

Chapter 3 – Problematization of Literature

3.1 Original Research Questions and Change of Direction in study

During the course of the literature review and initial data gathering the focus of this project shifted significantly. The original proposal for this research aimed to answer the following question:

To what extent is it possible and perhaps more importantly appropriate for a conductor to offer vocal instruction to singers in training from the podium when faced with a range of singers of varying ability levels, voice types and levels of vocal education?

The areas which were to be explored during the project were originally stated as:

- Whether or not it is possible for a conductor to effectively teach vocal technique to groups of singers considering that: each vocal instrument in the group will be biologically unique, the ability and experience levels of singers within the group may not be equal and the singers may also already be receiving coaching from a one to one singing teacher addressing their individual needs.
- Whether or not it is possible for a conductor to fulfil their responsibility to ensure that the vocal health of the singers under their direction is safeguarded whilst giving general vocal advice to a mixed group of singers.

The outcome of the project was expected to be a dissertation discussing the efficacy and safety of teaching singing technique to singers from the podium. It was also intended that if it was deemed appropriate then a proposed method for incorporating elements of vocal training systems into a choral setting would be included.

Initial data gathering was conducted via an online mixed-methods questionnaire which gathered 231 responses, the construction and analysis of which is described in Chapter 5, Methodology. After analysis however it became clear that vocal training was not a priority for all conductors. This is shown below in Figure 7 which presents an extract of the results of a survey of UK-based choral conductors which was carried out early in this research.

Conductors were asked to rate the level of importance of seven aspects of choral practice within a rehearsal setting on a 7-point Likert scale. The results show that whilst a duty of care to singers' voices was of importance to conductors with 80% of participants responding 8 – 10 (10 indicating very important) to this question, vocal training was the lowest priority of the seven options available with only 56% of participants responding 8 – 10 to this question.

Percentage of participants who rated the importance of each rehearsal aspect as being important, i.e. between 8 – 10 on a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = Not important and 10 = Very important)

	8	9	10	Total (as a % of all responses)
Duty of Care to singers' voices	20	11	49	80
Teaching Vocal Skills	25	7	24	56
Social integration	18	17	33	68
Concert preparation	15	22	41	78
Singers' motivation/self-esteem	15	20	53	88
Choral blend/sound unity	19	18	46	83
Overall quality of sound	20	15	54	89

Figure 1 - Responses to Likert scale questions of conductor survey indicating level of deemed importance of rehearsal aspects

It was apparent that the research questions formulated had focused on an aspect of practice that conductors deemed relatively unimportant and a fuller understanding of the voice-related responsibilities of a conductor might be gained by broadening the project's focus. It was therefore determined that revisiting the literature review, engaging in a problematization process, and generating new and more pertinent research questions would be appropriate.

3.2 Problematization¹

In order to generate meaningful and interesting research questions, and to reflect deeply on the scope of the study a problematization process, problematizing choral conducting as an

¹ Due to the fact that the problematization methodology used in this thesis (Alvesson & Sandburg's problematization methodology) has been written using the American spelling of this term, this spelling has been adopted throughout this thesis to ensure consistency.

act and the conductor's role within this field was engaged in. As a guide for this process Alvesson & Sandberg's "Problematization Methodology" (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p.47) was followed. This process involves:

1. Identifying a domain of literature to be drawn on
2. Identifying/articulating common assumptions in the literature domain within 5 sub-categories, namely:
 - a. In-house (assumptions specific to individual schools of thought)
 - b. Root metaphors (Broad illustrations of subjects within the literature)
 - c. Paradigmatic (Ontological/epistemological and methodological assumptions)
 - d. Ideological (Assumptions relating to areas such as political stances, moral issues, gender-related assumptions etc.)
 - e. Field assumptions (Assumptions about an individual subject that are held by varying theoretical schools)
3. Evaluating these assumptions
4. Presenting alternatives to these assumptions
5. Relating these assumptions to the intended audience
6. Evaluating the presented alternative assumptions to determine their merit as foundations for research questions

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013)

Responses to the prompts above will now be presented and the process of identifying assumptions within the choral conducting literature and then evaluating these as possible foundations of a research question will be outlined. As will be shown, the problematization process led to a conceptualisation of conducting as an act of musical leadership which led to the formulation of a new set of research questions for this project.

3.2.1 Following the Alvesson & Sandberg Problematization Methodology

1. Identify a domain of literature

The literature domain was identified as the scholarly and non-scholarly conducting literature which relates to the role of a choral conductor. Whilst the initial set of research questions pertained to the voice-centred functions of a conductor, initial data gathering suggested that this focus was not aligned with priorities in current practice. It was therefore determined that the problematization process should initially consider the literature pertaining to the overall role of the conductor to be the domain examined. As described earlier in Chapter 2, the conducting literature can be further divided into four categories: how-to guides; maestro writing; individual studies; and holistic models.

2. Identify and articulate assumptions

a. In-house

In-house assumptions are those assumptions shared within individual schools of thought in a field. The in-house assumptions identified within the reviewed literature domain are as follows:

- That the role of a conductor comprises three aspects, namely: musical; relational; and philosophical. This assumption is shared by advocates of holistic study of the conductor's role, most notably Colin Durrant and Dan Jansson.
- That musical and gestural skills are of primary importance when instructing conductors in training. This assumption is shared by authors of how-to guides and is evident in the emphasis placed on these skills in their writing.
- That choral conducting involves the teaching of musical and vocal skills to singers. This assumption is shared by educator conductors, who often operate within a college or school system that employs conductors as teachers of choir classes. This assumption is closely related to educational root metaphor assumptions, discussed below.

b. Root metaphor

Root metaphors are broad images used to describe subjects within the literature. Root metaphors for conducting identifiable within the reviewed literature domain include the choir/conductor relationship as:

- **Teacher/class.** As previously mentioned, it is possible to view conducting as an educational act in which the conductor is the educator and the singers are the

learners. This view is shared in particular by practitioners and researchers operating within school/college choral systems however it is also shared more widely by researchers such as Durrant (Durrant, 1996, 2018).

- **Leader/team.** It is also possible to view the conductor as a musical leader and the singers as their team. This metaphor of the conductor as a leader is increasingly being used by practitioners and choral associations in the UK. The Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD) describes itself as “the only UK organisation which is devoted entirely to supporting those leading choral music...committed to promoting, improving and maintaining opportunities for the professional development of all those leading singing of any kind” (*About ABCD*, 2020). In 2018 Wavelength Women was founded to celebrate and develop “Women in choral leadership” (*Wavelength - Celebrating Women in Choral Leadership*, 2018), and in 2019 The Choral Leadership Network was formed in order to bring together the experience and expertise of UK choral organisations to create “An inclusive support network for choral leaders and singers” (*Choral Leadership Network - About us*, 2019).
- **Instrumentalist/instrument.** A metaphor for conducting which is apparent in many how-to guides and maestro writing is that of the conductor playing the choir like an instrument, suggesting that they have control over the singers’ and their voices, controlling aspects of their singing such as tempo, dynamics just as a pianist might with a piano.

c. Paradigm

The research reviewed above has taken place primarily within two philosophical paradigms.

- Much of the research within the Individual Studies category outlined in Chapter 2 has been situated within a positivist paradigm. Individual aspects of conducting practice have been examined using quantitative measures such as gesture, (Grady, 2014), vocal health (Kirsh et al., 2013) or choral pedagogy (Corbalán et al., 2019).
- Holistic models of conducting have been produced by researchers taking an interpretivist approach (Durrant, 1996; Jansson, 2013) using qualitative methods. Participants in the research have been both singers and conductors, however other stakeholders such as choir committee representatives or choral associations have not been consulted in this type of research.

d. Ideology

Although the choral research domain as a whole may contain theses and articles focussing on ideological perspectives on choral music making, literature which focuses on relating this to the holistic role and voice-centred responsibilities of the conductor is scarce. Articles relating ideological beliefs to individual *actions* which a conductor might take (Freer, 2019) are available however these are not related to the conductor's overall role in relation to the choir. Within the reviewed literature above, the primary ideological debate identified was that of the moral duties/ethical considerations involved in choral conducting. Choral singing has increasingly been cited as a tool for promoting physical and mental wellbeing in singers (Johnson et al., 2013). Attention has also been paid to the health of singers' voices during choral rehearsing/performing (Andrade et al., 2014; Rosa & Behlau, 2017; Weiss, 2001). It

may therefore be said that the conductor's duty of care to singers is a topic of concern within the literature. In spite of this topic being present in the literature, very few of the texts reviewed *explicitly* consider the extent to which this duty of care forms part of the conducting role. More commonly, reference is made to this within practice-based writing and authors' opinions over where this responsivity lies are stated (Barr, 2009; Jordan, 2009).

e. Field

Field assumptions are those which relate to a specific subject within the field and are shared across different theoretical schools. Within the literature reviewed so far, the following field assumptions have been identified:

- **Conducting is enacted by a single person** – The conducting literature generally assumes that a single person will be enacting the role of conductor within a choir. Early voice-building literature might be an exception to this (Ehmann & Haasemann, 1982), however as the concept of voice-building was further developed this function was merged with that of the conductor and later enacted by just one person (Haasemann & Jordan, 1991; Jordan, 2009; Smith & Sataloff, 1999).
- **Conducting involves gesture** – across the different types of literature reviewed above, conductors are generally expected to use gesture to communicate musical intentions to singers. This is apparent across the literature reviewed in the previous chapter with authors generally of the opinions that “[y]our gesture can create the frame within which the choir makes its sounds” (Brewer, 1997, p.10). There is also an assumption that certain basic gestural movements will be understood across contexts such as increasing/decreasing gesture size to indicate the desired level of

volume to singers (McElheran, 1989). There also appears to be a standardised set of beating patterns that appear within the literature suggesting that these are likely to be understood universally within the choral conducting community (Hill et al., 2007; McElheran, 1989).

- **Conductors are expected to instruct choirs** – there are various forms of instruction which conductors appear to be expected to give to choirs ranging from communicating musical interpretive instructions relating to things such as dynamics or articulation (Durrant, 2018; McElheran, 1989), or determining seating formations for the choir (Jordan, 2005). There is a general expectation then that the conductor will be the person in charge and singers will follow instructions from this person. It should be noted that this identified field-wide expectation that conductors will instruct singers is more general than the specific expectation of vocal instruction identified within the voice-building literature.

3. Evaluating these assumptions and 4. Presenting alternatives to these assumptions

When evaluating the assumptions identified during the problematization process,

“[t]he problematizer must therefore continually ask him/herself, What [*sic*] is the theoretical potential of challenging a particular assumption? Is this novel? Is it likely to stimulate non-trivial rethinking? In what way may this lead to productive new research questions? As a general rule, challenging broader assumptions, such as paradigm or field assumptions, is likely to lead to greater impact theories” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p.58).

Relating this to the assumptions identified above, I argue that the broadest assumptions that might be challenged fall within categories b and c, i.e. root metaphor and paradigm. Whilst it may be interesting to challenge assumptions in other categories, I believe that the broadest understanding of the conductor's role can be investigated by challenging assumptions in these two areas. I also argue that this allows me to reframe and build upon the work of both Durrant and Jansson i.e. both of the researchers identified in the previous chapter as producers of 'holistic' models of conducting.

Alvesson & Sandberg suggest that "While the formulation of alternative assumptions analytically marks a crucial stage in problematization, it should not be seen as isolated from the other principles involved" (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p.59). The reformulation of these assumptions relies on the identification and evaluation of previous assumptions but equally the initial identification of the stated assumptions requires an awareness of potential alternatives (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). I will therefore discuss steps 3 and 4 in the problematization process concurrently as they are fundamentally interrelated.

Root metaphor – teacher/class

As discussed earlier (see p.26) choral-specific research journals are relatively scarce and, within the UK, a relatively recent phenomenon. A great deal of choral research has consequently been published in journals relating to music education. It is also true that a large proportion of the existing scholarly research on choral conducting has been carried out in the US where schools and colleges often offer choir as a credit-bearing class (Jansson,

2019). Researchers conducting these studies often recruit college and school choir conductors as participants. This perhaps accounts for the large volume of research that positions choral music making as an educational situation where the conductor is the teacher and the singers are the students.

Durrant's work most comprehensively represents the teacher/class root metaphor in relation to the role of a choral conductor. Durrant does not model the *role* of a choral conductor, rather his holistic model outlines desired capabilities a choral conductor should possess whilst being clear that a conductor should be a "promoter of appropriate musical learning" (Durrant, 2018, p.91). Durrant assumes that the role of the conductor is to promote learning and therefore does not acknowledge the possibility for example that choral singing may fulfil an extra-musical purpose for singers or perhaps that singers may view choral singing as a group project or a form of employment. Durrant therefore outlines desired capabilities for an educator conductor as opposed to suggested aspects of the role or duties they should perform. This results in the transferability of this model being limited. A conductor modelling their skillset on Durrant's work may find it difficult to work with choral groups who are not looking to engage in an educational session.

I therefore propose that an alternative root metaphor, that of a leader/team, would provide an interesting perspective on the role of a conductor. There is considerable overlap between the teacher/class and leader/team perspectives. Viewing the conductor as a leader instead of as a teacher still allows for consideration for teaching duties that a conductor might enact, these may fall under the banner of mentoring/developing their followers. It is

also true that many aspects of leadership could be investigated from an educational point of view. Elements of leadership such as motivation (Wis, 2011), goal setting (Northouse, 2016), and role modelling (Bass & Riggio, 2006) could equally be considered potential duties of an educator. A leadership lens however shifts the primary emphasis from educating singers, to considering this as one of many potential duties and allows for a broader exploration of the conductor's role without favouring teaching as a duty.

It is true that the leader/team perspective has been adopted by a small number of researchers, however the majority of these authors have focused solely on the leadership style that conductors adopt, with only Jansson, as discussed above, investigating conducting as a whole and producing a holistic model of the conducting phenomenon. The work of other leadership-focused researchers on choral conducting will be discussed fully in the next chapter, Chapter 4 – Leadership Theory and Choral Leadership Literature.

In rejecting the teacher/class metaphor, assumptions about *what is being taught and how* must also be reassessed. The question of *what is being taught* relates to an identified in-house assumption, namely that choral conducting involves the teaching of musical and vocal skills to singers. Durrant's holistic model advocates that the vocal development/teaching in particular is part of the conductor's role, arguing that a conductor should have “**a knowledge of the human voice** in order to...promote better and effective singing” (Durrant, 2018, p91) and “**the capacity to enable choral and vocal development**” (emphasis added) (Durrant, 2018, p.92). Adopting the proposed alternative leader/team perspective on the conductor's role in relation to the singers' voices allows a shift in focus from *what is taught*

to singers to a broader view of how the leader works with their team's voices and what their role is in relation to voice-centred matters. Leadership may or may not involve taking responsibility for any number of voice-related duties such as (among others): managing team resources (protecting singers' voices and/or assigning singers to appropriate roles in the team); mentoring followers (developing singers' voices); and/or taking responsibility for followers (safeguarding singers' voices). As such, investigating voice-centred matters from a leadership perspective allows for broadening the investigation from the teaching of voice to a more holistic view of the voice-related aspects of the conductor's role.

Paradigm

Most philosophical approaches to research can be defined by their stance on ontology and epistemology, and researchers' core beliefs in these areas are reflected in their choice of research methods. A researcher's ontological viewpoint reflects their views on what reality is, e.g. is there a knowable physical world and set of truths that can be discovered or is there no single reality or truth that can be known? Epistemological views are related to ontological views in that a researcher's epistemological view will determine *how* they go about gathering information about reality, e.g. if there is a single, knowable reality it can therefore be measured and results can be assessed in terms of reliability. Alternatively, if there is no single truth of a situation then reality might instead be interpreted to discover the meaning of the situation (Patel, 2015).

Previous research on choral conducting reviewed in Chapter 2 has been situated in either positivist or interpretivist paradigms. Researchers have therefore used primarily either quantitative or qualitative methods in their studies. Quantitative conducting research has generally related to individual aspects of choral conducting practice such as gesture (Grady, 2014), vocal health (Kirsh et al., 2013) or vocal training (Corbalán et al., 2019; Hoch & Sandage, 2018). Holistic perspectives on choral conducting however have been examined using qualitative methods (Durrant, 1996; Jansson, 2013).

An alternative to these approaches could be to situate a study within a pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatists view reality not as static, but being constantly renegotiated through our interaction with the world. It is therefore impossible to find truths, and instead consequences of our previous actions are used to make warranted assertions which guide future actions in an intelligent way (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Using the consequences of these interactions as guidance for future inquiry is seen as the only way of finding out about one's surroundings. Pragmatic researchers therefore replace the emphasis on epistemology and ontology described above with a focus on inquiry.

A consequence of adopting this worldview is that it is vital to acknowledge the context of any warranted assertion formed. If actions are separated from their context then there can be no expectation that the action will result in a similar consequence when reperformed. For a warranted assertion to be accepted, the action that predicated it must result in the desired consequence. "For pragmatists, reality is true as far as it helps us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experiences" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p.255). A

pragmatist will therefore accept or reject a version of reality depending on how well the action taken resulted in the expected or desired outcome. Pragmatist research may then be evaluated based on the results being of practical use in future inquiry, i.e. whether or not they represent warranted assertions that will produce a satisfactory interaction with the world in future actions. It is however not possible to know whether or not any warranted assertion formed will be of guidance in new contexts.

Pragmatists consider inquiry to be fundamental in finding out about the world (Morgan, 2014), however inquiry is not limited to formal research processes. Inquiry is instead considered to be any process of using experience to inform action ranging from academic study through to everyday considerations made by people in their daily lives (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In both circumstances prior experience is used to form warranted assertions which inform actions. Pragmatists therefore do not see practitioners and researchers as separate groups, rather they are both using past experience to inform current action. Research and applied work are therefore seen as sitting on one continuum as opposed to there being a separation between theory and practice.

It is this view of practice and theory that makes a pragmatic paradigm particularly suitable for examining choral conducting. The conducting literature reviewed in the previous chapter contains no small amount of practitioner writing (Brewer, 1997; De-Lisser & Peckham, 2015; McElheran, 1989) alongside more formal academic studies (Allen, S. Gail, Apfelstadt, 1990; Grady, 2014; Gumm, 2018; Ludwa, 2012). It is also true that conducting is by its nature a pragmatic, practice-based activity, wherein conductors *must* take action, i.e. interact with

singers, for their conducting to be meaningful. Although it may be possible to practice conducting gestures and beating patterns alone, it is impossible for a conductor to learn to truly lead singers and know whether or not their gestures are successful without interacting with choral groups. It is also impossible to know whether any instructions or advice given, however theoretically sound, will be successful in achieving the conductor's desired outcome without testing this with groups of singers (McElheran, 1989). Successes must be achieved, and mistakes must be made in a public setting for the choral leader to learn what works.

I therefore argue that it is appropriate to situate this study within a pragmatic paradigm.

5. Relating these assumptions to the intended audience

Pragmatic research is characterised by a focus on producing results that may be used to make a practical difference to a social group (Hogan, 2017). It is therefore crucial that the assumptions challenged in this study, and therefore the research questions generated, will lead to results that may be used to improve the experience for those involved in choral singing/conducting.

Research generated from this starting point therefore is likely to be of interest to practitioners, both conductors and singers alike, as a deeper understanding of current practice and expectations surrounding choral conducting could be used to demystify the required skillset for conductors in training. As an unregulated profession, choral conducting

is undertaken by practitioners with varying levels of experience and, as the literature review has shown, the guidance available to conductors in training varies in focus, particularly in relation to voice-centred matters. This research is also likely to be of interest to academics as it will represent an addition to a small but growing literature field. It is likely to be of particular interest due to its focus on the UK-based choral community, where fewer studies have been carried out in comparison to the rest of the world, particularly the US.

In considering this study's intended audience it is also worth considering what effect taking a pragmatic approach to this inquiry will have on the audience's evaluation of the research aims and outcomes. Pragmatic philosophy contends that "ideas are only meaningfully different if they move people to act in different ways" (Hogan, 2017, p.49). It is therefore key to this project's success that the output of the research has the potential to alter current conducting practice. If this occurs, then it is critical to note that singers will be impacted by the changes made due to the need for singers to be interacted with for choral conducting to be meaningful. As Hogan states,

"[a]nytime one ventures into wanting change, there needs to be an understanding of what is occurring in the community and within the people to be able to find the most appropriate, workable solution to the problem at a given time" (Hogan, 2017, p.47).

A pragmatic approach to this study therefore requires consideration of current choral practices and beliefs. Within the literature reviewed above, the conductor's perspective is centred but there is notably less consideration of the singers' perception of the effect of choral conducting behaviours. Singers therefore represent a marginalised voice in the conversation around the conductor's role as it relates to voice-centred activities. It is also

possible that within the conductor/singer dynamic, singers may have less power than conductors, particularly if the conductor role is conceptualised as an act of leadership (Wis, 2011). It may therefore be pragmatically appropriate to take the singers' perspective into consideration when formulating research questions in order to ensure that the output of this study may be evaluated positively in terms of its potential to improve conditions for those directly affected by choral conducting practice, i.e. the singers.

Relating the assumptions to be challenged to the researcher's intended audience therefore leads to consideration of how the research questions will be framed. I argue that, as singers represent marginalised voices in choral conducting research, it is constructive to centre the singers' perspective in formulating these questions. Doing so could result in a significant reframing of the choral conductor's responsibilities. This would be of interest to both academics and practitioners in the field of choral conducting.

6. Evaluating the presented alternative assumptions to determine their merit as foundations for research questions

The following alternative assumptions are therefore presented:

- The leader/team root metaphor for the choral situation. Choral conducting is therefore viewed as choral *leadership* as opposed to a primarily educational act. This

perspective allows for a broader exploration of extra-pedagogical duties a conductor may be expected to perform. The initial intended area of exploration for this research, i.e. the teaching of vocal skills, was shown to be focused in an area that was of relative unimportance to conductors. Broadening the focus of the project to how a conductor's overall role as a leader influences the voice-centred aspects of their practice may then produce a fuller picture of their treatment and development of singers' voices. Previously, the conductor has most often been viewed as an educator, shifting the lens to a leadership perspective is therefore helpful in generating novel research questions.

- A pragmatic approach to studying the choral conductor's role and voice-centred responsibilities. Situating the research within this paradigm is appropriate due to the nature of choral conducting being inherently pragmatic and the abundance of practice-based writing within the body of literature reviewed above. A pragmatic approach to this research will result in an output which may be used to improve practice for those impacted by the choral conducting act. This includes conductors but singers are recognised as a marginalised voice within previous conducting research. It is therefore appropriate pragmatically to centre the singers' perspective in formulating research questions.

I therefore argue that viewing the conductor's role as that of a leader as opposed to a teacher, and situating the research within a pragmatic paradigm, as opposed to taking a positivist or constructionist worldview, will lead to the generation of pertinent and novel research questions for this project. Challenging these assumptions and formulating research questions on this basis ensures that this study explores questions which are grounded in the

literature yet are novel and relevant to contemporary conducting practices. Research that responds to questions developed in this way will therefore generate results that make an original contribution to the field.

3.3 Research Questions

After engaging in the problematization process outlined above, new research questions were generated. These questions maintained the project's original focus on voice-centred conductor responsibilities but broadened this focus to encompass the conductor's overall role as a leader, with reference to voice-centred activities. The singers' perspective is centred in this set of questions, alongside a pragmatic focus on questions which, if responded to successfully, will produce results that may be used to generate positive change for this group.

The questions formulated were:

- 1. What do singers expect of a UK-based choral leader, with particular reference to the voice-centred aspects of their role?**
 - 1a. What areas of the singers' experience is the choral leader expected to take responsibility for?**
 - 1b. How might they enact responsibility in these areas?**
 - 1c. Might this set of responsibilities vary across genres/contexts?**

1d. With which voice-centred areas of choral work are singers expecting a choral leader to be concerned?

2. What forms of leadership are valued within a choral context?

2a. What does voice-centred choral leadership look like in practice?

The newly adopted leadership framework for the study now requires a review of the leadership literature, and a review of any conducting research which can be found to have used the leadership literature as a theoretical framework. This literature will be reviewed in the following chapter.

