CHORAL SINGING IN PRISONS: HOW GROUP SINGING PROGRAMMES CONTRIBUTE TO SELF-ESTEEM, IDENTITY AND REINTEGRATION

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the
ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the potential benefits of choral music in the lives of those who are incarcerated. By using Heartbeat Opera's production of *Fidelio* as a case study, I explore how the work engages with racism and mass incarceration through the use of inmates from six different prison choirs to form the Prisoner's Chorus. I argue that choral singing helps inmates to regain a sense of self-esteem and identity, and I investigate these topics through a socio-criminological lens using Howard Becker's Labelling Theory and Christopher Mruk's two-factor concept of self-esteem. Reflections shared by prison choir singers, facilitators and volunteers are discussed in the context of reintegration, specifically Shadd Maruna's ritualization of reintegration. These shared testimonies from participants suggest that group singing successfully incorporates all four pillars of Maruna's idea of reintegration rituals to help those who are returning back to society at large.

Chapter One: Introduction

> At first glance, prison seems a clearly delimited site, bounded by razorwire, thick walls, and surveillance towers… and yet, when examining the music made there, the prison becomes a bewildering place, stretching to accommodate multiple agendas that at times conflict with and at times are complicit with the custodial mission. For example, music fosters unlikely collaborations, offers momentary escape, and has potential for expressive subversion.[1]

In 2022, the Metropolitan Museum of Art forged a seemingly unlikely collaboration with Heartbeat Opera, a company based in New York City, to produce their digital premiere of Beethoven's *Fidelio*.[2] It was no ordinary production. The directors, Ethan Heard and Daniel Schlosberg, wanted to address mass incarceration and racism in America through a modern re-telling of Beethoven's famous opera.[3] They not only reworked the text of the opera (a *Singspiel* which alternates spoken dialogue and song) to recast the work to feature the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, but also, the production featured six contemporary prison choirs to form the Prisoner's Chorus (*O welche Lust!)*, to close Act 1. In some cases, videos of inmates singing were integrated into the digital "work;" in other scenes, audio recordings accompanied by still images of singing inmates are employed. What makes this production unusual is that the performance ensemble combines incarcerated individuals with non-incarcerated singers in a public opera performance. Associated with the wealthy elite, opera and classical music are often

[1] Benjamin J. Harbert, "Special issue on women's prison music: Guest editor's introduction." *American Music* 31, no. 2 (2013): 127-133, https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.31.2.0127.
[2] "Digital Premiere: Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*", The Met, accessed July 14, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-live-arts/digital-premieres/heartbeat-opera-fidelio#:~:text=His%20wife%20disguises%20herself%20to,era%20of%20Black%20Lives%20Matter.
[3] Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Prison choirs sing in a reboot of Beethoven's opera about unjust incarceration", NPR, February 19, 2022, https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2022/02/19/1081609788/fidelio-black-lives-matter-opera.

regarded as less inclusive and less accessible than other musical styles. A production such as this brings opera goers seemingly "up close" with inmates, transporting audiences into the domain of penal institutions. It also brings inmates into the realm of an opera performance. Given that the production offers a glimpse into contemporary American prisons and includes offenders in a public performance, it offers a rare opportunity to explore a public production that engages directly with choral singing in correctional institutions today.

Of the various music programmes that exist in prisons, I focus on group singing programmes that operate in spaces of detention. These programmes are mostly volunteer-run and aim to provide opportunities for incarcerated individuals to engage with music, learn musical and non-musical skills, develop a sense of confidence and create positive social connections with those inside and outside the prison system. In short, my thesis uses the case study of Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* to argue that the positive impacts of prison choir programming—in particular the cultivation of self-esteem and identity combined with the experience of community singing— and the skills gained from participation in choral singing can outweigh any unintended negative consequences and help to ease challenges associated with the reintegration process.

I begin by analyzing how the directors adapted Beethoven's work to represent the American prison system, including their choice to put together a choral ensemble that combines incarcerated individuals with volunteers. Chapter two focuses on the *Fidelio* production itself, interrogating the directorial choices in plot and musical arrangement, and the act of including inmates in a staged work. Based on the sources examined, there is no evidence of reciprocity in the sense of compensation for inmates, bringing a

performance back to prison or donations. Instead, the implicit "exchange" here appears tied to the opportunity for music-making and building community through song. In other words, this participation in a public performance and the concomitant benefits seem to "stand in" for other acts of reciprocity. Chapter three introduces the six prison choirs in the context of this production. By bringing socio-criminological approaches (particularly regarding self-esteem and identity) into dialogue with letters from participating inmate singers, I assess the impacts of choral music in the prison system and consider what can be learned by projects such as this one.

A Survey of Music in Prison in the Twenty-First Century

A brief survey of music programmes in twenty-first century prisons in useful in showcasing and raising awareness of the variety of programmes that exist for the benefit of inmates. Over the past two decades, the United States and the United Kingdom appear most frequently in documented uses of prison arts programming. Scholarship in this area is hampered by a lack of publicly available information. Music typically falls not under educational programming, but rather under recreational activities. Therefore, individual programs vary widely depending on resources, the type of institution, varying ideologies of incarceration and reintegration, and the individuals (often volunteers) running the programs. In what follows, I examine seven prison-based music programs most robustly documented through websites, videos, blogs and academic literature.

Good Vibrations is a music education project founded in 2003 that brings the Javanese Gamelan to inmates in prisons across the UK.[4] The Gamelan was chosen because it initially takes less physical technique; this allows participants to make music with their peers within a short period of time.[5] Each Good Vibrations project is tailored to the specific group at hand.[6] Projects usually last for one week, and in this timeframe, participants learn traditional Javanese pieces, how to improvise and compose, and they learn about Javanese arts and culture.[7] An important part of the programme is the play-through that happens at the end of each project, where participants organize a group concert to perform the pieces they learned.[8] One of the programme's biggest impacts is that it has served as a stepping stone for inmates to pursue other forms of education. There have been numerous accounts of participants who were initially reluctant to engage with education, but once they joined Good Vibrations, changed their minds about gaining skills and taking courses.[9] Participants found the project to be empowering. They also discovered that learning these new skills helped instill a sense of confidence and achievement, and that it fostered their own creativity.[10] Jennie Henley, Professor in Music Education at the Royal Northern College of Music, explains that music as an educational subject in prisons has not been given the proper time and credit it deserves. She argues that "participating in musical learning activities fosters the construction and

[4] Maria Mendonça, "Gamelan in Prisons in England and Scotland: Narratives of Transformation and the 'Good Vibrations' of Educational Rhetoric," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 3 (2010): 369, https://doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.54.3.0369.
[5] Jennie Henley, "Musical Learning and Desistance from Crime: The Case of a 'Good Vibrations' Javanese Gamelan Project with Young Offenders," *Music Education Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 104, https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2014.933791.
[6] Mendonça, "Gamelan in Prisons," 378.
[7] Jennie Henley et al., "Good Vibrations: Positive Change through Social Music-Making," *Music Education Research* 14, no. 4 (2012): 500, https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2012.714765.
[8] Henley, "Musical learning and Desistance," 104.
[9] Henley et al., "Good Vibrations: Positive Change," 508.
[10] Henley et al., "Good Vibrations: Positive Change," 500.

development of new personal narratives that encompass hope and a renewed relationship with society and communities."[11]

Recreational group drumming has also proven to be an accessible and rewarding activity for inmates; participation can help with feelings of boredom, fear, negative self-image and disconnection from others.[12] Group drumming has been employed in a variety of therapeutic and rehabilitative environments,[13] and having facilitators recognize the best practices for each group can help ensure that the activity succeeds.[14] For US-based music therapist Rex Bacon, drumming sessions often start with a structured pattern and later shift to a more creative and improvisatory approach to allow participants to create and take control over their music.[15] Rahil Rojiani's research team encountered three main findings after implementing an eight-week drumming programme for men in halfway houses. First, group drumming helped participants learn how to better deal with stress; second, this activity offered participants the chance to build relationships and form positive social connections in a place of detention; and third, the environment that formed during drumming sessions was well-suited to foster personal growth and self-empowerment.[16]

In some prisons, digital music production has been a successful endeavour with inmates. In a study by Maud Hickey completed over five years, 700 youth aged 12-17 at a Juvenile detention facility in Illinois were given 10 weekly music lessons where they

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[11] Henley, "Musical learning and Desistance," 117.
[12] Rex Bacon, "Recreational Drumming in the Correctional Setting," *Percussive Notes* 48 no. 1 (2010): 30, https://www.pas.org/Files/0110.30-31.pdf.
[13] Rahil Rojiani et. al, "Group drumming for incarcerated men may improve community reintegration: a mixed methods pilot study," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 18, no. 4 (2022): 826, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-021-09460-3.
[14] Bacon, "Recreational Drumming," 31.
[15] Bacon, "Recreational Drumming," 31.
[16] Rojiani, "Group drumming for incarcerated men," 830.

explored music production and creation through using computers, MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) keyboards and DAWs (Digital Audio Workstation).[17] Through this study, Hickey aimed to understand the reasons behind music education's popularity, and in particular, what participants responded so well to.[18] Results revealed that participation in the programme contributed to feelings of competence and autonomy.[19] A different example of music production in prisons is the Prison Electronic Music Program (PEMP), a multi-week programme that teaches inmates about music history fundamentals, music production, DJing and other transferable life skills.[20] This programme began in 2019 and works with inmates in California prisons, using music to positively change the lives of participants. PEMP's website explains that the skills gained through the programme help participants enrich their lives, while it also offers "opportunities for healing in preparation for a successful reintegration into society."[21]

Prison music programmes have started gaining recognition from larger organizations, including Carnegie Hall. Carnegie Hall Musical Connections provides composition, musical arrangement, and vocal and instrumental workshops,[22] bringing music to inmates at the Sing Sing Correctional facility, a maximum-security prison in New York. The programme is "an ongoing creative workshop developed by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute—the education and social impact programs arm of the

[17] Maud Hickey, "'We All Come Together to Learn About Music': A Qualitative Analysis of a 5-Year Music Program in a Juvenile Detention Facility," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 62, no. 13 (2018): 4046-4051, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18765367.
[18] Hickey, "We all come together," 4046–4049.
[19] Hickey, "We all come together," 4046.
[20] "Prison Electronic Music Programme," Give a Beat, accessed August 2, 2024, at https://giveabeat.org/pemp.
[21] Give a Beat, "Prison Electronic Music Policy."
[22] "Musical Connections," Carnegie Hall, accessed August 2, 2024 at https://www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Programs/Musical-Connections.

Hall—that supports select men at Sing Sing in cultivating music skills, including composition and instrumental performance."[23] The goals of Musical Connections operate on both an individual and institutional level. This programme aims to improve individuals' relationships with themselves and their community, and helps to develop skills like communication, teamwork and goal-oriented behaviour.[24] Participants in the programme echo these words, explaining how they apply these skills to other parts of their lives and after release.[25] Programme director Manuel Bagorro understands music as a rehabilitative tool[26] and Musical Connections is intended to positively contribute to the reintegration process that inmates will face when they are released back into society.[27]

In addition to the Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* production, other programmes have brought opera to places of detention. The collaboration between *Sociedade Artística Musical de Pousos* (SAMP) and the *Estabelecimento Prisional de Leiria – Jovens* (EPL-J) in Portugal is one such example. SAMP is an independent music school founded in 1873, and, in 2014, they began a partnership with the Leiria Youth Prison, producing several operas together and later partnering with TRACTION in 2020.[28] TRACTION was a project that ran for three consecutive years in Portugal and Spain: it "aimed to contribute to opera's renewal as a territory of cultural and social inclusion… making opera more attractive to those who don't attend."[29] The goals of this project were to

[23] Mary Andom and Jesse Moore, "Raise all voices: Music as a powerful tool for reform in the Justice System," *Carnegie Hall*, accessed August 2, 2024 at https://www.carnegiehall.org/Explore/Articles/2020/12/11/Raise-All-Voices.
[24] Andom and Moore, "Raise all voices."
[25] Jeff Lunden, "Making musical connections at Sing Sing Prison," *NPR*, March 17, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/03/17/592460916/making-musical-connections-at-sing-sing-prison.
[26] Lunden, "Making musical connections."
[27] Andom and Moore, "Raise all voices."
[28] "Exploratory Operas," Traction Project, accessed July 26, 2024, https://www.traction-project.eu/trials/samp/.
[29] "About," Traction Project.

provide a way for participants to improve their self-esteem and gain new skills through artistic creation.[30] This collaboration resulted in the co-creation of opera with a group of people who could tell stories in a way that attracted a more diverse audience.[31] In addition to performing canonical operas such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*,[32] the three organizations (SAMP, EPL-J and TRACTION) create original operas that involve inmates, family members, former inmates and residents of Leiria, such as *Nós. Vocês. Toda a gente* (Us. You Guys. Everyone.)[33] François Matarasso, an independent writer and researcher, found the livestream of the production to be moving and performed with conviction and authority.[34] Matarasso explains that the rap idioms and elements of contemporary opera were a reflection of the imagination and creativity that brought this production to life.[35] He claims that "art cannot depend on the audience's knowledge to achieve its purpose of communication, even if that knowledge can enrich the experience. Art works in other ways, if it works at all, and the performance I saw remotely through my computer screen did that."[36]

The programmes mentioned above all have limitations and challenges related to working with incarcerated individuals, including obtaining special clearance permissions, power dynamics, scheduling and a lack of resources and awareness. The facilitators of the Good Vibrations gamelan programme point to some of the obstacles they have faced

[30] Cristovão Margarido et al., "Opera in Prison: Impact of an artistic project on the reintegration of young people in prison, *TEEM'20: Eighth International Conference on Technological Ecosystems for Enhancing Multiculturality* (2020): 82, https://doi.org/10.1145/3434780.3436593.
[31] "About," Traction Project, Accessed July 26, 2024. https://www.traction-project.eu/about/.
[32] Margarido, "Opera in Prison," 827.
[33] "Exploratory Operas," Traction Project, accessed July 26, 2024, https://www.traction-project.eu/trials/samp/.
[34] François Matarasso, "Learning the Right Lessons," June 14, 2021, https://arestlessart.com/2021/06/14/7785/.
[35] Matarasso, "Learning the Right Lessons."
[36] Matarasso, "Learning the Right Lessons."

in effort to provide music workshops in prisons. In addition to the lengthy and difficult process associated with getting clearance to work in a prison, workshops and activities with inmates depend on the availability of officers and the situation of the prison on any given day.[37] Events like getting visits from lawyers and family, medical treatment and court appearances all impact the ability for recreational programmes to function.[38] Paul Lameiro, director of SAMP, also outlined the many logistical constraints encountered when putting together an opera co-produced with inmates and artists. Challenges concerning visitation, protection of the inmates and the public, conflicts at the institutional level and the monitoring of results by researchers all affected the programme negatively.[39] Working with incarcerated populations requires an understanding that this group is just as diverse as the outside population. In Hickey's youth music production programme, some participants felt that the workshops were not challenging enough, while others felt they were too difficult, and expressed frustration about not being able to use the technology properly.[40] Tailoring such programmes to suit the needs of a varied population is difficult when time and resources are scarce. Matarasso attests that "community art is rarely quite as hard as this, but it is rarely quite as ambitious as this, artistically, socially and politically."[41] Despite the range and number of music programmes offered in prisons, the area of arts programming in prisons has not yet received robust and expansive attention from researchers. In particular, there is scant Canadian-based research on this topic.

[37] Mendonça, "Gamelan in Prisons," 379.
[38] Mendonça, "Gamelan in Prisons," 379.
[39] Matarasso, "Learning the right lessons."
[40] Hickey, "We all come together," 4059.
[41] Matarasso, "Learning the right lessons."

Scholarship on Music in Prisons

While there is not a great deal of academic literature about prison choirs, a handful of scholars have produced research in the area. Mary Cohen, one of the leading scholars in the field of prison arts programming, has published numerous articles based on her experience forming and working with the Oakdale Community Prison Choir in Coralville, Iowa.[42] She is currently a Professor at the University of Iowa's College Education and School of Music, and conducts research focused on "music-making and wellness with respect to prison contexts, writing and songwriting, and collaborative communities." Cohen's 2009 article, titled "Choral Singing and Prison Inmates: Influences of Performing in a Prison Choir," compared levels of well-being between inmates who sang in a choir compared to those who did not, with results showing significant differences in levels of emotional stability, sociability, happiness and joviality.[43] Cohen's 2012 article titled "Harmony within the walls: Perceptions of worthiness and competence in a community prison choir," explores the ways in which community members perceive incarcerated singers both before and after a concert put on by the prison choir.[44] Later articles published in 2018 and 2019 focus on music programmes in prisons outside of the United States,[45] and the ways that choral singing can help facilitate a better reintegration process.[46]

Laya Silber is a senior lecturer and choral director at the Bar-Ilan University in Israel. In 2005, Silber published an article titled "Bars behind bars: the impact of a

[42] Published articles by Cohen in 2009, 2012, 2018, and 2019 have great use to me in this thesis, as they each focus on a different dimension of choral music's impact on inmates.
[43] Cohen, "Choral Singing".
[44] Cohen, "Harmony within the Walls".
[45] Cohen and Henley, "Music-Making Behind Bars".
[46] Cohen, "Choral Singing in Prisons".

women's prison choir on social harmony," detailing her experience providing group singing activities to inmates in a maximum-security women's detention centre in Israel.[47] Silber's goal in this study was to define the intersecting points between "the ordinary workings of a multi-vocal choir and the therapeutic needs of prison inmates." This eight-month study featured approximately 120 inmates, and Silber found that throughout the programme, inmates showed increased levels of listening, patience, trust, sense of empowerment, connection, and self-esteem. Benjamin J. Harbert's 2013 article titled "Only Time: Musical Means to the personal, the Private and the Polis at Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women" explores the choir programme based in the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women.[48] Here, Harbert acknowledges the pains of populations in prison, referring to the unpredictability and monotony, not only within the prison itself, but also within the choir. Harbert offers a nuanced and sensitive approach to the complexities of music programming in prisons, offering an unvarnished account of the realities faced by those who participate in group singing programmes in prisons; these include fragile trust, high anxiety and politics.

While much of the academic literature surrounding arts-programming in prisons is, as Mendonça points out, "more frequently approached from a music education or music therapy perspective than from an anthropological or ethnomusicological one,"[49] musicologists and ethnomusicologists explore the field through a different lens. Mark Katz has explored how hip-hop can help bring redemption to those who are incarcerated

[47] Laya Silber, "Bars behind Bars: The Impact of a Women's Prison Choir on Social Harmony," *Music Education Research* 7, no. 2 (2005): 251–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800500169811.
[48] Benjamin J, Harbert, "Only Time: Musical Means to the Personal, the Private, and the Polis at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women," *American Music (Champaign, Ill.)* 31, no. 2 (2013): 203–40, https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.31.2.0203.
[49] Mendonça, "Gamelan in Prisons," 371.

through his work with Alim Braxton, a rapper, author, and Death Row inmate.[50] In 2011, Katz founded "Beat Making Lab," a music production and entrepreneurship course at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[51] Since then, Beat Making Lab has reached not only those in North Carolina, but also those in Ethiopia, Fiji, Senegal, Panama and the Dominican Republic of Congo.[52] Beat Making Lab has even made its way into the prisons of Gamboa, Panama, where producers worked with an incarcerated DJ to produce music.[53] For an even wider array of prison art programmes, Balfour et al.'s book, *Performing Arts in Prisons: Creative Perspectives* offers a variety of accounts advocating for the implementation of such programmes in spaces of detention. Not only does this book draw on a diverse range of authors—including researchers, professionals, artists, activists and former inmates—but it also incorporates different frameworks and theories that contribute to the value and importance of arts programming in prisons.[54]

Suzanne Cusick's ground-breaking research on the uses of music as torture reveals the ability of music to become yet another tool with which to inflict pain and violence. An example of this kind of "no-touch torture" was the use of loud music and white noise in combination with other methods of torture on prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.[55] Richard Taruskin and William Cheng have also highlighted harmful uses of music,

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[50] Alim Braxton and Mark Katz, *Rap and Redemption on Death Row*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 2024).
[51] "Learn More," Beat Making Lab, accessed April 1, 2025, https://beatmakinglab.com/learn-more/.
[52] "Learn More," Beat Making Lab.
[53] Beat Making Lab, "Field Trip: Prison Beats | Beat Making Lab | PBS Digital Studios," May 1, 2013, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyAijB4Lpvw.
[54] Michael Balfour, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Linda Davey, John Rynne, and Huib Schippers, eds, *Performing Arts in Prisons: Creative Perspectives*, Intellect, 2019, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv36xw1kn.

[55] Central Intelligence Agency, *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*, December 9, 2014, pg. xiii, 28,36, 42, 49, 60, 51, 137, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CRPT-113srpt288.pdf.

at times, though not solely associated with prisons. Taruskin lays bare the atrocities associated with Hitler's Germany, mentioning that even Nazis listened to classical music while committing horrendous harms to humanity.[56] In his book, *Just Vibrations*, Cheng offers a more nuanced report on the potential harms of music, discussing the intentional weaponization of sound through examples of music being used as torture, both in the media and in real life.[57] Clearly, in contrast to music's role in the betterment of people, the reverse is also possible. I acknowledge that music can play a complex role in spaces of detention, for either good or bad. I will blend my knowledge of both musicology and criminology to provide a nuanced and critical look at the positive uses of music programming in prisons.

Furthermore, while Christopher Small did not specifically write about prison music, his approach to Musicking can be applied to the field. The idea that music is not just a social activity, but that it has the capacity for individuals to redefine their identity and break down of barriers between performer and audience all hold particular relevance to the area of prison music.[58] Moreover, one of the leading scholars in prison music, Mary Cohen, employs Small's idea of Musicking in her doctoral dissertation, titled "Christopher Small's Concept of Musicking: Toward a Theory for Choral Singing Pedagogy in Prison Contexts". Here, Cohen uses Small's idea of musicking to construct a theory of group singing pedagogy in spaces of detention.[59] Small explains that "the

[56] Richard Taruskin, "Is There a Baby in the Bathwater? (Part II)," *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft* 63, no. 4 (2006): 309–27.
[57] William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*, *Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press*, 2016.
[58] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, (University Press of New England), 1998, 8-9, 95-98, 48.
[59] Mary Cohen, "Christopher Small's Concept of Musicking: Toward a Theory for Choral Singing Pedagogy in Prison Contexts" (Doctoral diss., University of Kansas, 2007), ResearchGate.

fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do."[60] In the context of Heartbeat Opera's production of *Fidelio*, Small's approach holds much value. This opera project allows singers to have an opportunity to see themselves in a new light, and develop and maintain positive social connections with their choir peers. Here, the focus is not the music itself, but the people who participate in "musicking."

Musicologists, particularly opera scholars, have analyzed how prisons are represented on stage in operatic productions ranging from Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640), Jean Baptiste Lully's *Atys* (1676), Maria Antonia's *Talestri* (1763), Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805;1814),[61] Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836) and more recently, Philip Glass's *In the Penal Colony* (2000) and Anthony Davis's *The Central Park Five* (2019). Additionally, as David Levin outlines in his *Unsettling Opera*, when present-day opera directors "disrupt" a work by drastically recasting it in a contemporary context, the work, as well the genre of opera is disrupted.[62] Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* (2022) certainly disrupts Sonnleitner and Beethoven's "work" by recasting it in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. By bringing together inmates and non-incarcerated community members to sing side-by-side in the Prisoners Chorus, and by virtue of the numerous relationships that cross the boundaries of prison and society-at-large, the very genre of opera too is arguably interrogated.

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[60] Small, *Musicking*, 8.
[61] One of the best-known discussions of the prison scene in Fidelio, along with its operatic predecessors, is Stephen C. Meyer, "Terror and Transcendence in the Operatic Prison, 1790-1815," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55, no. 3 (2002): 477-523.
[62] David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, Chicago University Press, 2007.

As I hinted earlier, an overwhelming majority of the existing scholarship related to prison choirs focuses specifically on the United States.[63] This means that there is a gap in literature in this field from other countries, and especially from Canada, where there is currently no scholarship on choral singing in prisons. There are also very few longitudinal studies that investigate long-term benefits of group singing in prisons, and no literature that follows up with formerly incarcerated singers to examine the possible lasting impacts of choral singing after release. Fieldwork of music programming in prisons consists of researchers developing their own programmes (either an existing programme, or a programme for the sake of the study), then using the data from those studies to gather evidence. What makes my research unique is that I examine the role and significance of prison choirs through a case study of a public performance rather than focusing solely on prison music programmes themselves. Given the logistical difficulties encountered in attempting to set up my own prison music program and gaining access to a Canadian prison, I have chosen to limit my investigation to a wide range of available evidence, including video recordings and existing interviews with prison choir participants in Heartbeat Opera's production. Finally, my thesis is the first to examine the Heartbeat Opera Company and their production of *Fidelio* through a scholarly lens.

Methodology and Scope

As outlined above, whereas many scholars researching prison music rely on fieldwork, this thesis will focus on published primary source material such as video recordings, interviews with inmates and directors of prison music programs, and reviews of the

[63] Mary L. Cohen, "Choral singing and prison inmates: Influences of performing in a prison choir," *Journal of Correctional Education* 60, no. 4 (2009): 52–65.

digital performance of Heartbeat Opera's production of *Fidelio*. Each source uncovers something different about group singing in prison. For example, videos of interviews with participants and facilitators provide first-person insights into the perceived roles of music, opera and choral singing in prison. Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*, released online as a YouTube video, allowed for repeated viewings to examine and critically analyze the production. [64] The video includes behind-the-scenes coverage of the rehearsal process. Prison choir websites offer information about each organization, including their mission, performances and press. Online news articles and blog posts give insight into how groups like these are perceived by external individuals and organizations.

Additionally, written reflections from inmates are also available on Heartbeat Opera's website, which is especially important, as I was not able to conduct fieldwork myself given the logistical and ethical challenges, and the scope of an MA thesis. Questionnaires from Heartbeat Opera were sent to incarcerated singers to learn more about their experiences. Of the 100-plus inmates who participated in this opera, 25 are represented in letters that were published in a publicly available PDF document, and have been shared and displayed with the inmates' permission.

This thesis incorporates sociological perspectives from criminology to analyze how group singing can benefit participants. These frameworks help to better organize findings and draw connections between the benefits of music programmes in prisons and broader concepts such as identity, labels, worthiness and competence. The first framework I draw on is Labelling Theory. Labelling Theory uses terms such as "insider" and "outsider" to describe people who behave in a way that is perceived as right by

[64] The Met, "Digital Premiere: Heartbeat Opera's "Fidelio" | MetLiveArts," October 11, 2022, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THODe3j8mKc.

others, and the label and definition of deviance depends on what behaviours are enforced by the law.[65] The second framework I incorporate is self-esteem. The connection between self-esteem and crime has a complex relationship in the field of criminology, and there are two bodies of literature that exist: one suggesting that low self-esteem correlates to crime, and the other that high self-esteem is related to crime.[66] Mruk (2006) tries to overcome this inconsistency by arguing that positive self-esteem is dependent on two factors: competence and worthiness.[67] I will explain how higher levels of self-esteem in conjunction with positive social connections (worthiness) and learning new skills (competence) can have a positive effect on individuals.

[65] Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, 1-3.
[66] Oser, "Criminal Offending–Self-Esteem Nexus: Which Version of the Self-Esteem Theory Is Supported?" *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 3 (2006): 344, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885506291024.
[67] Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem Research, Theory, and Practice: Toward a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem* 3rd ed. Springer Publications, 2006, 23.

Chapter Two: Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*

> I really hope that this production can hold up the mirror to our society and speak truth to power… *Fidelio* at its core [is] about hope in the face of despair, love in the face of hate, and seeking for justice and liberation.[1]

Now in its 10th year, Heartbeat Opera's mission is to create "incisive adaptations and revelatory arrangements of classics, reimagining them for the here and now."[2] As the mission statement further elaborates, their "interdisciplinary collaborations expand the boundaries of what opera can be. Grounded in the belief that excellent opera-making should build community and radiate beauty, we work toward an equitable and inclusive future for our art form, centered in love."[3] Heartbeat Opera has created new and thought-provoking productions that adapt opera classics such as *Don Giovanni, Tosca* and *Carmen* into works that engage with contemporary American life.[4] Mainstream opera culture has been predominantly white for much of the twentieth century,[5] and Heartbeat Opera seeks to break racial boundaries with their productions. Today, the company is led by artistic director, Jacob Ashworth, and is supported by a diverse and talented group of artists and creatives.

In 2018, (then) co-directors Ethan Heard and Dan Schlosberg put racial injustice in the spotlight with their production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, harnessing opera's power to

[1] Heartbeat Opera, "Heartbeat Opera's FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer," November 16, 2021, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpG5Nk7bRz4, 1:18 and 3:12.
[2] "Mission," Heartbeat Opera, accessed March 7, 2025 at https://www.heartbeatopera.org/mission.
[3] "Mission," Heartbeat Opera, accessed March 7, 2025 at https://www.heartbeatopera.org/mission.
[4] "Past Productions," Heartbeat Opera, accessed March 7, 2025 at https://www.heartbeatopera.org/past-productions.
[5] Naomi Andre, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement.* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 9-10.

prompt challenging but important conversations that affect society.[6] Heard explains that the central themes and meanings in *Fidelio* are:

> Hope in the face of despair: in our adaptation, Leah's husband Stan, a Black Lives Matter activist, has been wrongfully incarcerated by a corrupt warden, but Leah still fiercely hopes she can free him. It is about courage in the face of danger: Leah disguises herself as a correctional officer to infiltrate the facility where she believes Stan is being kept. And love in the face of hate: Leah's love transcends the warden's racism.[7]

Hope, courage and love are timeless and apparent in both the original opera and this new production. In addition, the co-directors believed Beethoven's music to have the ability to support the wide range of emotions felt by the characters, including anger, grief and hope.[8] Despite *Fidelio* now being over 200 years old, the work still is relevant to the ideals of a liberal-democratic society, including freedom, a reformed and fair justice system, and more widespread political participation.[9]

In this chapter, I will examine how decisions made in Heartbeat Opera's production of *Fidelio*, specifically the Prisoner's Chorus, contribute to the directors' vision. I argue that this version of the opera successfully reflects some of the complex topics faced in America today, creating a work that is both striking and thought-provoking. In addition to plot changes, there are also revisions to the number of characters and the musical arrangement. Reviews from newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, and from entertainment giants such as NPR and Vulture, were nearly all positive. Critics praised the production, echoing each other's positive comments surrounding set design, orchestral and vocal performances, impact of

[6] Heartbeat Opera, "FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer," 2:45.
[7] "Fidelio," Ethan Heard.
[8] Heartbeat Opera, "FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer," 00:49.
[9] Estelle Joubert, *German Opera and Enlightenment Philosophy: The Politics of Sensation* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 3.

the Prisoner's Chorus and the modern-day context. Some reviewers pointed out that certain elements in the subplot took away from the overall message of the production, and others questioned the entire production, believing it to corrupt and subvert the fabric of tradition and classical music. These critics' voices, when combined with an analysis of the production, allows for a nuanced assessment of how Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* engages with issues of race and incarceration in contemporary America, and, perhaps most importantly, it allows for an evaluation of the impact of the Prisoners' Chorus.

Fidelio's Viennese Context

Beethoven's *Fidelio* has a long history of revision and adaptation. After abandoning his first opera project, *Vestas Feuer* (The Vestal Flame) in January of 1804, the composer took on the task of working on J. N. Boulliy's *Leonore, ou L'amour conjugal*, first set by Gaveaux in 1798, then by Ferdinando Paer in Italian in 1804.[10] After many last-minute obstacles, the opera was premiered at the *Theater an der Wien* in Vienna on November 20, 1805, under the title, *Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* (Leonore, or the Triumph of Married Love).[11] Elements such as length, redundant text and awkward voice parts all contributed to the unsuccessful premiere of the 1805 version.[12] Additionally, the premiere of *Leonore* was cut short as French troops occupied Vienna on November 13, 1805, and this version of the opera only managed to be performed three times.[13] While Beethoven preferred the title *Leonore*, theatres insisted that *Fidelio* be

[10] Douglas Johnson, "Fidelio," in The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), 182-183.
[11] Johnson, "Fidelio," 183.
[12] For a discussion of versions of *Fidelio* and the success of the premiere, see Michael Robinson, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Fidelio* (Cambridge Opera Handbooks), Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[13] The Metropolitan Opera, "*Fidelio*" Educator Guide, Met Opera, 2020, 15, https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/discover/education/educator-guides/fidelio/fidelio.20-21.guide.pdf.

used so that any confusion between his work and the works of Gaveaux and Paer would be avoided.[14] *Fidelio* was revised again in 1814, using existing materials from earlier and unsuccessful versions of the opera to create the new work.[15]After cutting down the work from three acts to two, the opera, now titled *Fidelio*, was premiered once again on May 23, 1814 at the *Theater am Kärntnertor* in Vienna.[16]

Despite the numerous changes made to *Fidelio*, the essence of the opera remains the same. As Mark Swed remarks,

> Nothing could be more Beethovenian, even when it came to rewriting the libretto, altering the structure of the opera or adapting the score. The composer, who was shocked by how the Reign of Terror in Paris had voided the ideals of the French Revolution, worked for nine years on his opera, far longer than on any other composition. He produced three versions and felt that he never got this idealistic summoning of freedom entirely right.[17]

This notion that *Fidelio* is broadly associated with freedom and the French Revolution pervades musicological readings of the work.[18] In his *Political Beethoven*, Nicholas Mathew argues that *Fidelio* "is the site of immense tension between history and myth, the real and the ideal, the occasion and the work. Even in its earliest incarnations, the opera has an ambivalent relationship with recent history."[19] The "recent history" to which Mathew refers is of course the Congress of Vienna, a landmark diplomatic event that inaugurated a new political era featuring a new balance of power in Europe. As Ryan

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[14] Johnson, "Fidelio," 183. For a discussion of the generic similarities and differences between Beethoven's Fidelio and similar works by Gaveaux and Paer, see Martin Nedbal, "How German is Fidelio? Didacticism in Beethoven's Operas," in *Morality and Viennese Opera in the Age of Mozart and Beethoven*, Taylor & Francis, 2016.
[15] Nicholas Mathew, *Political Beethoven*, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35.
[16] The Metropolitan Opera, "*Fidelio*," 2.
[17] Mark Swed, "Review: Beethoven remade as Black Lives Matter music at the Broad Stage," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-03-01/review-beethovens-opera-fidelio-remade-to-reflect-the-era-black-lives-matter.
[18] See for instance, Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, 2nd edition. Schirmer Books, 1998 and Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven: The Music and the Life,* Norton, 2003.
[19] Mathew, *Political Beethoven*, 35.

Ebright points out, the premiere of the 1814 *Fidelio* coincided "with the Congress of Vienna, where European leaders were mapping out the post-Napoleonic geopolitical landscape, [for which] Beethoven added a new choral ending that threw greater symbolic weight onto the newly liberated prisoners."[20] This opera was "interpretable as a metaphor for the emancipation of Europe from Napoleon,"[21] and featured revisions that reflect that in the work. The opera's association with freedom and the inauguration of a new political era was not missed. Crucially, critics were interested in the sensorial capabilities of opera to achieve this task. At the premiere of this new version of *Fidelio*, a reviewer from the *Wiener Theaterzeitung* remarked that "Beethoven possesses the power to combine his notes with such magic… they powerfully broaden the heart when one enjoys them, and occupy the soul with a succession of thoughts and pictures to which one never gave way before."[22]

Sonnleitner and Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1814) unfolds over the course of two acts. The work features Florestan, a political prisoner jailed in Seville, and his wife Leonore, who disguises herself as a boy named Fidelio to work for Florestan's jailer, Rocco. Rocco permits Fidelio to work in prison after getting clearance from Pizarro, the governor, but he warns her that she cannot enter one particular cell—the dungeon in which Florestan is held. Pizarro later receives a letter from Don Fernando, the minister, explaining that he is going to pay a visit to the prison after hearing rumours of cruelty. Knowing that Fernando and Florestan are friends, and that he has not committed a crime, Pizarro demands that Rocco dig a grave so that Florestan can be killed. Leonore persuades Rocco to let the

[20] Ebright, "Beethoven's 200-Year-Old 'Fidelio'."
[21] Mathew, *Political Beethoven*, 36.
[22] *Wiener Zeitung*, 1 (May 28, 1814): 180-181 translation collection, Italics in original. Cited from Estelle Joubert, *German Opera and Enlightenment Philosophy*, 2025).

other prisoners out of their cells for some light and fresh air but when Pizarro discovers this, he angrily demands that the prisoners be put back inside their cells. In Act 2, Florestan appears on stage chained to the dungeon walls, experiencing hallucinations and visions of his wife coming to save him. Rocco and Leonore arrive at the cell, and while Florestan does not immediately recognise his wife, she recognises his voice when he speaks to Rocco. Pizarro then enters the cell to kill Florestan after Rocco signals to him that the grave has been dug, and just as this is happening, Leonore points a pistol at Pizarro, revealing herself as Leonore and threatening that Pizarro will have to kill her before being able to kill Florestan himself. Don Fernando arrives and realises that his friend is in prison. Pizarro is arrested, Leonore frees Florestan from his chains, Don Fernando pardons and frees the remaining prisoners, and the opera ends in celebration of Leonore.[23]

Heartbeat Opera's Adaptation of *Fidelio*

The co-directors and the entire Heartbeat Opera company felt that it was important to create a production that not only reflected, but responded to the current events happening in America, and that *Fidelio* was the perfect way to do just that.[24] Originally premiered at the Baruch Performing Arts Center in May 2018, Heartbeat Opera's modern re-telling of *Fidelio* was re-staged in 2022 in the wake of the BLM Movement.[25] Act I begins with a dark stage that is quickly filled with flashing strobe lights, gunshots, and a black man who is being arrested (00:20).[26] A woman (Leah) is seen at her desk, having a frustrating

[23] The Metropolitan Opera, "*Fidelio*", 7.
[24] Heartbeat Opera, "FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer," 0:05.
[25] "Fidelio," Ethan Heard, accessed March 7, 2025, at https://www.ethanheard.com/#/fidelio/.
[26] The Met, "Digital Premiere: Heartbeat Opera's "Fidelio,"" October 11, 2022, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THODe3j8mKc&t=3363s.

conversation with a lawyer, trying to free her husband Stan, a BLM activist, from being wrongfully imprisoned (00:55). Leah, who now goes by Lee, becomes a correctional officer inside the prison where Stan has been imprisoned. Marcy (Marzelline), the daughter of Roc (Rocco), has developed an interest in Leah/Lee (07:55). Leah discusses with Roc whether she can work down at the annex of the prison, and Roc is weary about the idea, explaining that Stan has been in solitary confinement for one year and that the warden has issued orders to kill him (19:00). The following scene features the governor of the jail, Pizarro, on a phone call, arguing against the BLM movement and plotting the murder of Stan (26:21). Roc enters the scene, and Pizarro announces that the prison is scheduled to be inspected due to improper conduct (28:00). After exchanging a kiss, Leah manages to convince Marcy to open the gates and allow the inmates to have 30 minutes of time outside of their cells (48:00). A white sheet is draped over the back of the theatre stage, and a video showcases six prison choirs singing *O welche Lust* (Oh what a joy), forming the Prisoner's Chorus (49:30). Roc enters the scene, angry that the inmates were let out temporarily, but informs Leah that she has temporary access to the annex with him (56:15). Pizarro enters the scene, demanding to know why the prisoners were let out of their cells. Roc explains that it is their way of celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day (1:03:33).

Act 2 opens with an instrumental prelude and features Stan in solitary confinement in the Annex, experiencing hallucinations of his wife Leah coming to save him (1:12:15). Roc and Leah enter the Annex where Stan is and begin to prepare his grave (1:22:43). While Leah is outside, Stan informs Roc about his unjust detention and tells the stories of other black men who have been wrongfully imprisoned by the

corrupted justice system (1:23:05). Pizarro enters the scene, revealing that it is him who will be killing Stan (1:32:25). Leah jumps in front of Pizarro and confronts him, revealing that she is Stan's wife (1:33:40). Leah and Roc manage to drive Pizarro out and the couple is reunited (1:37:03). The couple is then separated yet again by the prison gates and the music turns ominous (1:41:12). Stan is pushed behind the prison gates and is shot multiple times (1:41:50). The stage darkens and after a short instrumental interlude, the scene shows Leah, waking up at the same desk that she was at during the beginning of the production (1:42:50). The opera ends with Leah, alone and centre stage. The pose that Stan strikes at the very beginning of the opera is mirrored by Leah, and the opera ends in darkness (1:43:50).

There are several changes made in Heartbeat Opera's production, including to the text, plot, and even orchestration and music (this is in addition to the unique set and stage design). In the 1814 version, Florestan is imprisoned for his political views and for attempting to reveal the crimes committed by Don Pizarro. In the 2022 version, Stan is wrongfully imprisoned for his work as a BLM activist. The original German libretto is changed to modern English, while all the musical numbers are sung in the original German language. Some specific examples where the dialogue takes a completely different turn in the modern-day production include:

1. Pizarro on the phone, telling the person on the other side of the call to "stand back and stand by," (27:20) referring to President Donald Trump's remark to the right-wing extremist group, Proud Boys.
2. Stan informing Roc about his unjust detention and sharing the stories of other black men who have been wrongfully imprisoned (1:23:05).

3. Roc explaining to Pizarro that the prisoners have been let out of their cells because that is their way of celebrating Martin Luther King Jr (1:03:34).

While reviewers expressed a generally positive reaction to the work, there were also some concerns raised by journalists. Joshua Barone from *The New York Times* felt that "the text has lost some of its grace, with pandering references to the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection and President Donald J. Trump's infamous call for the Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by'…A casualty of these lapses is the baritone Corey McKern's Pizarro, who is something of a Trump stand-in, a caricature among nuanced, human characters."[27]

Opposing the entire production, Heather Macdonald of Quillette expressed that too many modern-day productions of classical music are speaking to a particular political agenda. She argued that "for decades now, opera directors in Europe and the United States have felt license to revise operas to conform to their political agendas. These directors did so through wildly incongruous stagings that updated an opera's plot to modern times and introduced progressive totems that would have been unfathomable to the opera's original creator."[28] Macdonald goes on to speculate that the Metropolitan Museum of Art would not be interested in this work, had it not been for the "Black Lives Matter gloss."[29] Suggesting that the production has thrown on a Black Lives Matter gloss is not only inaccurate, but insulting. As mentioned earlier, Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* was staged a second time in 2022 in response to the movement. The production however, has

[27] Joshua Barone, "Review: Beethoven Returns for the Age of Black Lives Matter," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/arts/music/heartbeat-opera-fidelio-review.html.
[28] Heather MacDonald, "Bastardizing Beethoven," *Quillette*, May 17, 2023. https://quillette.com/2023/05/17/bastardizing-beethoven/.
[29] MacDonald, "Bastardizing Beethoven."

always been about racial injustice and mass incarceration of black people in America, with or without the association with Black Lives Matter.

The opening scene in the original *Singspiel* shows Marzelline rejecting the advances made by Jaquino, the gatekeeper.[30] Heartbeat Opera's production removes this scene entirely, opting to begin the opera in a serious and striking tone. One of the most obvious changes to the plot is the complete rewriting of the ending. Beethoven's original *Fidelio* ends in triumph, after Leonore successfully frees her husband from the prison he is being held in. The revised version shows no happy ending; instead, it ends with Leah, alone and centre on a dimly-lit stage, where she strikes the same pose as her husband did at the beginning of the opera. To me, this change is significant because it highlights all the work that is left to do and all the progress that is yet to be made for justice and equality. In both versions of the opera, there is romantic interest between Leonore/Fidelio (Leah) and Marzelline (Marcy). Removing Jacquino's character from the new production altogether helps to facilitate the romantic storyline between these two characters. Some reviewers, however, felt that this subplot took away from the main message and plot of the production. Kurt Gottshalk comments that "the friendship and sexual overtones that developed between Leah and Marcy, though central to the plot, became a distraction that the very real tale being woven, that of a Black activist held in solitary confinement.[31]

[30] "Fidelio," Royal Ballet & Opera, accessed March 3, 2025, at https://www.rbo.org.uk/opera-essentials-fidelio.
[31] Kurt Gottschalk, "LvB meets #BLM in Heartbeat Opera's Fidelio," *Bachtrack*, 2022, https://bachtrack.com/review-fidelio-heartbeat-opera-heard-schlosberg-metropolitan-museum-new-york-february-2022.

Interpreting the Production

Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* received a fair amount of press coverage analyzing a range of issues related to the production. The topic of complicity and self-interest was observed by critics, and Fonda Shen of the Columbia Spectator viewed Roc (prison warden) and Marcy (Roc's daughter) as the general public, which has become complacent to the injustices that surround them.[32] She explains that these characters "were the most powerful representation of modern-day perpetrators of social injustices, even more so than the overtly unjust and evil Pizarro, because they appeared to be good people.[33] When Roc is confronted by Marcy and Leah about a certain prisoner in solitary confinement, he urges them to not keep pressing, explaining that he is "just following protocol" (18:50) and "it's above your pay grade" (19:25). During the scene where Roc and Stan are in the dungeon, Stan makes a profound appeal about not only his unjust detention, but also the faults and failures of the criminal justice system (1:23:05). This version of *Fidelio* brings attention to Roc, who is both sympathetic towards Stan, yet neither able nor willing to go against the system he has made his career in,[34] making him just a pawn in the criminal justice system. As for Marcy, Shen explains that her "selfishness was harrowing because it was not evil or intentional, but all too relatable."[35] When Leah asks Marcy to let the prisoners out, she refuses multiple times, making excuses and explaining that it is not her decision to make and that she could lose her job (45:45). That said, Marcy changes her

[32] Fonda Shen, "Heartbeat Opera advocates for criminal and social justice reform with 'Fidelio' adaptation," *Columbia Spectator*, December 3, 2018, https://www.columbiaspectator.com/arts-and-entertainment/2018/12/03/heartbeat-opera-advocates-for-criminal-and-social-justice-reform-with-fidelio-adaptation/.
[33] Shen, "Heartbeat Opera advocates".
[34] Joshua Kosman, "Opera company rethinks Beethoven's 'Fidelio' in light of Black Lives Matter," *Datebook San Francisco Chronicle*, February 16, 2022, https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/music/opera-company-rethinks-beethovens-fidelio-in-light-of-black-lives-matter.
[35] Shen, "Heartbeat Opera advocates".

mind almost immediately, after Leah asks her to free them for her sake, and after the two exchange a kiss (47:30).

By far the most important change to opera is that its central theme—freedom—is not achieved at the end of the opera. Instead of the happy couple being reunited and celebrated, and the final chorus hinting at the coming of a new political era in the 1814 version, Heartbeat Opera presents a *Fidelio* where freedom and political reform remains out of reach. Near the end of the opera, Stan is shot (the audience might surmise that he is killed), and Leah is left standing on a darkened stage (1:41:56). In effect, the vision of freedom embodied by the Prisoners Chorus—arguably the central musical moment in this production—dissipates as liberty and a just prison system does not (yet) exist in this operatic world. The obvious reading of such a dramatic change is that racism and mass incarceration in present-day America are pressing issues that remain unaddressed. This sense of despair is evident also in the set design and the music itself.

In addition to plot alterations to reflect present-day American society, other changes appear in the set design, cast and most notably, the musical ensemble. Kurt Gottschalk of Bachtrack commented that despite the significant reduction in cast and musicians, "the lean and imaginative piece, for a cast of five and music ensemble of seven, by no means lacked in impact for its economy of scale.[36] New York Times journalist Joshua Barone shared that the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium used to premiere the production was too big, taking away from the storyline of being inside a claustrophobia-inducing jail, and that the seven-person musical ensemble could not fill the stage adequately.[37] The set design was generally well-received, with Rick Perdian

[36] Gottschalk, "LvB meets #BLM."
[37] Kosman, "Review: Beethoven Returns."

commenting that while "the set was basic… nothing says prison like a chain-link fence topped with razor wire… the most elaborate stage equipment could not have made it better.[38] At around the four-minute mark, the simple set is revealed to the audience; combined with music, lighting and song, it serves as the perfect backdrop for the production.

Unlike other *Regieoper* productions, Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* actually "tampers with the score" to use Roger Parker's words.[39] The full orchestra called for in the original opera is stripped down and adapted by Schlosberg, leaving just two pianos, two cellos, two French horns and one percussionist.[40] The grandeur and power of a full orchestra is breathtaking, but Schlosberg's re-arrangement of the music allows the "expressive cellos [to] reveal the characters' thoughts, and the horns [that] add an aura of muscularity and honour."[41] This new orchestration allows the percussion to interact with the spoken dialogue, adding a dramatic effect to certain phrases.[42] In numbers such as Marcy's *O wär ich schon mit dir vereint* (07:55), the latter half of Leah's *Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?* (37:50) and Roc, Leah and Stan's *Es schlägt der Rache Stunde* (1:35:11), the ensemble of musicians and singers deliver a performance that does not lack in fullness or impact. At points, it sounds like there are more instruments on stage than there are. Mark Swed of the Los Angeles Times remarked that the seven-piece ensemble "displayed much invention, but percussion punctuation and purposeful horns tended to make their

[38] Rick Perdian, "Heartbeat Opera's heroic, harrowing Fidelio hits the road." *Seen and Heard International*, February 14, 2022, https://seenandheard-international.com/2022/02/heartbeat-operas-heroic-harrowing-fidelio-hits-the-road/.
[39] Roger Parker, *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio*, University of California Press, 2006, 5, 10.
[40] Tsioulcas, "Prison choirs sing."
[41] Barone, "Beethoven Returns for the Age."
[42] Barone, "Beethoven Returns for the Age."

points in the musical equivalent of all caps and boldface."[43] An example of this is Pizarro's *Ha, welch' ein Augenblick*,[44] where the clever use of horns and whip-like percussion provides extra impact to this dramatic and sharp number. Anastasia Tsioulcas at NPR describes the small ensemble as providing an effect that is "strikingly intimate and imaginative, texturally effective, and also slightly claustrophobia-inducing — not out of place in a prison.[45]

Re-Interpreting the Prisoner's Chorus

One of the most significant changes between Heartbeat Opera's version and the 1814 version of *Fidelio* is the Prisoner's Chorus in Act I. Estelle Joubert describes the chorus as a way to "freeze, transmute and monumentalize pain into beauty."[46] In what NPR journalist Tsioulcas defines as the "emotional apex" of the opera,[47] the voices and faces of inmates from six prison choirs are shown in a video montage that is displayed on stage. When putting together this production, Ethan Heard and Dan Schlosberg wondered how the prisoner's chorus could be conceived.[48] After reaching out to Amanda Weber, director of the Voices of Hope Prison Choir, the co-directors were able to make connections with several other prison choirs, forming a community of over 100 singers from six different prison choirs to form the Prisoner's Chorus.[49] Heard and Schlosberg visited four of the six participating groups and the inmates were joined by over 70

[43] Swed, "Review: Beethoven remade."
[44] The Met, "Digital Premiere," 28:28.
[45] Tsioulcas, "Prison choirs sing."
[46] Joubert, *German Opera*, 10.
[47] Tsioulcas, "Prison choirs sing."
[48] Heartbeat Opera, "Heartbeat Opera collaborates with six prison choirs on FIDELIO," April 21, 2018, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_ipFPVLUS8, 00:22.
[49] Heartbeat Opera, "FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer." 2:18.

volunteer singers from the outside, rehearsing weekly to make this portion of the production come to life.[50] For Schlosberg, "the prisoner's chorus is really the central moment in this piece, and it features the voices of these incarcerated people in the opera, yearning for freedom and for justice."[51] Each of the groups recorded a section of the piece, then those recordings made of the prison choirs were mixed into one master track by sound designer, Kate Marvin.[52]

To set the stage for the Prisoner's Chorus, the musicians begin by playing an interlude, while Lee opens up a chest that contains the large white sheet that is draped over the back wall of the theatre.[53] The faces of the inmates are projected onto the white sheet and their voices are heard singing *O Welche Lust* as Lee stands proudly watching them sing. The videos of the inmate and volunteer singers are stitched together in one big montage, accompanied by translated English subtitles of the original German text. Some choirs are shown on video, and other choirs are shown in pictures; both formats of media are striking, as they focus on the faces and expressions of the singers. Sonically, the number is not perfect, but that is not what matters here. The passion and effort that each singer put into learning and performing this challenging piece of music is impressive, and can be heard in the final version of *O Welche Lust*. When the number ends, there is a moment of silence before the audience gives a hearty applause.

Using video technology to show the inmates singing *O Welche Lust* rather than have the inmates perform in person serves to highlight the separation between inmates and those outside of prison. Perhaps there was no way to get prison security clearances

[50] Heartbeat Opera, "Heartbeat Opera collaborates," 1:12.
[51] Heartbeat Opera, "FIDELIO, 2022 Trailer," 2:03.
[52] Heartbeat Opera, "Heartbeat Opera collaborates," 1:00.
[53] The Met, "Digital Premiere," 48:45.

for all inmates to leave the prison to perform, or there was no budget to bring the inmates out, or there was not enough space in the theatre to hold all members of the Prisoner's Chorus. While showing the faces of inmates in a video helps give them an identity to the audience members, the very fact that they are not physically in the performance venue, symbolizes difference and separation. I would compare this feeling of disconnect to when an actor wins an award but is not physically present at the award show, so they "video in" from a different location and share a pre-recorded video greeting and acceptance speech. As Philip Auslander has famously argued, there is something different about experiencing a performance or an event live—something that is raw and unfiltered, without the use of different technologies that might produce a product that may not truly capture the gravity of the matter at hand.[54]

Why was the chorus presented to the audience in this digital format? According to their mission statement, Heartbeat Opera strives to build community through opera-making,[55] working "to expand the boundaries of what opera has been in the past and to propel it toward an inclusive future."[56] Having the Prisoner's Chorus participate via video and putting the entire production online for free makes the production inclusive and accessible to people on the outside. But what about those on the inside? In reviews, I noticed that the Prisoner's Chorus was given special attention in nearly every article, and for good reason. The Heartbeat team benefitted from this media buzz, but on the flip side, one could ask what the inmates gained from their participation, besides the experience.

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[54] Philip Auslander has written extensively on "Liveness" in the performing arts. See for example his *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 3rd edition, Routledge, 2022.
[55] "Mission," Heartbeat Opera.
[56] "Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*," The Broad Stage, 2021, accessed at https://broadstage.org/media/r0ihlyma/1657648930_tbs2122_educom_learnguide_fidelio_f.pdf.

Were the inmates given an opportunity to learn about the opera and watch the production that they participated in, or was there any other form of reciprocity involved between these two groups? These are all questions for which we do not currently have answers, but these issues are worthwhile to consider in the context of the power dynamics within the production itself. If the Prisoner's Chorus did not involve incarcerated individuals, would the production still have been as successful and media-worthy?

This partnership, effort and hard work displayed amongst incarcerated singers, programme facilitators and Heartbeat Opera members is evident in the final production of the Prisoner's Chorus. In addition to the impressive musicianship that Heard and Schlosberg witnessed, they also reflected on the process, explaining how their outlooks and perspectives have changed in regard to what it means to be free, what it means to be incarcerated, and how making music together can be such a moving process.[57] There was also an overwhelming amount of positive feedback from the singers. While the six choirs did not get a chance to meet each other, they worked on this new music amongst fellow peers in their own choir, with their director, and with the directors of Heartbeat Opera. One inmate singer described how the process of learning to sing a piece of music and the message behind the opera helped them grow more confident, and how recording the piece live has positively affected them more as time goes by.[58] They go on to share how participating in *Fidelio* has been a way to give back something positive to friends and

[57] Heartbeat Opera, "Heartbeat Opera collaborates," 3:15.
[58] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 10, accessed March 3, 2025, at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/540e2853e4b00853b09fe0a4/t/6206b9a08382e434380e4d5c/1644607907317/HBO-Letters+from+Incarcerated+Singers.pdf.

family back home:[59] "thank you for allowing them to see me in another light… I have been fortunate to meet and bond with a great group of people and I almost feel free."[60]

This chapter explored historical and political contexts of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and analyses the Heartbeat Opera's rendition of the same work. The themes of justice and freedom are still as prevalent now as they were 200 years ago, and the opera is a timeless work that has spoken to people from many walks of life. Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* ends with the absence of justice and freedom and serves as a reminder of all the work that is yet to be done to live in a free and fair society. The impacts on incarcerated singers, however, deserves a close study. It is to the voices of these inmates that I now turn.

[59] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 10.
[60] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 10.

Chapter Three: Self-Esteem, Identity and Reintegration through Opera

> I would like people to know that just because we are locked up for our mistakes, we are still human beings. Sometimes people feel that we are all animals that don't deserve a second chance. Truth be told, most of us are victims of our own circumstances who when faced with adversities chose the wrong direction with our actions. This choir makes us feel that 'normal' feeling for a short time every week. We are accepted as humans, not looked at as numbers.[1]

This chapter introduces each of the six prison choirs involved in the *Fidelio* production, and shares experiences and accounts from singers, facilitators and other individuals involved in the project. The above quote comes from Douglas Elliot, an incarcerated singer, who expressed how participating in *Fidelio* has helped choristers feel "normal," even if only for a short while. Elliott's reflection touches on the topic of identity and labels, explaining how during weekly choir rehearsals, inmates feel accepted and seen as humans rather than a statistic. Having testimonies from the incarcerated singers is an invaluable resource, as there is no field work component in this thesis. By analysing the first-hand accounts of prison choir members, I link choir participation with increased self-esteem and better reintegration. I incorporate Shadd Maruna's four pillars of reintegration rituals with themes that emerge from the prisoners' experience. Based on the range of sources and scholarship examined, I argue that a strong case emerges in favour of the many positive impacts for prison choirs.

[1] "Letters from incarcerated singers," Heartbeat Opera, 26.

Introducing the Six Prison Choirs

The Prisoner's Chorus is made up of six prison choirs, all based in the Midwestern United States. Prior to Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*, all six groups were up and running. The groups were all founded by individuals with a passion for making music accessible to those in spaces of detention, and today, five out of the six groups remain active. Most of the institutions are minimum or medium security unit facilities. I note that there are varying amounts of data and information about each of these choirs. Some choirs have been the subject of an abundance of academic literature, social media posts and blog posts, while others may only have one or two web articles written about them.

The East Hill Singers is a prison choir based out of the Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas, founded by Elvera Voth in 1995.[2] This chorus is composed of inmates at the Lansing correctional facility's minimum-security unit and volunteer singers from the outside community.[3] The choir performs four times a year outside prison walls,[4] and has grown to include up to 50 singers at a time.[5] As Lee Lynch, the executive director of the group, explains, participants create music and art as a way to give back to the community after taking from the community through crime.[6] The choir is currently directed by Kirk Carson and is one of the core programmes that forms the Kansas Arts in Prison programme, a not-for-profit organisation providing a variety of arts opportunities for inmates in the state.[7]

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[2] Mary L. Cohen, "Hallelujah! Prison Choirs: Studying a Unique Phenomenon," *The Choral Journal* 48, no. 5 (2007): 47.
[3] Teresa Wilkie, "East Hill Singers - Inmates and Community Singing Together," September 14, 2019, in *Jaws of Justice Radio*, produced by KKFI Kansas City, podcast, MP3 audio, 11:50, https://kkfi.org/program-episodes/east-hill-singers-inmates-and-community-singing-together/.
[4] Wilkie, "East Hill Singers," at 13:15.
[5] Wilkie, "East Hill Singers," at 3:50.
[6] Wilkie, "East Hill Singers," at 26:20.
[7] "Our Story," Arts in Prison, accessed March 3, 2025, at https://www.artsinprison.org/about.

Inspired by Elvera Voth's work with the East Hill Singers,[8] Mary Cohen founded the Oakdale Community Choir in 2009.[9] Half of the choir was comprised of volunteer singers from the outside and the other half consisted of male inmates, who met every Tuesday evening to rehearse and sing together.[10] The goals of the choir were to bring group singing experiences to incarcerated men and community members who were interested in learning more about the prison system.[11] Based at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center, a medium-security prison in Coralville, Iowa,[12] this collaboration brought people together who would otherwise not have interacted with each other[13] and has given new meaning to music education, where more than just the sonic aspects of music are created and valued.[14] The Oakdale Community Choir ceased operations in the spring of 2020, first, because of the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequently due to current leadership of the prison not wanting the choir to resume.[15]

A group that has remained up and running since the pandemic is The Voices of Hope (VOH) choir. This group was launched in 2015 under the leadership of Amanda Weber, with 17 singers who gathered once a week to sing together.[16] This group was established after the education director of the minimum security Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee was unhappy with the (then) vocal programme offered, leading to a

[8] Don Lee, "Finding freedom through song," *Chorus America*, April 4, 2014, https://chorusamerica.org/conducting-performing/finding-freedom-through-song.
[9] Cohen, "Choral Singing in Prisons," 110s.
[10] University of Iowa College of Education, "Oakdale Prison Community Choir," June 20, 2017, YouTube video, 00:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODYIt2O9h5k&ab_channel=UniversityofIowaCollegeofEducation.
[11] "About Us," Oakdale Community Choir, accessed August 12, 2024, https://oakdalechoir.lib.uiowa.edu/.
[12] Iowa Medical and Classification Center, *Iowa Department of Corrections*, https://doc.iowa.gov/districts-prisons/iowa-medical-and-classification-center.
[13] University of Iowa College of Education, "Oakdale Prison Community Choir," YouTube.
[14] Cohen, "Harmony within the Walls," 48.
[15] "About Us," Oakdale Community Choir.
[16] "Home," Voices of Hope, accessed August 12, 2024, https://www.wearevoicesofhope.org/about.

search to find a new director.[17] "Voices of Hope is a choir of many who sing as one and treat each other as family! Without this choir, I would not have been able to do my time this easily,"[18] remarks one singer. Weber conducts rehearsals every Sunday afternoon at the prison, where a new choir programme begins every 12 weeks, each one ending with a one-hour long concert in the prison gymnasium.[19] Similar to Cohen's Oakdale Community Choir, the VOH also utilises an ensemble make-up that includes inmates and volunteer community singers.[20] The stated mission of VOH is "to provide accessible music-making opportunities within justice-impacted populations that foster individual growth and bridge unlikely communities through song."[21] In 2020, VOH formed a second choir at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Stillwater that consisted of 15 incarcerated men.[22] The Coronavirus pandemic caused the choirs to be put on hold and adopt socially-distanced programming, and in January 2023 the groups returned to regular scheduled programming.[23]

The three other participating choirs (UBUNTU Men's Chorus, KUJI Men's Chorus and HOPE thru Harmony Women's Choir) were all founded by Catherine Roma, a choral director, educator and activist. *Ubuntu*, meaning "I am who I am in community — I exist in relationship," is a Zulu word that encompasses the relationships and care that

[17] Challenge Incarceration Program – Shakopee, *Minnesota Department of Corrections*, https://mn.gov/doc/facilities/cip-at-togo-willow-river-shakopee/shakopee/ and Rick Nelson, "With Voices of Hope, one choir director makes music behind bars," *The Minnesota Star Tribune,* July 27, 2018, https://www.startribune.com/with-voices-of-hope-one-choir-director-makes-music-behind-bars/489381791.
[18] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 24.
[19] Nelson, "With Voices of Hope."
[20] Amanda Weber, "The power of incarcerated voices to transform community: Research from a women's prison choir," *The Choral Journal* 61, no. 10 (2018): 54. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27035142.
[21] "Who we are," Voices of Hope, accessed August 12, 2024, "https://www.wearevoicesofhope.org/about.
[22] "Who we are," Voices of Hope.
[23] "Who we are," Voices of Hope.

members of the UBUNTU Men's Chorus strive to show each other.[24] UBUNTU was founded in 2012 and operates out of the Madison Correctional Institution, a minimum and medium security prison in London, Ohio,[25] Ubuntu, as one chorister explains, is "not just the name of the choir, it is the spirit in which we sing."[26] HOPE thru Harmony Women's Choir was established in 2014,[27] consisting of both insiders and outsiders operating out of multi-level security Dayton Correctional facility.[28] In 2016, Roma founded the KUJI Men's Chorus, whose name is short for *Kujichagulia*, the second principle of Kwanzaa, meaning self-determination.[29] The choir is based in a combination close/minimum custody facility in Marion, North Carolina.[30]

Letters from Incarcerated Choir Members

Following the collaboration between Heartbeat Opera and volunteer prison choir singers, Heartbeat company members sent letters back to the participating prison choirs, requesting feedback regarding the project.[31] The resulting responses provided an opportunity to learn about the incarcerated singers and their perspectives, which are

[24] "UBUNTU Men's Chorus presents Begin to Love," *WYSO*, July 26, 2016, https://www.wyso.org/show/excursions/2016-07-26/ubuntu-mens-chorus-presents-begin-to-love.
[25] Steve McQueen, "Madison men's choir makes music through prison walls," *WYSO*, Jan 10, 2016, https://www.wyso.org/arts-culture/2016-01-10/madison-mens-choir-makes-music-through-prison-walls.
[26] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 28 and Kristy Zurbrick, "New wardens hired at London and Madison correctional institutions," *Colombus Messenger*, April 12, 2023, https://www.columbusmessenger.com/new-wardens-hired-at-london-and-madison-correctional-institutions.html.
[27] Catherine Roma, "Building Choral Communities Behind Prison Walls," GALA Choruses, Last modified December 6, 2023, https://galachoruses.org/resource/building-choral-communities-behind-prison-walls/.
[28] Meredith Moss, "Creating harmony: Yellow Springs woman leads World House Choir," *Dayton Daily News*, August 29, 2018, https://www.daytondailynews.com/events/concerts/creating-harmony-yellow-springs-woman-leads-world-house-choir/WiBpdrzBEN4GMyN0Zve3WK/.
[29] Roma, "Building choral communities," and Moss, "Creating Harmony."
[30] Marion Correctional Institution, *Department of Adult Corrections*, https://www.dac.nc.gov/divisions-and-sections/institutions/prison-facilities/marion-correctional-institution.
[31] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera.

immensely helpful in making critical connections to larger themes. The five questions posed to inmates were:

1. What does *Fidelio*/this story/project mean to you?
2. What was it like to learn the music? The German?
3. What has surprised you about working on this material?
4. How does it feel to sing this music in the context of the story?
5. What would you like us to know about you? Your choir?

A critical analysis of these letters involves not only examining the written reflections but also paying attention to the circumstances in which these letters were solicited, and considering any shortcomings in the execution of this activity. The number of incarcerated singers in this production was over 100, and yet, only 25 letters were published. One wonders immediately about the response rate. Heartbeat Opera does not reveal how many letters they received, and whether it was more than the 25 that they published. Inmates were asked to respond to a set of five questions posed by the Heartbeat team, and while some individuals provided answers to each question, many did not. Instead, some answered just one or two of the questions or none at all; some opted to write freely about their thoughts and reflections from the project; and one inmate even wrote a poem.

Had the questions been different, or if inmates were asked to write freely, would there have been a better or worse response rate? The current response rate of inmate letters is less than 25%, which is objectively low. While the questions read rather neutrally on the surface, the absence of an explicit question or opportunity to give feedback about both the positive and negative aspects could have made singers feel

uncomfortable to share anything that was not praise. The questions could unintentionally have been leading and biased favourably towards Heartbeat Opera. While requesting feedback is admirable, it is well worth noting that none of these questions invited criticism or presented an opportunity for inmates to express any concerns, challenges, and critiques beyond purely musical ones.

There may have been more responses from singers, but only 25 were published. What influenced the selection of these particular responses for publication? Were some letters not detailed enough, or was their writing illegible? Perhaps the content of some letters was not to the liking of the Heartbeat team, or they did in fact voice criticism. This introduces the question of power dynamics within the production. Participants might have felt pressured to write only positive things about their experience because they did not want to appear ungrateful for the opportunity, or perhaps worse, feared a loss of musical opportunities in prison. Heartbeat Opera also had the final say in what got published, acting as a filter between the letters and the public. The implicit power dynamics, unintentionally biased questions and low number of published letters are all important factors to consider when reading and analyzing the feedback. Despite these shortcomings, I do not believe that Heartbeat Opera was intentionally trying to solicit certain answers from inmates to get praise. I believe they reached out to inmates in good faith and wanted to have these reflections from inmates to humanise them. But an analysis of the letters needs to proceed with the understanding that the perspective offered in the collection of letters may be limited in certain ways.

What these letters do give us a sense of is how inmates responded and related to *Fidelio.* In response to the first question, one chorister replied, "*Fidelio* presents a chance

for prison to be experienced in a new way for both people in free society and those of us that are incarcerated. We (people incarcerated) know the ins and outs of prison from our perspective, but not from the perspective of a loved one. At least not in the way *Fidelio* depicts."[32] When asked about the significance of participating in this production, another choir member expresses that "*Fidelio* speak[s] to the humanity and hope that exists within the walls of prison and for the love[d] ones waiting on the outside."[33] Through their first-hand testimonies, I will present and explore the various benefits that participating in this project produced, focusing on self-esteem and self-image (labelling).

Self-Esteem and Labelling

Several themes emerged from the collections of letters from the inmates that align particularly well with concepts of self-esteem and labelling from the field of criminology. While Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a framework involving flexibility and breadth of application, it over-simplifies well-being and motivation, through three pillars of autonomy, relatedness and competence.[34] Instead, I will be analysing these letters through the lenses of self-esteem and labelling, two concepts that are related to each other, and are apparent in several of the reflections. Those with low self-esteem may be more prone to believe the negative labels assigned to them. Conversely, someone with a high level of self-esteem may not give in so easily to such labelling from others.

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[32] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 7.
[33] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 2.
[34] Richard M. Ryan, and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *The American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68.

What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is defined by the amount of value that people place on themselves, where those with higher self-esteem generally favour themselves, and those with low self-esteem generally do not.[35] As such, self-esteem comes from perception, and not reality, as one must, for example, believe that one is valuable in order to have high self-esteem.[36] In Carrie Oser's 2006 study, 146 inmates were given a self-administered survey to measure levels of self-esteem, and results showed that the relationship between low self-esteem and crime was experienced by 134 out of the 146 participants.[37] On the contrary, there is another body of literature which suggests that high levels of self-esteem are linked to criminal behaviour.[38] Those with inflated egos may commit crimes without contrition or may present themselves in a way that expresses high self-esteem as a defence mechanism for actually having low self-esteem.[39] These conflicting opinions and difficulties in understanding self-esteem's relationship to criminal behaviour suggest that there should be a more nuanced approach to better grasp the connection between these two ideas. Christopher Mruk proposes a different way to look at self-esteem, in which "self-esteem is the lived status of one's competence in dealing with the challenges of living in a worthy way over time".[40] Scholars like Mary Cohen also support this perspective, criticizing the one-dimensional use of the term, especially when used to

[35] Roy Baumeister et al., "Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success, Happiness, or Healthier Lifestyles?" *Psychological Science in the Public Interes*t 4, no. 1 (2003): 2. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062291.
[36] Baumeister et al., "High Self-Esteem," 2.
[37] Oser, "Criminal Offending–Self-Esteem Nexus," 352-359.
[38] Oser, "Criminal Offending Self-Esteem Nexus,", 344.
[39] Roy Baumeister, Laura Smart and Joseph Boden, "Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: the dark side of high self-esteem," Psychology Review 103, no 1 (1996): 5-33, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.103.1.5.
[40] Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem Research, Theory, and Practice: Toward a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem*, 3rd ed. (Springer Publications, 2006), 28.

describe the incarcerated population.[41] Self-esteem, as Mruk defines it, "emerges in the space created by competence and worthiness as they stand in relationship to each other over time."[42]

The Importance of Self-Esteem

Those participating in prison choirs come together on a regular basis to sing new music, and learn from the director and their peers. Several participants expressed that learning the music and German text in *Fidelio* was a challenge, and some thought that they could not successfully learn and sing the music. Singer J. Smith remarked that the experience was "beautiful and challenging," and that despite not being a fan of German initially, this project helped them appreciate the "beauty and power of the language."[43] Marcellus Bibbs writes that: "the music was difficult at first because I didn't understand the language or the pronunciation of the words. Once the German language became known to me it was easy and relaxing to sing the lyrics."[44] Despite the challenge and what might have been thought of initially as a far-fetched goal, singers invested the time and effort, and successfully achieved the goal that they set out for themselves.

The Prisoner's Chorus was a success in the end, and both participants and company members were very proud of this endeavour. Choristers showed that they could overcome challenges and learn new music in a foreign language, working together to contribute to a successful opera production. Marcelus Bibbs shared, "if I would have to name something as being surprising, it would be the fact that I was able to accomplish

[41] Cohen, "Harmony within the Walls," 47.
[42] Mruk, *Self-Esteem Research*, 30.
[43] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 2.
[44] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 8.

it."[45] Mruk explains that competent behaviour is associated with positive feelings and incompetent behaviour results in negative feelings.[46] For Connie Ramirez, this opportunity has taught her that she can do the things that she sets her mind to: "I was never able to give myself very much credit for doing things out of my comfort zone but it's things like this that show me that I can do anything I set my mind to do. This choir has become my family, and I have great love for each and every one of them."[47]

For those who had been skeptical at first, this experience provided an opportunity to rise to the challenge. One individual remarked that, "I thought we would never get it, but it began happening and it felt so wonderful. I caught myself in the prison after rehearsals singing my part aloud and guys looked at me. I guess they may have thought I was losing it after almost 30 years straight in prison. But be assured I'm still all there in my mind."[48] Once choristers learned the music, some experienced a newfound sense of confidence and self-awareness that they didn't know existed.[49] These testimonies above all show the positive ways that feeling competent and capable can help one's self-esteem and instill a sense of confidence.

Worthiness is defined by Mruk as "far more than a mere outcome because [it] concerns the meaning of our actions. Instead, worthiness is the value dimension of self-esteem and ranges from low to high."[50] As discussed above, some participants shared what being part of a choir and contributing to the *Fidelio* project meant to them, and felt that they were finally able to contribute something good to society after committing a

[45] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 8.
[46] Mruk, *Self-Esteem Research*.
[47] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 13.
[48] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 4-5.
[49] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 30.
[50] Mruk, *Self-Esteem Research*, 29.

crime. One inmate shared, "our voices (The Voices of Hope) reaching the stage in NYC… has opened the minds and hearts of inmates to the power of music, and guests of the theatre to the existence of our voices!"[51] Singing together in this project helped participants reflect on the impact of what they were doing, not just for themselves, but for the wider audience outside prison walls.

What is Labelling Theory?

Choral singing can offer participants a chance to redefine how they perceive themselves. How we label those who are like or unlike us can play a significant role in our perceptions of ourselves and the people around us. As both a sociological and criminological theory, Labelling Theory states that the negative reaction that society shows towards an individual's behaviour can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading that individual to turn towards deviance and crime.[52] This theory is often attributed to Frank Tannenbaum, who believed that interactions between individuals in communities caused people to learn crime, and that being formally labelled a criminal by the justice system is one of the most powerful lessons that an offender would experience.[53] In the 1960s, Labelling Theory received its formal name, and was heavily influenced by Howard Becker,[54] who explained that different things are viewed as deviant by those in different groups, and that when an individual's deviant acts cause them to be labelled as a criminal by society, they may accept that label, thus resulting in a self-fulfilling

[51] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 3.
[52] Kimberly Ortiz-Hartman, *Principles of Sociology: Societal Issues and Behaviour*, 1st ed, (Salem Press, 2018), 101.
[53] Ortiz-Hartman, *Principles of Sociology*, 102.
[54] Ortiz-Hartman, *Principles of Sociology*, 102.

prophecy.[55] Becker explains that while social groups may mark certain behaviours as deviant, it is not a crime until a specialised body like the police define it as such.[56] Labelling is thought to increase deviance "by negatively impacting an individual's self-conception…[and] blocking access to conventional opportunities."[57]

The Importance of Labelling

In a study on labels and criminality, Jón Gunnar Bernberg observes that through the "direct impact of official labeling on associating with deviant others, there is also the probability that the official label will lead indirectly to increased participation in deviant groups through exclusion from conventional peer groups."[58] His research group sought to explore the impact that labelling had on later re-offending.[59] Findings from the study supported the hypothesis that official labelling affects involvement in delinquency, causing an increase in criminal involvement.[60] Those who have committed an offense and are sent to prison receive the label of criminal, offender, prisoner, villain, etc. imposed on them by their peers, the wider community, and the justice system. The labels that the individual has come to know about themselves (mother, father, husband, wife, teacher etc.) are supplanted by the "criminal" label, which may become their "master status," a label that is viewed as more important than all other parts of that person.[61]

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[55] Becker, *Outsiders*, 9-10.
[56] Becker, *Outsiders,* 1.
[57] Ortiz-Hartman, *Principles of Sociology*, 101.
[58] Jón Gunnar Bernberg, Marvin D Krohn, and Craig J Rivera, "Official Labeling, Criminal Embeddedness, and Subsequent Delinquency: A Longitudinal Test of Labeling Theory," *The Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 43, no. 1 (2006): 70, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427805280068.
[59] Bernberg et al., "Official Labeling," 81.
[60] Bernberg et al., "Official Labeling," 81.
[61] Becker, *Outsiders*, 32-34.

Through opportunities to sing and collaborate with others to contribute something positive, participants may experience a better perception of themselves. One possibility to help inmates feel whole again is to offer programmes in prisons for inmates to gain new skills and knowledge, and express themselves in a non-violent way. Many participants mentioned how delighted they were at the prospect of sharing something positive with others. "There's always bad it seems in the news coming from prisons," Wallen writes, "I'm so amazed at how we are going to be seen for good".[62] Further, an anonymous choir member shares that: "gradually, the gravity of what I was doing settled in, it was an honor that someone wanted us to be a part of not just their opera but their careers and lives. Having been in prison for over 20 years, I have not had a place in the free world, and this has been an opportunity for me to share something truly positive with my friends and family."[63]

Below are a few short remarks that highlight how choral singing can help inmates see themselves as more than their criminal status, and instead, as a whole person:

> The creativity I possess is still within me, prison has not taken away my hope. Ubuntu is a motley crew of men trying to rise above their situation.[64]
>
> I'm a people person, energetic, easy to talk to and eager to learn new things. My choir is a group of men who I've grown to know as good men.[65]
>
> My choir is an amazing sisterhood that we can lean on or trust upon… just because we are incarcerated for months, years, or never going home, we need to keep hope and faith alive in all of us because we are humans who make mistakes.[66]

[62] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 6.
[63] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 10.
[64] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 2.
[65] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 8.
[66] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 16.

"In the choir, you're not viewed as an offender, you're viewed as a person",[67] remarks one Oakdale Community Choir chorister. Similarly, former warden Jim Mckinney at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center has observed during weekly choir rehearsals "on a Tuesday night, nobody thinks they're in prison".[68] Another incarcerated Oakdale choir member explains that "the gang life - that's not who you are. But when you come to a camp like this and see the choir and see how open it is, you start to feel human again."[69] These testimonies show that group singing can build one's identity beyond a criminal master status.

The incarcerated singers not only worked together with the Heartbeat Team, but also with 70 outside singers to create the Prisoner's Chorus. While no further information is provided about what working with outside singers entailed, many of the participating choirs operate on a half-in-half-out model, in which volunteer singers from the outside come into prisons and sing together with inmates. By providing opportunities for inmates to have positive social interactions with both their incarcerated peers and those outside of the prison system, choir becomes a space to learn, unlearn and build community. Stigma and negative labelling from mainstream society is one of the most listed obstacles that ex-prisoners mention when they discuss reintegration and desistance from crime.[70] To be seen as a whole person, even just for a little while, can be an important part of this process. If we only see those behind bars as offenders, and do not give them a chance to

[67] Greetings from Iowa, "The Oakdale Community Choir," YouTube video, 00:19, December 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IiZpHowE9pU.
[68] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 06:22.
[69] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 7:09.
[70] Shadd Maruna, John A. Humphrey, and Peter Cordella, "Reintegration as a Right and the Rites of Reintegration: A Comparative Review of De-Stigmatization Practices," *Effective Interventions in the Lives of Criminal Offenders*, 121, Springer New York, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-8930-6_7.

improve and make a better name for themselves, then we too will suffer from living in societies with ever higher rates of recidivism.

Reintegration

Participation in group singing programmes has the potential to aid in the reintegration of ex-offenders upon their release from the prison system. Reintegration is a multi-faceted and complex process, and its success is dependent on several factors. Joe Graffam et al. argue that "the cumulative impact of barriers that ex-offenders face upon their release can make it virtually impossible to resume a normal life."[71] Multiple studies reveal that social connections, employment, training support and rehabilitation are all critical factors to a successful (or unsuccessful) reintegration. Some of these can be realized through participation in group singing, especially social connections, skill training and rehabilitation. Choirs offer a place for individuals to learn music and sing together, working towards a common goal. Participants must learn to listen to themselves, their peers, and directors to successfully perform the music as a group. In the case of prison choirs, having outside volunteer singers join the group allows for inmates to make positive connections with those on the other side of prison walls. Opportunities to work and connect with others helps participants develop better interpersonal skills and personal attributes such as teamwork, trust, problem-solving and communication. These opportunities and skills are not only important for the workplace but can also aid in the

[71] Joe Graffam, Alison Shinkfield, Barbara Lavelle, and Wenda McPherson, "Variables Affecting Successful Reintegration as Perceived by Offenders and Professionals," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 40, no. 1–2 (2004): 152, https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v40n01_08.

rehabilitation of offenders. Without the ability to listen, trust and communicate, rehabilitation may be hindered.

Mary Cohen explains that the role of music educators goes far beyond just the sonic elements of music, and that if only those sonic dimensions of music-making are paid attention to, the potential to foster and nurture relationships, self and social awareness may be impeded.[72] Helping inmates build a better relationship with themselves and those around them is, in my opinion, a good first step towards a successful reintegration. It is an unfortunate fact that Anglo-American societies have done an especially poor job at reintegrating and re-accepting those who have just come out of prison.[73] Former warden Jim Mckinney explains that: "We kind of have this idea that if they're in prison, they get out, they're going to go off into some far-off land. That's not true. They're going to live next door to somebody and that somebody might be you, it might be me."[74] Mckinney's comments regarding reintegration ring true, even if greater society does not want to accept newly released inmates. In addition to the physical resettlement back into society after being incarcerated, however, there is the social element of moral inclusion.[75] Shadd Maruna argues that more should be done to help those newly released from prison to better reintegrate into society, and that it starts with ritualising the reintegration process.[76] Maruna explains that the four pillars of successful reintegration include practices that are: symbolic and emotive, repeated as necessary, involve community, and focus on challenge and achievement.

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[72] Cohen, "Harmony within the Walls," 48.
[73] Maruna, Shadd. "Reentry as a Rite of Passage." *Punishment & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 3–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474510385641, 4.
[74] Greetings from Iowa, "The Oakdale Community Choir," 5:24.
[75] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 4.
[76] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 5.

Symbolic and Emotive Rituals

Maruna uses bonding exercises experienced by those participating in Alcoholics Anonymous and restorative justice ceremonies to explain the importance of a symbolic and emotive ritual.[77] Choir can also be a place of emotional reflection, symbolism, healing and bonding amongst participants. Anthony Rhodd's story of spiritual growth and healing through choral singing after being locked away in solitary confinement is a testament to the potential impact and influence of music. Rhodd shares:

> After a year in solitary confinement, I distrusted the atmosphere of acceptance the choir seemed to exude, yet I was drawn by it. I held back tears as I cautiously sang, remembering my mountain. I did not know these people; they did not know me. They could not have known that I had spent the last year completely isolated; my voice faded from disuse. I tried to hide my bandages and prayed no one would notice. As we sang the lyrics, "May you walk in beauty in a sacred way", the power of the song overcame me. I breathed in, deeply. I stopped singing and focused on the voices and piano. Exhaling, I found renewed energy that I had not felt since I was a child, since before solitary confinement.[78]

After his brother, Lee, passed away in 2022, Rhodd gathered in a sweat lodge with other Indigenous brothers for a pipe ceremony; when they started singing, he noticed that it reminded him a lot of being in the Oakdale choir, who also sang together in a circle.[79] For Rhodd, the choir was an accepting community that helped him overcome difficulties socialising with others after solitary confinement, and also helped him reconnect with his childhood and Indigenous heritage.

Catherine Roma explains that some of her "most profound musical experiences have happened inside prison walls."[80] Observations by inmates who have participated in

[77] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 15.
[78] Anthony R. Rhodd and Mary L. Cohen, "Finding mountains with music: Growth and spiritual transcendence in a U.S. prison," *Religions*, no. 11 (2022): 5, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111012.
[79] Rhodd and Cohen, "Finding mountains with music," 6.
[80] Roma, "Building choral communities."

a prison choir show the depth of their appreciation and understanding for such programmes. As previously discussed, many of the inmates who participated in the *Fidelio* production also wrote letters that answered some set questions. One of the questions asked, "What would you like audiences to know about you? Your choir?"[81] Many responses from singers explained how grateful they were for the opportunities to sing, and many praised their fellow choir peers.[82] One singer explains that this experience unlocked a lot of emotions,[83] and that "as someone who has been buried and forgotten in this system, it offers light to one of the positive programs in the penal system, and brings us to consciousness for people who might never think of us otherwise."[84]

Repeated as necessary

Maruna's second pillar, "repeated as necessary," constitutes an essential dimension to reintegration. As he argues, "a one-off ritual welcoming a former outcast to society — that is not followed up and sustained with similar rituals in the future — will be unlikely to support the long-term processes of desistance and reintegration."[85] While the *Fidelio* production was a singular event, many prison choirs have the opportunity to continue singing together in weekly rehearsals and end-of-year concerts, and are thus able to continue with this activity. As mentioned earlier, most of the six prison choirs from *Fidelio* are still up and running,[86] and several other prison choirs established since continue to bring group singing to the incarcerated. There are several choral programmes,

[81] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera.
[82] Examples of this can be found under the "Why does Labelling Theory Matter?" section.
[83] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 26.
[84] "Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 26.
[85] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 17.
[86] The Oakdale Community choir is no longer running.

however, that are established in the short term for the purpose of conducting a study. A researcher may implement multi-week programmes inside prisons to study some aspect of choral singing in spaces of detention, but these programmes are not long-term commitments. This raises an important question: are the long-term benefits associated with these programmes sustained? In other words, once the programme or study has concluded, will the effects of the programme turn into lasting and meaningful change?

Community Involvement

Maruna stresses the importance of involving community members to play a part in reintegration rituals, explaining that rituals affect not only the participants, but also the greater audience around them.[87] There is a tendency for the non-incarcerated to forget that most inmates will, in fact, return back to society after serving their sentences, living side-by-side once again with those on the outside. Those on the inside may feel nervous about going back into greater society because of a lack of interaction with outsiders, fear of judgement, and further labelling. The Oakdale Community Choir utilises a few strategies that I believe may help to reduce these apprehensions and assist in fostering a better sense of understanding between those on the inside and outside.

Cohen's choir is made up of half inside singers as well as half outside volunteer singers.[88] The Oakdale choir engages in the practice of welcoming and hospitality,[89] encouraging members to create a community of caring.[90] For some inmates, the ritual of choir rehearsal with outside singers has become their weekly visit, after going without

[87] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 17.
[88] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 00:14
[89] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 00:14.
[90] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 3:48.

them for several years.[91] The community of caring that Cohen writes about is exemplified in this choir and outside volunteer singers have also expressed praise for the programme. As one chorister remarks: "I first came in 2009 when Dr. Mary Cohen began the Oakdale Community Choir. I learned so much by coming about the struggles that people go through."[92] By involving community members in these choir rehearsals, inmates not only get a chance to interact with those on the outside, but non-incarcerated volunteers can have a chance to understand and challenge the ways in which the justice system currently operates, while also breaking stereotypes that they may have held about inmates and prison.

In 2010, Catherine Roma's UMOJA prison choir also consisted of inside and outside members, and the outside singers shared their experiences of working together with the prison choir:

> This was one of the most spiritually inspired experiences … to be standing next to men that society has deemed "unworthy," "bad people," and to hear the hair raising, angelic, voices singing next to me brought tears of joy to my eyes. The bond was incredible, and I will forever be grateful for the experience.[93]
>
> There is a real sense of transcendence when making music with people who are not free. You look at the faces of these men and wonder how they got here—if they will ever get out.[94]
>
> It was moving to see incarcerated men in a setting so unlike what you see in the media. Expressive, passionate, creative. It was also heartbreaking.[95]

The KUJI Chorus, another prison choir founded by Roma, did a production of *Hamilton* and performed four sold-out shows to 700 outside guests.[96] One guest remarked:

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[91] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 4:35.
[92] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 3:55.
[93] Roma, "Building choral communities."
[94] Roma, "Building choral communities."
[95] Roma, "Building choral communities."
[96] Roma, "Building choral communities."

> This was my first experience inside a prison. The aggressive inertness of that vast building, surrounded by chain link and barbed wire, staffed by impassive personnel was overwhelming to me at times. The men in the cast soared out of there on the wings of the stories of the founding fathers and mothers. I am forever changed and grateful.[97]

Words like "grateful," "change," and "moving" are just some of the terms present in these reflections. These testimonies show how even non-incarcerated individuals have gained something meaningful through participating in prison choir activities, whether that be as a volunteer singer or an audience member. By involving and inviting outside members of society to activities such as these, they become active participants in the reintegration rituals that Maruna recommends. Some choristers shared how they felt about being a part of something bigger than themselves, through collaboration with each other and community members. One singer shares delight that their voices were heard in New York City, and that this production "has opened the minds and hearts of inmates to the power of music, and guests of the theatre to the existence of our voices".[98]

Focus on Challenge and Achievement

Experiencing incarceration is a challenge in its own right; however, it is certainly not an accomplishment.[99] Maruna states that rituals that incorporate challenge and achievement might be "designed to recognise a person's efforts to 'make good' after committing an offense."[100] Even while in prison, inmates who volunteer their time to create good contribute to the rituals of achievement.[101] One inside singer from the Oakdale Community Choir reflects on his own journey, sharing: "I could either do the rest of my

[97] Roma, "Building choral communities."
[98] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 3.
[99] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," page 19.
[100] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," page 19.
[101] Maruna, "Reentry as a Rite of Passage," 19.

life in lockup and behind a cell and as an animal, or I could attempt to try and get my mind right… it allowed me to be a part of something good that was connected with the outside but also connected with the inside."[102] Most of what we hear in the media about prisons is negative and, as a result, giving inmates opportunities to do good may help to create positive change in those individuals. As mentioned before, non-musical skills that inmates gain by participating in a choir include teamwork, listening, trust, goal setting and motivation. Coming together to learn and sing, making positive social bonds, reflecting on oneself, actively listening and understanding are all examples of "making good."

After *Fidelio*: An Impact Story

I have often wondered where some of these incarcerated singers are today. Some of them may still be behind bars while others may have been released. Of the ones who were released, some may have gone back into detention, while others may have thrived. Michael Blakk Powell was once an inmate at the Marion Correctional Institution in Ohio, and a member of the KUJI Men's Chorus, led by Catherine Roma. Powell was one of the singers who participated in the Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*, and despite initial apprehensions, he realized that the words he was singing in *O Welche Lust* were in fact reflective of his own life, sharing that the choirs "were singing about our own lives in a way. I was fully on board after I understood what I was doing."[103]

[102] Greetings from Iowa, "Oakdale Community Choir," 6:44.
[103] Craig Byrd, "Michael Blakk Powell is Breathing Free", Cultural Attaché, February 9, 2021, https://culturalattache.co/2021/02/09/michael-blakk-powell-is-breathing-free/.

Since his release in 2020, Powell has worked full time at a non-profit organization called Healing Broken Circles, where he is the Director of Creative and Youth Programming.[104] Powell's role involves creating and implementing educational, artistic and transformative opportunities for youth. Healing Broken Circles aims to "provide opportunities to heal, learn and thrive for those touched by the justice system."[105] In response to how he is staying humble and focused after release, Powell shares that:

> If you bumped into me on the street, you would never guess I spent almost 14 years in prison. The biggest thing is I am never ever going back to prison. I know I never want to be there again. I grew up there from 18-32. I still talk to my guys doing time now. They look up to me. It's my responsibility to show them something different. These are people who steered me away from gangs and drugs in prison. I want to do that justice. I don't want all their efforts to be in vain.[106]

Powell's reflection speaks to the responsibility and growth that he has experienced throughout his time in prison and after release. He is also a poet, rapper and actor. As a rapper, Powell (stage name Blakk Sun) uses Hip Hop and Rap to showcase the reality of street culture, and he founded the Reentry Music Group, which signs artists after serving their sentences, to "change the narrative of the urban experience and provide music that inspires positive growth."[107] This represents only one positive impact account of a former prison choir participant. While assessing the wider impact of Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* begins to move out of reach without further fieldwork, this thesis has demonstrated what can be gained from extant sources currently available.

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[104] Canvas Rebel, "Meet Michael Powell," January 18, 2024, https://canvasrebel.com/meet-michael-powell/.
[105] Canvas Rebel, "Meet Michael Powell."
[106] Byrd, "Michael Blakk Powell."
[107] Seth Ferranti, "Blakk Sun by Shaun Leflore," *Gorilla Convict*, February 17, 2022, https://www.gorillaconvict.com/2022/02/blakk-sun-prison-story/.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

> Freely to breathe again!
> I am about to re-enter the world
> after spending the last 17 years in
> the grave. To lift myself up out of
> the dungeon of my own creation
> into fresh open air, I feel like
> I'm really living the words.
> Up here alone is life, never the
> dungeon to return![1]

The above quote comes from Marc Showalter, an incarcerated singer who sang in the *Fidelio* production with Heartbeat Opera. His poetic response to the question, "What has this [production] meant to you?" highlights not only the impact of group singing programmes in prisons but also speaks to its capacity to create and hold onto hope, even in difficult circumstances. My thesis is an exploration of the importance and impact that music has in spaces outside the concert hall. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which choral singing programmes in prisons help to create meaningful change inside and outside prison walls. Today, there are multiple music programmes and projects that exist in prisons, covering a wide range of genres and activities. Initiatives such as these have even started to make their way into larger organisations. Despite the seemingly growing number of prison-music programmes, there is little academic scholarship published on the subject. My thesis thus addresses this gap in the literature, in part to contribute to the field of music programming in prisons, and in part, because I analyze a rare public performance that combines incarcerated and non-incarcerated performers.

[1] Letters from incarcerated singers", Heartbeat Opera, 11.

Chapter two introduced the case study of my thesis—Heartbeat Opera company's modern rendition of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*. The company is known for creating intriguing and modern renditions of canonic operas, as well as producing completely new works. In the case of *Fidelio*, Heartbeat Opera created a work that reflected and responded to the current state of race and mass incarceration in twenty-first century America. The production featured significant changes in the libretto, plot, cast, set design and music. The single most important change to the opera is that its central theme—freedom— is not achieved. Instead, Stan is shot, there is no reunification of a happy couple, and there is certainly no happy ending. What is the audience to make of a production that showcases inmates via video in Beethoven's Prisoner's Chorus, singing about freedom, only to have that freedom be denied? I argue that this adaptation of Beethoven's opera functions as a direct and sharp criticism of racial issues and mass incarceration in America today.

In chapter three, I turned to self-identity, labels, and self-esteem. Letters from incarcerated singers that participated in the *Fidelio* production are shared and examined in the context of these notions. To have a better understanding of concepts such as self-esteem and labels, I introduce and define these concepts, situating them in the context of sociology and criminology. They are then explained in relation to group singing experiences in prison. Through letters written by the incarcerated singers, I explored how participating in group singing activities has helped singers improve their own self-esteem and self-identity through team building, working through challenges, achieving goals, finding confidence and feeling valued. These ideas go above and beyond the purely sonic components of music, and instead, move into the territory of reintegration. In this section,

I referred to Shadd Maruna's four pillars of successful reintegration. Maruna suggests that reintegration rituals are to be symbolic and emotive, repeated as necessary, involve community and focus on challenge and achievement if they are to be of lasting help to those returning back to society.

While my research focuses on music programming for the benefit of incarcerated individuals, I recognise that there have also been successful attempts to use music as a weapon or a way to inflict harm on those in detention. Additionally, music programmes that have been implemented with the intention of doing good may also have unintentional negative consequences. In the case of the *Fidelio* project with Heartbeat Opera, there may have been a lack of appropriate reciprocity between inmates and the company, or perhaps incarcerated singers were not able to truly express themselves through the letters solicited from them at the end of the production. The success of prison choir programmes may be hindered by a lack of adequate supervisory staff, cancellations and absences by the institution without warning, and low or inconsistent attendance from participants.[2] The presence of individuals with narcissistic personalities and inflated egos, as well as the potential lack of authenticity in conversations between inmates and volunteer singers, also constitute some of the unintended or unforeseen circumstances arising out of prison choir participation.[3]

There are a handful of academic sources from different scholars about the topic of singing and choral programmes in prisons, and they are mostly based in the United States. For this thesis, I relied on the work of Mary Cohen to help guide me, as she has published several articles about her work with her own choir, the Oakdale Community

[2] Silber, "Bars behind bars," 257.
[3] Cohen, "Harmony within the walls," 51-52.

choir. Her work also drew connections between choral singing in prisons and larger concepts such as well-being, connection, worthiness, competence and reintegration. In Canada, there is a sore lack of publicly available information about music programmes in prisons, and even less about prison choirs. To this day, the only prison choir in Canada with anything published online is the New Beginnings Choir, a performing arts programme that operates out of the Edmonton Institution for Women.[4] This choir was founded by Eva Bostrand, and meets weekly to rehearse songs together, occasionally performing outside the institution as well.[5] Besides their website page and a couple of performance videos on YouTube, however, there is no other information on the group. It remains unclear whether this lack of information about this topic in Canada is due to a lack of programmes, projects and initiatives, or due to a lack of media representation.

Looking Towards the Future

At the academic level, I would like there to be more attention paid to this under-studied field, and especially to creating lasting music programmes in prisons. Understanding how music relates to larger concepts such as identity and self-esteem help us to better understand its importance and practice in all spaces, for all people. While creating pilot and fixed-week studies to expose inmates to music may give them the initial opportunity to interact with music, I believe that long-term programmes are more beneficial to create sustainable and positive change. Of course, the possibility of offering programmes such as these is dependent on budget. I had hoped that my work could contribute something

[4] "EIFW Performing Arts Programs," Sing for Life, accessed March 7, 2025, at https://singforlife.ca/wp/eifw-performing-arts-programs/.
[5] "EIFW Performing Arts Programs," Sing for Life.

that drew equally from both the fields of musicology and criminology. Much of the existing literature pulls heavily from one side or the other, but not both, and I think it is important to try and bridge this gap. Ultimately, this allows for a better understanding about the ways in which music can be a vessel for positive change. It also highlights the urgent need to bring music outside of the concert hall and into spaces where vulnerable populations may need it most.

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