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FEATURE ARTICLES

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE KOLIN: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION IN THE CHORAL ARTS

By / Par Cameron Bennett



Cameron Bennett

Cameron Bennett (he/him) Originally from St. John's, Newfoundland, Cameron Bennett recently moved to Halifax after completing his Bachelor of Music (Honours) in Musicology from Memorial University of Newfoundland, where he sang with the Quintessential Vocal Ensemble, where he also served as Operations Manager, the MUN Chamber Choir, and the St. John's Gay Men's Chorus. Cameron is also a trained clarinetist and pianist, having completed Royal Conservatory of Music examinations in both instruments, and has performed with the Newfoundland Youth Symphony Orchestra, the MUN Wind Ensemble, and as a part of the New York Summer Music Festival at SUNY Oneonta. Currently, Cameron sings with the Halifax Camerata Singers and Galileo Baroque Choir, and is pursuing a Master of Arts in Musicology at Dalhousie, where his thesis research focuses on Dolly Parton.

Diane Kolin is a French-born Canadian singer, music educator, and voice teacher. She is currently finishing her PhD at York University, where her research focuses on accessibility and disability in the arts. Diane is also a member of the Choral Canada Student Chapter Executive Committee and sits on the Board of Directors of Choral Canada. Recently, I sat down with Diane to chat about her research and learn more about her work.

CB: To begin, could you introduce yourself and share what led you to pursue doctoral research in music?

DK: My name is Diane Kolin. I am a French-born Canadian singer, a music educator, and a voice teacher. Along with my voice studies in France, I found an interest in music history and musicology. I have always loved to explore what happens to a composer or a musician behind the scenes of their music. This led me to become a musicology researcher. I completed my MA in Musicology at York University in Toronto in 2021 and am now in the process of finishing my PhD at the same university.

CB: What inspired your focus on accessibility and disability in the arts, particularly in music education and performance?

DK: First, I live with a disability. I am a wheelchair-user with a progressive neurological condition. It means that I learned to sing while I was still standing, and I had to adapt my singing practices to my changing body, re-learning how to breathe while using crutches, and later, sitting in a wheelchair. Since I am a musicologist, I looked at examples of artists with disabilities who successfully progressed in their career as a musician, a singer, a composer, or a music theorist, by traveling to different European countries to visit archives and collect sources. One example was the impact of hearing loss on Ludwig van Beethoven's compositions, which led me to spend countless hours in the archives of his birthplace in Bonn, Germany. I also discovered many artists who have disappeared from our study books today, although they have fascinating journeys. Then I turned to living professional artists with disabilities in North America and Europe, especially how our society changed to include – or exclude – these artists. The common thread in the lives of these musicians from the past and the present is most of the time related to their music education. Sometimes their teachers thought outside the box to help them find a way to hold their instruments. Sometimes family members or communities

helped them feel included by figuring out their adaptations. Sometimes the encounters they made during their career helped them grow, which I consider part of continuous learning. As a music educator mostly working with children, I want to leave a positive impact in my students' lives but also talk about what it means to work in the music industry with a disability. Today, I propose inclusive workshops to music schools to explore different teaching and learning methods to read, play, or sing music differently, from the use of new technologies and digital instruments to alternate score reading. I particularly like the American Sign Language Singing workshop that I offer to choirs. I work with a fantastic ASL performer in Toronto to teach the choirs about ASL Music performance.

CB: How would you summarize the core themes of your dissertation for choral professionals who may be unfamiliar with disability studies?

DK: My dissertation contains three parts, all linked by a common topic: accessibility and disability in the music world. The first part is a historical musicology study of written sources about musicians with disabilities from the Medieval times to the end of the 19th century; this section contains 48 biographies of disabled musicians, singers and composers. The second part is a sociological analysis of disability in our current society from a critical point of view, applying theories used in the field of Critical Disability Studies to the arts and to music in particular – in short: how the perception and the inclusion of disabled artists evolved in the 20th and 21st centuries. This section contains interviews with 18 professional disabled musicians and singers. Finally, the third topic is about music education; for that section, I have used an educational theory called Transformative Learning Theory to look at potential improvements in music education and to propose a set of inclusive tools and techniques for educators to integrate into their teaching practices.

CB: What did the research process look like in practice—did it involve working with specific communities or case studies?

DK: The historical research involved a lot of traveling and discussions with archivists and other musicologists. It also required some imagination to access old European buildings while using a

wheelchair, but we always found ways for me to access sources such as scores, reports, journals, books, articles and press reviews. It was a fantastic journey in the world of historical disability in music.

For the interviews section, I worked directly with disabled musicians in Europe and North America, remotely or in person. The interviews were either video or audio recorded, with questions about their first connections to music, their education, their process of finding the right adaptations to perform, and their successes and struggles of being a professional musician with a disability. Here again, I learned so much from their experiences.

The part of my research about music education involved working with a community of students aged 6–18. I had to imagine workshops adapted to several age groups and interests, around the question: how do I play or sing music differently? It required a collaboration with the school administration and the teachers; all of them were helpful and willing to explore the new options I was presenting. I also needed to receive approval from the ethics board of my university, since I was working with children. The process was quite long: the board scrutinized all aspects of my workshops, from consent forms to data processing. It was worth the effort. After receiving approval, I delivered four workshops in a music school in Toronto. The children were curious, asked questions, participated in the activities and gave me feedback. The teachers were also very engaged.

CB: What were some of the most surprising or meaningful discoveries you made during your PhD journey?

DK: The most surprising aspect was the fact that I found that some of the challenges experienced by musicians with disabilities were shared with other minority groups such as women or musicians born in other countries. We created bridges between our different communities, applying the idea of performing differently. I was invited several times to sing with the Toronto Chinese Orchestra. For the first time in my life, I sang in Cantonese and Mandarin, coached by musicians of the ensemble to make sure my pronunciation was correct. I had lovely conversations with the members of the group.

The most meaningful discovery was, and still is, the

feeling of strong community among musicians with disabilities I met or interviewed. I am a member of Creative Connectors,¹ an initiative based in Ontario which brings together multiple artists with disabilities from Canada and the United States. We meet once a month to share our different practices and learn from each other. As a singer and musicologist, I am part of an organization called RAMPD, Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities,² based in New York but working with music professionals in North America and Europe.

CB: Were there any accessibility considerations that you built into your own research methodology and writing?

DK: Yes, mostly in the methodology I used for the delivery of the workshops and the creation of a set of tools and techniques for music educators. The workshops needed to be accessible to all students, with and without disabilities, which means clear instructions adapted to each age group, and meaningful and engaging accessible activities for all. The tools and techniques needed to be understood and easily integrable to a traditional curriculum. I had conversations with music educators and disabled artists to ensure it was the case before delivering what I intended to produce. I also listened to the feedback of the students and the teachers to improve the workshops.

CB: Now that the dissertation is complete, how do you envision your work contributing to broader conversations about inclusion in music-making spaces?

DK: It has already started. As an accessibility advisor, I worked with Choral Canada to ensure the PODIUM conference in Toronto in 2022 and Montreal in 2024 were fully accessible. In 2023, armed with what I learned from my diverse conversations in the music industry, I opened an organization called ArtsAbyl³ which aims to improve accessibility and disability representation in schools and cultural venues in Canada. It provided a structure for my workshops and a place to continue the dialogue with artists outside academia. All services are available in French

and English. ArtsAbyl works with multiple cultural organizations to assess venues, create access guides, and provide advice about accessibility integration or improvements. I collaborate with choirs and music ensembles to help them figure out how to include musicians and singers with disabilities, but also how to make their performances accessible to their audience members. Workshops and trainings are now delivered to children and adults. Free resources are available on the website. I also host a podcast series called “ArtsAbyl in Conversation,” available on all streaming platforms and on YouTube, interviewing artists with disabilities in North America and Europe, following the idea of the interviews I did for my dissertation, but this time for everybody to enjoy. Since its launch in March 2024, 52 episodes have been published including a special live discussion with past guests for the 50th episode.

CB: What are some common barriers to accessibility that you’ve observed in choral settings—whether physical, pedagogical, or cultural?

DK: The main problem I face is that most of the time, when we talk about accessibility, people think of the audience but not of the performers. I sometimes hear, “It’s ok since I don’t have any singers with disabilities in my choir.” If there are no choir members needing accessibility features now, it doesn’t mean that there won’t be any tomorrow. Moreover, it sends a message to choristers with disabilities that they are not welcome to perform in that choir. I am not blaming the choir, though, I am blaming the fact that we live in a society built by and for non-disabled people. Accessibility is frequently missing and considered as an add-on, with the idea that it is always expensive to make a place accessible. In reality, simple and inexpensive solutions can solve most of the accessibility issues. A place with a ramp at the entrance is not necessarily accessible. If there is a ramp but no accessible washrooms, then the place is not accessible. I like it when choirs purposefully decide not to select a venue for rehearsal or performance because it is not accessible. Then, we frequently think of wheelchair access only, but there are a variety of disabilities, sometimes temporary. Everybody has different access needs: some have mobility issues and use crutches, rollators, wheelchairs, or have

1 Creative Connectors, <https://www.creativeconnector.art>

2 RAMPD, <https://rampd.org>

3 ArtsAbyl, <https://www.artsaby.com>

invisible impairments due to fatigue or pain; some have sensory disabilities such as sight or hearing issues, ranging from blindness and deafness to the difficulty of reading score or hearing whispers. The solution is to make sure these issues are known, so that they could be taken into account. However, we live in a society in which disability is frequently seen as shameful. I advocate for clear communication between choir members and directors. As a singer frequently singing in choirs, I always work with the administration and the artistic team to make sure that I can access rehearsal and performing venues, stages, washrooms, change rooms, and even party rooms. We also work together with the conductor to make sure I can see them from my spot on stage, in a way that still makes sense for the whole appearance of the group, for example. We create a small group with people having access needs and we decide in what order we get to the stage, who needs a chair, how early we need to get on (sometimes it is easier to enter before the entire orchestra gets on stage), what to do if there are raisers in the way, etc. This is not something we do at the last minute. We talk about it beforehand, and we rehearse entrances during dress rehearsals. Communication is the key. When everything is considered and planned, then accessibility just becomes one of the many elements of a performance. If someone needs help, I am always happy to work with them. Just contact me to start the conversation.

CB: What small but impactful changes can choral educators make to foster more inclusive environments for singers with disabilities?

DK: One of the aspects is to think of accessibility in advance and to integrate it into the music curriculum. There is a great set of guidelines called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), written by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), which is based on the idea that when a product, a course, a building, is conceived with accessibility from its start, then the product, the course, the building, will be accessible to everybody. UDL is easy to follow and is based on three pillars: engagement (choices made when building the course), representation (how educators deliver the course) and action (how the students interact with the course). The guidelines can be found on the CAST

website⁴ and there are many examples of application on course designs available online. I could also introduce the concept to anyone interested.

CB: Are there examples of choirs or musical organizations that you feel are doing accessibility work particularly well? What can others learn from them?

DK: There are many organizations doing a good job with their accessibility, which makes me happy. I have interviewed two choirs for ArtsAble's podcast, which are good examples. The first one is Every Voice Matters (EVM),⁵ one of the choirs of the VIVA Singers in Toronto, led by Carol Woodward Ratzlaff. I have attended one of their rehearsals for the podcast episode and I was very impressed. The entire process, from the rehearsal to the concert, is accessible. Before a new chorister joins, there is a conversation between the singer and the artistic director (and sometimes the parents or caregivers) to consider access needs. A singer who needs assistance to learn the music works in pairs with an assigned partner in the music field, for example a university music student. Some of the pairs have worked together for many years. Solfa and Curwen hand signs are combined during warm-ups. Scores are provided. Some choristers prefer to memorize their lines. The idea is that a diversity of rehearsing and learning methods is proposed, allowing each chorister to choose their preferred way. The concert blends all VIVA Singers choirs, including EVM. Another example is the Braille Tones,⁶ in Edmonton, led by Susan Farrell. The choir is free to attend, breaking another accessibility issue due to financial constraints. In addition to the conductor, the section leads help the singers to learn and to perform in a variety of musical genres and languages. Everybody is free to participate the way they want, even if they prefer to be on stage but not to sing. Their program is family-friendly and fun to perform. In terms of research projects, The SingWell Project⁷ led by Frank Russo at the Toronto Metropolitan University and SingAble⁸ led by Ardelle Ries at the University of Alberta are two impactful initiatives giving great

⁴ UDL Guidelines, CAST, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

⁵ Every Voice Matters, VIVA Singers, <https://www.vivasingerstoronto.com/our-choirs>

⁶ The Braille Tones, The Braille Tone Music Society, <https://www.btones.ca>

⁷ SingWell, <https://www.singwell.ca>

⁸ SingAble, <https://www.ualberta.ca/en/augustana/programs/degree/music/choral/singable.html>

examples of inclusion of singers with disabilities in group projects.

CB: How can choirs engage more meaningfully with disabled composers, performers, or scholars in their artistic planning?

DK: Since the topic of disability in music is still very recent in research or professional conversations, there is no easy way to find disabled scholars, composers, or performers to help choirs in their accessibility journey. Many scholars became accessibility advisors or public speakers sharing their experiences. Disabled composers can be found among members of coalitions of music professionals such as RAMPD, mentioned earlier. I will mostly talk about performers in this section.

It all starts with communication. Make sure your website, announcing your auditions and your concerts, is accessible to screen readers. It should contain alternate text to all images and have a clear structure, from the menus to the page hierarchy of titles, paragraphs and lists. The structure should not change when someone zooms in to enhance the lettering size. The colour chosen is also important. Some tools allow you to test colour contrast to make sure people who are colour blind or have sight impairments can read the entire content. Your newsletters should also be accessible. If you publish a video of someone speaking, add subtitles. Hire an accessibility consultant or contact local universities who have accessibility services to ask for guidance.

On your website, include an “Accessibility” section or page, with information for audience members and choristers. It will show potential newcomers that the choir welcomes choristers with disabilities. It should include information about access, parking, washroom, rehearsal schedules (including breaks), and should mention that the choir is open to any access needs and ready to discuss options.

Engage in conversations with performers who might need different types of access. Do not buy equipment before consulting with the person. For instance, it might be a nice gesture to buy a ramp, but you want to make sure to buy the right ramp, with the right size and the right incline. People with disabilities have lived experience of their access needs, so it is always better to ask. If the elevator to the rehearsal level

requires a key, make sure to leave the key in a place which is reachable by the person, so that they don't rely on others to attend rehearsal. Independence is an important aspect of inclusion.

When you plan a concert, think of the entrance order and the placement of choristers with disabilities on stage, considering other barriers such as the way the risers are installed and the presence of an orchestra. Schedule a rehearsal of the entrance and stage placement with chorister disabilities in mind. If a solo is to be sung by a disabled chorister, make sure access to the front stage is clear.

When visiting a venue for a future performance, have your disabled or mobility-reduced choristers in mind. How do they access the stage? Are the green room or change room accessible? Is there an accessible washroom close to the rooms? Close to the stage? Gather all accessibility elements in advance, but do not rely only on the information given by the venue to make your decision. Frequently, they think they are accessible, but they are not, or only partially, and never realized it. Plan a trip to the venue and visit all rooms to be used with accessibility in mind.

CB: For choral leaders who want to start thinking more critically about accessibility, what first steps or resources would you recommend?

DK: A simple starting point is to review the disability legislation of your Province. For instance, in Ontario, there is the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) which gives standard rules of accessibility and inclusion. There are many free trainings available on governmental websites and local disability rights associations.

If you want to go further and explore frameworks of Critical Disability Studies in music, I suggest reading *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* by Joseph N. Straus⁹, which was the first book published by a musicologist exploring disability in the music industry. Many other books and articles followed, but this one is a reference.

Alejandro Alberto Téllez Vargas published *Disability and Music Performance: Interdisciplinary Disability*

⁹ Straus, Joseph N., *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (2011; Oxford Academic), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766451.001.0001>.

*Studies*¹⁰, considering aspects of musical performance in the context of the disabled body, conceptualising disability in music as valuable difference and diversity, rather than as a deficit and an endpoint.

I also recommend watching the excellent TED Talk given by the deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie in 2003, called “How to truly listen.”¹¹ Despite its age, it is still very accurate. If you want to know more about Glennie, I wrote a book chapter about her and two other musicians titled “Assumptions of Normality: How Three Women with a Disability Changed the Face of Music,” in *Women’s leadership in Music*.¹²

CB: Finally, what message would you most like to share with Canada’s choral community about building truly inclusive musical spaces?

DK: Building truly inclusive musical spaces means considering all individuals, regardless of their origin, their language, their abilities, or their gender. I believe that our choral community is already very inclusive. The simple fact that we are able to talk about these differences, including accessibility and disability, is proof. There is always room for progress. For me, it starts with conversations about possible obstacles, followed by awareness of our obstacles, growing interest and motivation in removing these obstacles, and finally, actions. By talking, learning, and working together, we can improve our choral world by removing existing barriers that have been here for too long. It takes courage and time, but I believe we can do it.

¹⁰ Alberto Téllez Vargas, Alejandro, *Disability and Music Performance: Interdisciplinary Disability Studies* (2018; Routledge).

¹¹ Evelyn Glennie’s TedTalk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU3V6zNER4g>

¹² Kolin, Diane, “Assumptions of Normality: How Three Women with a Disability Changed the Face of Music,” in *Women’s Leadership in Music* (ed. Iva Nenic and Linda Cimardi), (2023; Columbia University Press).