

# Singing in St John's: A Report on the Third Annual Meeting of Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS)

Sally L Busch  
Carleton University


## ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief report of the Third Annual Meeting of the Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS) Group from the perspective of a student affiliate. AIRS research themes, including development, education, and well-being are described and events held concurrently with the meeting are outlined. The benefits of student involvement with such events and organizations, including opportunities for collaboration and inspiration are stressed.

## Résumé

Cet article présente un bref rapport de la troisième réunion annuelle du groupe Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS) à partir de la perspective d'un étudiant affilié. Les thèmes de recherche du groupe AIRS, notamment le développement, l'éducation et le bien-être sont décrits et les activités tenues en même temps que la réunion sont décrites. Les avantages de l'engagement étudiant dans de telles activités et organisations, y compris les occasions de collaboration et d'inspiration sont soulignés.

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Held July 9-11, 2011 at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John's, Newfoundland, the Third Annual Meeting of Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS) was a rousing success. Meeting attendees were afforded the opportunity not only to share their research, but also to take in several activities occurring with concurrent conferences.

AIRS is a Major Collaborative Research Initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada whose mandate is to promote and carry out research involving singing. Annual meetings of this group permit affiliated researchers to share their findings and generate new avenues for collaboration and study. AIRS focuses its research on singing into three main themes: development, education, and well-being. The developmental branch includes investigation of both how singing behavior

develops as well as how singing by others may influence development (e.g., how maternal singing regulates stress in infants). The educational theme includes research that addresses the ways singing is taught as well as how singing may be used as a teaching tool (e.g., how singing may enhance vocabulary learning in schoolchildren). Research concerning the role of singing in intergenerational and cross-cultural understanding, as well as physical and psychological health, is subsumed under the theme of well-being (e.g., how singing may aid in social connections or improve mood). Each of these themes and sub-themes of research was well-represented at this meeting, as researchers and students from a wide variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and music shared both poster and verbal presentations of their work. Verbal presentations were followed by periods of discussion open to all attendees. Potential avenues for collaboration both within and between themes were discussed extensively. Emergent themes of discussion from the AIRS meeting included the connection between song and movement, song as a mechanism for well-being both on individual and interpersonal levels, and song as a unique communication medium that engenders trust and encourages learning.

The Third Annual AIRS meeting was held in conjunction with several concurrent events, including Festival 500 Sharing the Voices (an international choral festival), The Phenomenon of Singing Symposium (an academic conference associated with Festival 500), and the International Council for Traditional Music Conference. The overlap between these varied, and yet highly related events represented a unique opportunity for researchers to attend diverse presentations and be exposed to music researchers and musicians from around the world. Sources of inspiration abounded, as presentations demonstrated how singing is already being applied in the real world for educational and therapeutic purposes, sometimes with, sometimes without research support.

Although AIRS itself is based at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada, the international interest in singing research was immediately clear at this meeting, as members flew in from around the world to attend. While Memorial University provided meeting facilities and housed



many AIRS members in residence, St. John's itself provided a welcoming backdrop. In the evenings, the city was full of music; cozy pubs and other locales boasted live music, either local fare or sometimes more formal performances associated with Festival 500. During the day, meeting attendees were kept busy with AIRS business. Notably, in true commitment to the subject under investigation, each day's meeting began with a song. Furthermore, during presentations, both in the AIRS meeting and Festival 500, audience members were frequently encouraged to sing along. This interactive component lent these events a uniquely friendly and collaborative atmosphere, making them perhaps especially accessible to students new to the conference scene. The student experience of the AIRS meeting culminated in a highly productive and enjoyable meeting of the student and early researcher group. Over pizza and pop, students and early researchers affiliated with AIRS were able to sit down together to tackle organizational issues, generate research ideas, and socialize.

Involvement with a research initiative like AIRS generates a multitude of opportunities for academic and professional development for students: It can be an alternative source of research funding, offer career-building experiences through within-group publications and volunteer positions, as well as offer valuable connections with other researchers within a relatively small group. This meeting and others like it are important for young researchers to attend, as they afford opportunities to connect with others in similar veins of research, compare notes, and learn from the findings of others (in particular other students). Further, in an area of research such as singing, where the literature is relatively sparse, the information that can be shared at early stages

of research (i.e., in advance of publication) is invaluable. Also, professional connections made at such conferences may lead to unexpected avenues for future education or employment. And that's not to mention the many benefits of socializing with fellow researchers with similar interests! However, conference attendance is not always an entirely pleasant experience. Organizing any conference is a complex process, and so, as in the case of the AIRS meeting, some information (such as the conference schedule) may not be available until the last moment. Also, the expenses associating with attending conferences (travel costs, lodging, food) can be daunting for students. However, as I learned from my experience with the AIRS meeting, taking the initiative to ask questions (i.e., of conference organizers) and making use of all available funding sources (e.g., from your university, students' association, the organization holding the conference, the lab you work in, etc.) can make these aspects of conference attendance easier to navigate.

Overall, the Third Annual Meeting of AIRS was an excellent example of how holding concurrent events, although challenging from a planning perspective, can contribute to the cross-fertilization of ideas. The supportive and interactive atmosphere engendered by the proceedings was encouraging to its young researchers and set an example for other similar events. The next AIRS meeting will take place at the University of Prince Edward Island during August 2012. Those interested in singing research or becoming affiliated with AIRS can go to [www.airspace.ca](http://www.airspace.ca) for more information.