or her body shape, posture, demeanour and voice. Moreover, any knowledge or any emotion is channelled through the conductor gestalt. A generative habitus is clearly at work, and our results show that the "pre-conducting habitus" is sustained to some degree in a lasting manner. On the contrary, the practice does indeed shape and transform the conductor, in accordance with Wenger's theory. Our results are found to be midway between the two positions (Handley et al., 2006; Mutch, 2003); that while bound by initial structure (predispositions), conductors maintain a sense of agency, adapt and adopt competence and identity in various communities. Put in competence terms, musical-technical mastery is to a large degree an individual feature, but it manifests itself and is made meaningful through the community of singers. This further points to the dispute over the cognitive versus the social in learning theory (Yakhlef, 2010), where the conducting practice demonstrates not only their co-dependence but also the *simultaneity* of the two. For example, error-correction in rehearsals is deeply social (singers are vulnerable), but the aural skills required to do it combine a complex set of cognitive abilities (Leman, 2008; Snyder, 2000). On a more aggregate level, conductors continuously face a number of

balancing acts in their roles (Jansson, 2018; Hunt, Stelluto, & Hooijberg, 2004), which require a high degree of artistic reflexivity. The conductor is therefore in one sense very lonely and at the same time in a communal state. However, the attention to the cognitive versus the social may be just as much a question of the granularity with which we look at the conducting practice. At the career level, which is the focus of the present study, the social bias of CoP does not reduce the usefulness of the theory.

Dimensions of variability

CoP was a priori chosen as the main structure for the analysis. As was argued in the preceding discussion, the framework proved to be highly appropriate, albeit with some explicit positioning with regard to the theory developments following Wenger's original conceptualisation. In sum, the results tell a meta-story about a varied group of choral conductors, not as continuous strands of lived lives, but by elucidating the "perimeter" of the arena they operate on and trajectories they move along. The results revealed the underlying dimensions of each of the four Wenger pillars, which were used to structure the results section and are summarised in Table 2. Each sub-dimension opens up topics that are research traditions in their own right, some of which are pointed out in the following, without claiming to be exhaustive.

The coexistence and interconnection between multiple communities was confirmed by the analysis. The sub-dimensions of *Community* comprise one or more choirs, conductor peers and variants of the extended local musical/cultural community. The two latter may not always be very prominent and represent groups with low cohesion but when they matter, they do impact the practice. The three sub-dimensions of *Competence* often play out sequentially but not always. The significance of the entry platform appears explicitly in how conductors talk about it. Both formal education and learning are impacted by where they are coming from, highlighting the importance of the "learner" element in Varvarigou and Durrant's (2011) curriculum framework.

The sub-dimensions of *Meaning* are partly intra-musical and partly extra-musical (Cross, 2009; Green, 2005; Koelsch, 2011; Koopman & Davies, 2001). *Purpose* is first and foremost about music, but in some cases financial elements move to the foreground. *Reciprocity* is an aspect of the relational side of the practice, one that might be explored further by drawing the theory traditions of transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Gill, 2006; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). The role of *Achievement* is related to *Purpose* by how it weakens or confirms *Purpose*, but differs by how it comes out of effort over time. A conductor may be present at the practice for a reason, but merely *being there* is usually not enough; there needs to be progress of some sort, in musical terms or outwardly position. Moreover, it impacts on *Identity*, which is largely a question of how far a conductor has moved from a pre-conducting self-image to having fully inhabited the conductor guise. But *identity* is also modified by what role choral conducting occupies in the overall professional work-life, whether it is the main job, an integral part of a wider musical job, or auxiliary to a non-music job.

We have derived the dimensions of choral conductors' situated learning from a limited and qualitative data set. However, just as Arthur (2016) based on a single case "sought to add to existing understandings of CoP theory and [. . .] developed a typology which might help explain the lived experience of this respondent" (p. 8), we believe that our selection of 20 conductors spans the canvas fairly well and is applicable for a varied choral conducting practice field.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we have, with Wenger's theory of CoP as the analytical framework, discussed how conductor careers arise and unfold. In summing up, we see some implications for formal education and practice. Most of the conductors were choral singers in their youth. The best way to recruit conductors, therefore, seems to be to involve young people in choirs. Many informants talk about how they were accidentally put in front of a choir – and enjoyed it. Such exposure could clearly happen more systematically and thus strengthen recruitment. It seems important that young people meet proficient tutors and that the conducting craft is introduced in secondary school.

Our informants have various educational backgrounds. However, the results show that most of the competence building happens in the choir – in practice. Many experience a discrepancy between what they learnt through their formal education and the requirements they face out in the field. In short, they were overexposed to advanced repertoire and underexposed to interpersonal skills. The discrepancy might be reduced by equipping students with a varied tool-box combined with a framework for artistic reflexivity – a method for how to more easily recognise and deal with challenges they will face in their practices. Having more realistic practice during the course of their education (as opposed to students conducting students) would certainly prepare candidates better.[5] Post-degree peer learning is exploited by some but seems to be untapped potential.[6]

The conductor's entry platform impacts his or her perceived strengths and weaknesses. The varied entry platforms suggest that both initial education and continued courses and master classes need to recognise and adapt to an array of profiles and needs – there is no one-size-fits-all. The external environment and working situation also impacts how conductors create meaning in their practice as well as identity. Many of our informants struggle to get acceptance for decent pay and working conditions. Nonetheless, they find their practice deeply personally meaningful, through what they achieve with their ensembles and from the mutuality of the choral community.

Authors' note

Supplemental material for this article is available on request.

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The project is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, in compliance with standard ethical guielines for research. The informants are cited anonymously and given aliases.

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Notes

1. Musicology is used in a wide sense, which includes performative and pedagogic research and practice.
2. The qualitative sample was in fact very similar to the quantitative sample, in terms of gender mix, years of experience and level of choir.
3. http://www.researchware.com/products/hyperresearch.html
4. Koralliansen (The Choral Alliance) in Norway has over the last two years offered a nationwide mentoring programme, where an experienced conductor coaches a less experienced conductor in his or her regular choir setting.

5. Bachelor students at the Norwegian Academy of Music are required to lead their own choir whilst studying.
6. Organised by *Koralliansen* (The Choir Alliance) in Norway since 2017.

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