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THE POLYPHONIC TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE CHOIR

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches choral music not merely as an aesthetic mode of performance but as a socio-aesthetic structure that enables the polyphonic transmission of cultural heritage. The choir is not only a form wherein individual voices converge into collective resonance; it is also a cultural space where memory, identity, and shared lived experience are constructed through sound. In this context, the choir functions simultaneously as a musical praxis and a regime of cultural representation. The study examines how local narratives are translated into a universal musical language through polyphonic arrangements of folk melodies, and how memory is reconstructed and transformed via aesthetic means. Choral repertoire is conceived not solely as a reproduction of the past, but as a performative stage where contemporary identity politics, historical ruptures, and affective collectivities are articulated. Grounded in music sociology, performance theory, and theories of cultural memory, this article posits the choir as an active agent that shapes identity and bridges temporalities through sonic expression. Thus, the choir establishes cultural continuity on both sensorial and conceptual levels; it does not merely carry collective memory, but actively re-creates it with each performance.

KEYWORDS: Choir, Choral Music, Cultural Heritage, Theories of Memory, Identity and Music

INTRODUCTION

Choral music is not merely a polyphonic aesthetic form; it is a ritualized enactment through which social memory, identity, and affect are sonically and corporeally reconstructed in the public sphere. This multilayered structure expresses not only musical harmony achieved through the dissolution of individual voices into a collective texture, but also an emotional, cultural, and political solidarity. In this context, the human voice transcends its role as a technical instrument and becomes a vessel of sensory memory, symbolic representation, and communal belonging.

Framed through Benedict Anderson's (2003) notion of "imagined communities," the choir functions as a sonic public space wherein individuals imagine themselves as part of a nation, a history, or a shared sense of belonging (Şahin, 2017; Destegül & Umuzdaş, 2022). Similarly, in resonance with

Jean-Luc Nancy's (2007) reflections on the "ontology of listening," the choir becomes a space where the boundaries between self and other blur, and an auditory form of being-in-common is sonically enacted. This shared space is not only heard it is felt, carried together, and embodied on stage.

Choral music may also be conceptualized, following Victor Turner (1982), as a "ritual space" in which sound, body, and memory transcend the personal and become acts of collective expression. Whether as a gesture of remembrance, an enactment of solidarity, or a revoicing of a historical narrative, choral performance constitutes not only an aesthetic act but also an ethical one. Each song is more than a melodic structure it becomes the expression of an emotion, a social demand, or a collective vulnerability (Şahin, 2017).

In the Turkish context, the rise of polyphonic choir movements since the early 2000s both state-sponsored and driven by civil initiatives has provided a fertile ground for not only transmitting cultural heritage but reconfiguring it (Çevik, 1999). From commemorative concerts for the Battle of Gallipoli to laments performed in the wake of the Soma mining disaster, choral practices have increasingly emerged as sites of affective politics, identity negotiation, and civic participation.

As emphasized in UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, cultural heritage is not a static inheritance of the past but a living, evolving, and continuously reconstituted process. In this regard, choral music stands as a dynamic expression oscillating between cultural continuity and societal transformation. This study thus seeks to explore choral music not merely as an artistic form, but as a multidimensional stage for collective memory, cultural identity, performative representation, and affective solidarity.

Collective Memory and *Lieux de Mémoire*: Choral Music as a Site of Remembrance

Societies remember their past not only through written records but also through rituals, narratives, symbols, and sounds. Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) theory of "collective memory" asserts that individual memory is shaped within social frameworks, and that remembrance occurs collectively, through symbolic practices and specific spatial contexts. Within this framework, choral music functions not merely as an aesthetic production, but as a memory practice wherein the past is collectively recalled, emotions are synchronized, and identities are embodied through sound (Olick, 2014).

Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* sites of memory suggests that in the absence of continuous historical experience, memory becomes concentrated in particular spatial, symbolic, and ritual forms. The choir, in this context, is not only a physical ensemble but also an aural memory site that carries, transforms, and updates collective recollections through the medium of voice. Repertoires, stage arrangements, performance venues, and even the choir-audience relationship become integral components of this sonic memory space.

The polyphonic arrangement and performance of a lament or a folk song is not merely a musical reconstruction it is the enactment of collective remembrance. The choir stages a form of memory that is not only cognitive but also affective and aesthetic in nature. For instance, when a Black Sea folk song is performed by a polyphonic choir, the act transcends the modern arrangement of a regional melody; it transforms local memory into a universal musical language. In this way, cultural memory acquires both local and global resonance through musical translation.

In the Turkish context, performances by ensembles such as the Boğaziçi Jazz Choir following the Soma mining disaster or the Gezi Park protests demonstrate that the choir is not only a vehicle for commemoration, but also a mode of expressing collective trauma. In such performances, the choir not only recalls silent sufferings of the past it voices them, creating a shared affective space. Here, sound transcends the individual and becomes the language of communal mourning (Bayrak & Karaçil, 2024).

This production of memory is not confined to repertoire alone; performance venues themselves are active agents in this process. Municipal halls, cultural centers, concert venues, open-air festivals, and even impromptu performances in shopping malls all serve as physical memory sites for the sonic representation of the past. These are not merely acoustic platforms they are public spaces where shared emotions circulate, remembrance becomes collective, and history is reimagined together.

Following the theories of Halbwachs and Nora, choral performance emerges as a form of memory that is not only preserved but also activated and socialized through performance. In this regard, the choir occupies a space between what Nora describes as *mémoire vive* (living memory) and *mémoire d'archive* (archival memory); it becomes a living agent of remembrance. Each performance presents an opportunity to rewrite and reinterpret memory (Olick, 2014).

An analysis of choir repertoires in Turkey reveals that collective memory is often woven around themes such as the War of Independence, the ideals of the early Republic, migration narratives, and folk traditions. Yet these repertoires are continually reshaped by the sociopolitical and identity-related demands of the present. This highlights the choir not only as a preserver of memory, but as a transformative practice that rearticulates the past in the language of today.

In conclusion, choral music serves as both a vessel and a catalyst for collective memory. As an aesthetic form of remembrance, it stages the past in the present, offering a shared affective space that transcends individual experience. Each polyphonic performance reveals how the past resonates in the now how memory is not simply preserved, but also shared, reimagined, and deeply felt together.

Performance and the Choir

Choral music is not merely an aesthetic practice based on the multiplication of sound; it is a dynamic performance space in which identity, belonging, and the body are continually reconstituted on stage (Akgün & Kıyak, 2023). In this sense, the choir can be understood, in Richard Schechner's (2002)

terms, as a ritual form that embodies “restored behavior.” Every rehearsal, every stage appearance, and every musical gesture is not simply an act of execution but a performative production in which identities, social roles, and emotional existences are re-enacted.

Through the lens of Judith Butler’s (1993) theory of performative identity, choral performance becomes a site where gender, belonging, and otherness are not merely represented but actively produced. Women’s choirs, LGBTQ+ community choirs, or vocal ensembles composed of migrant women do more than sing they negotiate normative structures of identity and render the invisible visible. In this respect, performance is as much a political expression as it is an aesthetic one: the body becomes not just the origin of sound, but also the surface upon which social discourse is inscribed.

From Michel Foucault’s (1977) perspective on the politics of the body, the choir also becomes a stage for discipline and aestheticized power. Vocal training, breath control, posture choreography, and techniques of sonic discipline implemented during rehearsals aim not only at musical cohesion but also at aligning the body with particular forms of representation. Thus, the choir serves as both a space of liberatory expression and a micro-political arena where bodily regulation is internalized. The choir produces what Susan Foster (1996) refers to as “social choreography,” turning individual bodies into a shared narrative.

Victor Turner’s (1982) concept of the “liminal space” provides a useful framework for interpreting choral performance within this structuring. The rehearsal room and the stage are threshold spaces where individuals temporarily suspend their everyday roles and are incorporated into a collective identity. These liminal zones are where individual experience is transfigured into collective form, and social differences are momentarily set aside in favor of ritual unity.

These performances are not limited to traditional stages; they also unfold in alternative spaces. Michel Foucault’s (1986) notion of “heterotopia” offers a valuable lens through which to understand this spatial fluidity. Choirs may perform in concert halls, town squares, shopping centers, or open-air settings, often intervening through flash mobs. This demonstrates that the choir is not spatially fixed but instead constitutes a fluid, mobile, and embedded form of performance within everyday life.

Thomas Turino’s (2008) theory of “participatory music” emphasizes that the choir is not merely observed it is felt and experienced as a shared social practice. In Turkey, amateur choirs exemplify this participatory nature. Composed of individuals without formal musical training, these choirs engage not with the pursuit of technical perfection, but with the desire for solidarity, emotional connection, and identity representation (Ergin Talaka & Öktem, 2021). Here, performance is less about musical achievement and more about rendering the condition of being-together sonically and visibly present.

Such plural representations reveal that the choir is not only an artistic event but also a cultural stage upon which identity, memory, and belonging are negotiated. The collective vocal production shaped under the guidance of the conductor becomes more than a harmonic goal it materializes an ethical and political form of togetherness (Çevik, 1999). Individual voices come together, and this convergence constitutes not only a technical fusion but also the construction of a shared existence.

In conclusion, from the perspective of performance theory, the choir emerges as a multilayered expressive field where sound flows into the body, the body expands into the stage, and the stage reverberates into society. Each performance is an act that bridges the memory of the past with the emotion of the present, transforming identities and rearticulating belonging. In this light, choral music is not merely musical it is a sociological, philosophical, and political practice.

Choir and Cultural Structure

Cultural identity is not a fixed or essential category; it is a dynamic formation shaped through processes of representation, negotiation, and transformation. As Stuart Hall (1996) suggests, identity is a "state of becoming" constantly reconstructed and reproduced under varying discursive conditions. In this context, choral music is not merely an aesthetic form of expression, but a performative space where cultural identity is sonically encoded, staged, and opened to public recognition.

Drawing on Michel de Certeau's (1984) perspective on creative strategies of everyday life, the choir is not only a transmitter of dominant cultural forms but also a site of subcultural production, where individuals and groups articulate their own narratives of identity. The participants' choices such as repertoire selection, stage costumes, performance languages, and choreographic arrangements construct an aesthetic configuration of identity. In this sense, the choir becomes a stage where the voice serves not only as a musical but also a cultural instrument of discourse.

In the Turkish context, choral practices have held a central place within the cultural dimensions of the modernization project. Since the early Republican era, Western-style polyphonic music has been adopted as a civilizing superstructure, institutionalized through state-sponsored choirs (e.g., the Ankara State Polyphonic Choir, TRT Children's Choir), and positioned as tools for national cultural formation (Ardahan & Akdeniz, 2019). These institutions, when read through Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, emerge as fields where particular aesthetic and class-based codes are reproduced and legitimized.

However, since the 2000s, a notable proliferation of grassroots and civil choral movements reflecting cultural pluralism has emerged in Turkey. Ensembles such as the Kadıköy Women's Choir, Lazona Choir, Diyarbakır Dengbêj Women's Collective, Migrant Women's Choir, and Istanbul Queer Choir voice an alternative presence against homogenizing cultural narratives. These choirs operate not only musically but also as aesthetic spaces in which plural representations of gender, ethnicity, generational

experience, migration, and queerness are sonically articulated in the public domain (Şahin, 2018; Kıyak & Akgün, 2019; Papageorgi et al., 2022).

In this context, repertoire is not simply a musical list, but a curated set of symbolic indicators of cultural identity. Performing pieces in Zazaki, Kurdish, Armenian, or Laz languages entails an auditory renewal of cultural memory, while also making an implicit political statement. Stage aesthetics, body posture, venue choices, and the public message of the performance all constitute components of this cultural encoding.

At this point, the choir becomes not only a representational agent but a generative site for the (re)construction of identity. For instance, the Boğaziçi University Polyphonic Choir's politically engaged repertoire responding to sociopolitical events, protests, and university reforms positions art as a discursive medium directly engaged with public life. This bridge between aesthetic expression and political discourse redefines the choir as a mode of collective critical thought, not just a sonic execution.

In recent years, the rapid expansion of amateur choirs across Turkey has helped disseminate this form of cultural encoding into broader sociological strata. These ensembles, comprising individuals from diverse age groups, professions, ethnicities, and faiths, offer not only musical experiences but also opportunities for individuals to voice their identities and seek recognition within a collective framework. In doing so, the choir cultivates a renewed sense of “community” within the individualized structure of modern society a shared space woven with both local and global, individual and collective forms of belonging (Pearce et al., 2015; Papageorgi, 2022).

In conclusion, choral music does not merely represent culture it negotiates, transforms, and multiplies it. As identities become sonically visible on stage, this visibility generates new social imaginaries intricately connected to cultural memory. In this regard, Turkey is not only a country that performs choral music but a society that articulates its cultural plurality through choral voice one that carries both the political and aesthetic weight of sound.

Affective Resonance and Emotional Community in Choral Music

Choral music is not merely a polyphonic sonic entity; it is also an affective space in which emotions, bodies, and social relations are synchronized. This space functions not only as an aesthetic experience for individuals, but also as a site of collective feeling a shared emotional resonance. Within the framework of Arlie Hochschild's (1979) concept of “emotional labor,” the choir emerges as more than a site of musical production; it becomes an interactive field where emotions are generated, regulated, and collectively expressed.

For participants, the choir is not only a musical gathering but also a psychosocial support system and a source of belonging. According to Thomas Turino's (2008) theory of “participatory music,” music

is not merely an aesthetic product but a social adhesive that strengthens a sense of community. In this light, choirs evolve into affective micro-communities, wherein individuals gather around a shared purpose, time, and sensibility. Vocal harmony in these spaces reflects not only technical alignment but also a deeper, spiritual synchronization.

This collective affect does not remain on a metaphorical plane; it is embodied physiologically. In an experimental study by Swedish researcher Vickhoff et al. (2013), it was observed that the heart rates of choristers singing together gradually synchronized. This finding demonstrates that choral music fosters biological coordination through shared rhythm, thereby physiologically reinforcing emotional solidarity. The choir thus becomes not only a sonic formation, but also a site of rhythmic breathing, shared vibration, and collective respiration.

In Turkey, such affective mutuality is even more pronounced in amateur and volunteer choirs. Babaç and Köse's (2018) analysis of graduate theses reveals that many amateur singers perceive choir participation as an effective means of coping with loneliness, stress, and alienation. This suggests that choir singing functions not only as musical engagement but also as a form of emotional self-care.

Émile Durkheim's (1912) concepts of "collective consciousness" and "ritual intensity" offer a valuable framework to understand these affective affiliations. The choir serves as a reenactment of fragmented ritual forms in modern society. Through shared voices, synchronized breathing, aligned posture, and common lyrics, a temporary yet intense emotional bond is established among community members. This bond generates an experience of "we-ness" that transcends individual identities rendering the choir an affective, quasi-sacred communal ritual.

This emotional solidarity is not limited to the singers; it also extends to the audience. In a study conducted by Clift et al. (2016) in the UK, many audience members reported a distinct sense of "togetherness" during choral performances. In Turkey, this affective transmission becomes particularly visible in outdoor choral concerts held after collective traumas, such as the polyphonic memorials organized following the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. These performances publicly reveal the emotional capacity of choral music to channel collective grief and healing.

Such modes of shared feeling may be read through Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "shared vulnerability." The choir creates a space where individuals express their personal vulnerabilities in synchrony with others, forming new affective ties through this mutual exposure. For instance, the Boğaziçi Jazz Choir's laments following the Soma mining disaster function not only as musical memorials but also as acts of social mourning and emotional repair.

The "emotional economy" cultivated during choral practice significantly influences participants' processes of identity formation, psychological well-being, and social connectedness. Many reports feeling less isolated, more meaningful, and more connected (Clift et al., 2010; Welch et al., 2014). In

this context, the choir becomes not just a site of artistic production, but a vital domain for affective coherence, social bonding, and the generation of shared belonging.

Choral music offers a stage where emotions are synchronized, vulnerabilities are collectivized, and societal loneliness is transformed. The aesthetic dimension of polyphony enables emotional, corporeal, and identity-based contact among participants. The choir, in this sense, becomes a space of ethical and empathic togetherness a resonance that speaks not only to the ear but to the heart and the memory.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, choral music has been explored not merely as a polyphonic art form but as a performative space in which cultural identity, collective memory, affective solidarity, and social belonging are embodied on stage. The choir offers a multilayered social realm where individual voices are transformed into a collective accord, where the past is aesthetically remembered, and where identities are rendered audible. Each performance constitutes not only musical harmony, but also the reconstitution of ethical, political, and emotional bonds.

From a theoretical perspective, the choir emerges as a site of cultural agency illuminated by frameworks such as Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Nora's lieux de mémoire, Butler's performativity, Foucault's politics of the body, Hochschild's emotional labor, and Turino's participatory music. These perspectives reveal how the choir operates not only through voice but also through the body, emotion, and symbolic representation to reshape social relations.

In the context of Turkey, the practice of choral music spans a wide spectrum from state-supported professional ensembles to grassroots civil initiatives. Across this spectrum, the choir has functioned both as a guardian of cultural continuity and as a platform for amplifying pluralistic identities. The diversity—from migrant women's choirs and LGBTQ+ vocal ensembles to ethnic minority and youth choirs—demonstrates the choir's role in updating collective memory and multiplying representations of identity. In this regard, Turkey is not merely a society that sings in choir, but one that listens, reflects, feels, and reconstitutes itself through choral expression—becoming a geography of cultural plurality in resonance.

Beyond being a mode of aesthetic production, the choir creates a shared space that offers the possibility of re-collectivization within a fragmented modern life. It is a space where emotions are embodied together, memory is staged collectively, and vulnerabilities are voiced in unison. In contemporary societies, such a space becomes one of ethical and affective responsibility. The choir does not merely carry the echoes of the past; it gives voice to the imagination of a pluralistic and empathic future.

Ultimately, this study proposes to conceptualize choral music not only as an act of performance but as a form of social staging. This stage is as ethical as it is aesthetic, as retrospective as it is forward-

looking, as individual as it is collective. The choir, in this sense, offers a sonorous invitation to reimagine our social world through shared thinking, feeling, and transformation.

DISCUSSION

The Choir in the World to Come: The 21st century has ushered in an era marked by profound loneliness, polarized identities, ecological crises, and digital alienation. Global pandemics, climate disasters, forced migrations, and social fragmentation have not only separated individuals on a physical level but have also intensified emotional, cultural, and existential ruptures. In such a fractured world, the simple yet radical act of singing together emerges as a social practice worthy of renewed attention. The choir, in this context, is not merely a form of art that preserves the aesthetic legacy of the past; it can be reimagined as a mode of commoning capable of envisioning ethical, ecological, and social futures.

In the world to come, choral singing may function not only as a tool of musical education or cultural representation, but as an experimental social laboratory where new forms of “being-with” are explored. Especially in contemporary societies shaped by neoliberal individualism, collective musical practices must be redefined around the need to hear and be heard. In this sense, the choir becomes a stage not only for polyphonic music but for a polyphonic, multilingual, and emotionally diverse way of life.

At the same time, the cultural and ecological ruptures brought on by the climate crisis call for an expansion of the choir’s potential beyond human-centered frameworks toward relational engagements with the environment. From an ecomusicological perspective, the choir is no longer just a space of inter-human solidarity; it becomes a site of multispecies entanglement involving sound, place, nonhuman actors, and ecological resonance. Outdoor performances, nature-themed repertoires, and musical protests for climate justice already offer glimpses into this potential.

Technological developments are also reshaping the boundaries of choral practice. Virtual choirs formed through digital platforms are giving rise to new community formats unbound by geography. This evolution suggests that the choir can become a placeless form of “affective congregation,” rooted in emotional networks rather than physical presence. However, these new forms raise critical questions: Can a digitized choir still be truly collective? Can synchronized pixels replace shared breath? Can empathy be cultivated through a screen?

Meanwhile, the democratizing potential of choral singing remains largely unrealized. Socioeconomic inequalities, imbalances in cultural representation, and barriers to access continue to restrict the full actualization of the choir’s inclusive potential. In this regard, educational policies, local government

support, and programs promoting cultural diversity are essential in transforming choirs into more equitable and accessible spaces.

In light of these developments, the future of choral music will be shaped not merely by aesthetic choices but by ethical commitments, cultural strategies, and broader societal visions. The choir is not only a resonant echo of the past it is also a rehearsal space for the pluralistic, egalitarian, and compassionate societies of the future.

Thus, the central question for the world ahead may no longer be merely musical, but deeply political and philosophical:

How do we sing together, so that we may learn to live together?

Choir and Post-Humanist Culture: Throughout modernity, music has largely been framed as a product of human aesthetic intelligence and cultural supremacy. Within this paradigm, choral music has been understood as the harmonious convergence of human voices—both technically and emotionally calibrated. However, post-humanist theory calls for a radical rethinking of this understanding by decentring the human and foregrounding relational, multi-species, and ecotonal modes of existence. This shift also necessitates a profound transformation in how we conceive the meaning and function of the choir.

Post-humanism is not merely a critique of anthropocentrism; it constitutes an ontological reconfiguration. As articulated by Rosi Braidotti (2013), the post-human subject is no longer the rational, autonomous individual but a fluid entity constituted through networks, technologies, species, and elements. In this context, the choir is no longer simply the harmonization of human voices, but a multi-layered sensorium composed of natural sounds, technological sonic patterns, and even silence itself. The human voice ceases to be the sole agent of meaning; instead, auditory multiplicities emerge through forest murmurs, wind gusts, birdsong, and digital reverberations.

Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of the "Chtulucene" invites us to imagine the choir not as a vessel for carrying the past, but as a networked topology of entangled sonorous lives. Within this mesh, humans, animals, machines, sound waves, and atmospheric presences share a common plane of perception. Here, the choir is no longer about "who speaks," but rather a practice of co-vibration, co-existence, and mutual transformation.

Through Bruno Latour's (2004) lens of the "actant," the constituents of the choir are not limited to human performers. Microphones, concert hall acoustics, musical scores, archival materials, digital software, birdcalls, and air pressure all function as active agents in the choral production process. Seen in this light, the choir transcends its traditional form as a human-centered representational structure

and evolves into a vibrational choreography of multi-agentic interaction in a non-anthropocentric ontology.

From this perspective, the choir of the future holds the potential to redefine the concept of “community” not as exclusively human collectivity, but as a space for affective interspecies alliances, ethical resonance with the natural world, and technologically extended modes of being. Performances interwoven with environmental soundscapes, live-digital hybrid choirs, AI-assisted improvisational choral software, and animal-human sonic interaction projects exemplify the early contours of this post-humanist orientation.

Yet, such expansion must not be guided by technological novelty alone, but grounded in an ethical attentiveness. The choir becomes not just a form of artistic expression, but a practice within a new ontology one shaped by questions such as: *Who has the right to speak? Who can co-vibrate? Which beings are recognized as sonic entities?* These inquiries frame the choir not as a mere representational forum, but as a site of ontological solidarity where beings listen to, acknowledge, and transform one another.

In conclusion, within the framework of post-humanist culture, the choir emerges as a sonic commons that dismantles the aesthetic privilege of the human and inscribes it within a choreography of plural existence. This choir does not merely recount the narratives of the past it stages a sonic imagination of an interspecies future. The world to come will no longer be built solely on the voice of the human, but through the resonant polyphony of all the voices we live among and the choir, in its reimaged form, may be among the most powerful spaces for cultivating this emerging multiplicity.

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