

# Music as Argument: Is Singing an (Un)Reasonable Response to Global Climate Change?

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Music has been a significant aspect of social movements from the antebellum slave movement, to the labor movement in the early twentieth century, to the antiwar movement in the sixties, to current activism (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, & Schulz, 2009; Carter, 1980; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2006). One contemporaneous example is the climate change movement, for which Bill McKibben called on artists, including musicians, to take a more active role, based in part on an assumption that “movements that sing are often described as being more unified and powerful than those that don’t” (Bowers et al., 2009, p. 25). Within the broader climate change movement, we are particularly interested in the demonstrations organized by Peaceful Uprising that occurred during the February/March 2011 trial of Tim DeChristopher.

In an act of civil disobedience, DeChristopher infiltrated an oil and gas lease auction on December 19, 2009 in Salt Lake City and won 13 parcels of land. He bid on these leases to prevent them from being used for oil and gas development, which he viewed as not only a threat to wilderness but also a threat to humanity due to the contributions of fossil fuels to the climate crisis. From February 28-March 3, 2011 DeChristopher stood trial and was found guilty on two felony charges of violating the Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act and making a false statement. He was sentenced to two years in prison. As the climate change movement, and more specifically Peaceful Uprising, prepared its response to the trial, DeChristopher called for movement members to sing in demonstration and solidarity, saying that he wanted to hear singing from inside the courtroom. He stated, “We will be a movement; when we sing like a movement” (Peaceful Uprising, 2011a).

Using a rhetorical approach to argumentation, we examine the demonstrations that took place before and during DeChristopher’s trial to examine whether music/singing is: 1) a reasoned argument, and 2) a reasonable argumentative tactic in social movement discourse. We answer yes to both questions, contending that music/singing can be a reasoned demonstrative argument (Prelli, 2006, 2009) and that music/singing can be a reasonable argumentative response to a particular rhetorical situation. After laying the groundwork for viewing music as argument, we analyze the musical demonstrations staged before and during the DeChristopher trials in Salt Lake City. We suggest that the people participating in collective singing at these demonstrations performed a demonstrative argument consistent with the convictions of the movement. Further, despite the seeming unreasonableness of

singing in the face of the climate crisis, we argue that this demonstration was a reasonable response to the specific rhetorical situation. We conclude with implications for the rhetoric of music and the rhetoric of social movements.

### **Music as Argument**

Although the importance of music to social movement scholarship is well documented, there is little research that explores (social movement) music specifically as an argument. A growing body of scholarship is examining music as a rhetorical phenomenon (Matula, 2000; Sellnow, 1999), yet scholarship that specifically attends to music as argument is limited to the work of Irvine and Kirkpatrick (1972). Using a rhetorical perspective on argumentation, they call for “a body of criticism examining protest music” (p. 284), particularly its “direct and immediate argumentative potential” to introduce new ideas and to induce adherence in broad audiences (p. 275). In this essay, we focus specifically on vocal music and collective singing. While the lyrics of vocal music can be arguments, we are also interested in how vocal music as performed through collective singing can act as an embodied performative argument in which the act of singing itself is an argument. We contend that vocal music and collective singing are demonstrative arguments, following Prelli’s (2006, 2009) theorizing of demonstration in relation to social movements.

Prelli (2006) argues that display is a predominant mode of rhetorical practice in which rhetoric works to exhibit, present, or manifest. One form of rhetorical display is demonstration, or demonstrative argument. Drawing from Richard McKeon, Prelli argues that despite Aristotle’s distinction between proof and display, demonstration works at the convergence of proof (or reasoned logic) and display. In other words, demonstrations can act as arguments of fact *and* arguments of value. We contend that vocal music and collective singing are demonstrative arguments that display convictions as premises for claims, that is, they make arguments of value.

### **Demonstrations for Tim DeChristopher**

DeChristopher provides an example of the continued salience of strong leaders to social movements in certain contexts. DeChristopher’s act of civil disobedience is a catalytic moment in the climate change movement because it reignited the practice of using creative acts of civil disobedience to stop actions that would cause further greenhouse gas emissions and intensify the climate crisis. DeChristopher’s action was successful in stopping the creation of new oil and gas leases in wilderness areas. With this act of civil disobedience, Tim became an instant star, gaining the attention of national and international players in the climate change movement such as Bill McKibben and James Hanson. “Tim is a

hero,” according to McKibben (2011), because “he took that leap” into civil disobedience that is needed to address the climate crisis (n.p.).

In the aftermath of his direct action, DeChristopher and his allies created Peaceful Uprising, a group within the climate change movement focused on “defending a livable future through empowering nonviolent action,” changing the “status quo at the root of the climate crisis,” and inspiring “the [nonviolent] revolution that the climate crisis requires” (Peaceful Uprising, n.d., n.p.). Although the mission of Peaceful Uprising extends beyond DeChristopher’s action, many of the major actions organized by the group have been centered on DeChristopher’s trial. Through the trial actions, Peaceful Uprising sought to uphold three convictions: 1) to demonstrate joy and resolve in the face of intimidation, 2) to argue that civil disobedience is a just response to climate change, and 3) to uphold nonviolence (Peaceful Uprising, 2011a). While the first is a specific response to the federal government’s treatment of DeChristopher’s case, the latter two convictions are rooted in DeChristopher’s act of nonviolent civil disobedience as a just response to climate change. As such, the trial actions sought to show solidarity with DeChristopher through demonstrating these convictions.

Peaceful Uprising used vocal music and collective singing as the primary tactic in the trial actions. “Gathering together to sing revolution songs has long been apart of social movement history and will be a key part of the actions outside of the trial” (Peaceful Uprising, 2011b). The trial actions included a series of events: a practice sing-a-long and candlelight vigil/sing-a-long before the trial, a march on the first day of the trial, and sing-ins for all four days of the trial. Peaceful Uprising (2011a) asked participants to “join us as we sing revolution songs” by bringing their singing voices to these events (n.p.). Although DeChristopher himself called for singing, the choice to focus the actions on music/singing also relates to the ability of vocal music and singing to both solidify movement members (Bowers et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2006) and to act as an embodied demonstration of convictions.

In order to analyze the DeChristopher trial actions, we used rhetorical field methods (Middleton, Senda-Cook, & Endres, 2011) to collect a variety of textual fragments including participant observation at the actions, movement texts such as websites, photos, fliers, a songbook, and other materials produced by Peaceful Uprising, and reception texts such as newspaper articles. Through rhetorical analysis of these varied textual fragments, we uncover how the vocal music and collective singing act as a reasoned argument, and examine how vocal music and collective singing can be reasonable tactics for social movements.

### **Collective Singing as Reasoned Argument**

The vocal music and collective singing that occurred at the DeChristopher trial actions are embodied musical demonstrative arguments. We will show how the lyrics and enacted singing at these events demonstrate the convictions of

Peaceful Uprising: joy and resolve in the face of intimidation, civil disobedience as a just response to climate change, and nonviolence. According to Prelli (2009),  
The “force” of a protest demonstration is experienced whenever one feels compelled to discourse and act in ways that are consistent with the cause’s presumptive moral and political convictions. We might add that much as the *soundness* of logical reasoning presumes that premises are certain, true, or otherwise acceptable, so to does the “soundness” of demonstrative protest rhetoric depend on identification with the cause’s moral and political convictions as indisputable and, thus, constituting the legitimating grounds of specific lines of discourse or courses of action. (p. 87)

Our analysis not only shows how the group’s convictions were enacted, but also how the group responded to breaches in those convictions. We reveal how demonstrative musical protest argument is an embodied, affective enactment of solidarity with the convictions of the movement.

Collective singing showed solidarity with the convictions of the movement. Through singing, participants showed nonviolent joy and resolve in the face of intimidation, which is consistent with Stewart et al.’s (2006) contention that protest music can “give protesters courage to demonstrate and remain nonviolent in the face of violence and arrests” (p. 76). The Peaceful Uprising (2011a) website states, “This trial is all about intimidation and the best answer to intimidation is joy and resolve. *We will show our joy and resolve as people have throughout history by raising our voices together and singing in the streets*” (n.p.). Jubilant renditions of well-known songs like, “This Land is Your Land,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “Blowin’ in the Wind” worked to encourage a celebratory mood even when news from the courthouse was not hopeful. As participant observers, we keenly felt the power and joy in singing together, despite our initial skepticism of the efficacy of music/singing to do something about the trial, or climate change more generally. Further, witnesses to the events also noted the joy of the event. An article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* notes,

A joyous throng of 300 protestors marched Monday morning from Salt Lake City’s Pioneer Park to Exchange Place across the street from a federal courthouse, where, later that afternoon, environmental folk hero Tim DeChristopher opened his four-day trial on two felony counts for monkey-wrenching an oil and gas lease auction. (Jensen, 2011, p. A1)

According to a police officer interviewed at the event, “At least they are happy protestors. There hasn’t been any trouble” (O’Donoghue, 2011, p. A1). In addition to joy, participants enacted resolve through song lyrics such as “I will stand with you – will you stand with me?” and “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on” and through being there for the full duration of the trial. These convictions did not go unchallenged, but the collective response to these breaches showed the power of participants’ adherence to the convictions. For example, at one point a participant asked to give a speech into the bullhorn. He began to argue that what was really

needed was revolution instead of singing and the participants responded by turning their backs into his bullhorn and singing over him.

Collective singing also demonstrated an act of nonviolent civil disobedience. Civil disobedience, in which demonstrators literally put their bodies on the line to call attention to unjust action, has a long history in social movement discourse. Just as civil disobedience is a reasoned response to climate change so too is singing in the face of prosecution. Peter Yarrow (of the 60s folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary) attended both the midnight vigil and the first day trial action to encourage demonstrators and show his support for Tim DeChristopher. During his time at the microphone, Yarrow linked the civil disobedience actions of DeChristopher to those of his forbearer's both narratively and in song. At both events Yarrow told the story of working to end apartheid in South Africa with his 14 year-old daughter Bethany. She told him that she wanted to go along to a demonstration and get arrested with him. He responded like any father would and told her she "couldn't possibly miss two days of school." She insisted and both were sent to "jail for justice." Yarrow lauded those who engage in civil disobedience and, as need be, go to jail for justice as DeChristopher did. Participants sang "Have You Been to Jail for Justice" regularly over the course of trial actions, demonstrating solidarity with DeChristopher and the conviction that civil disobedience is a just response to climate change. Participants also demonstrated that civil disobedience is a just response to the trial. With Yarrow's stories, Tim's actions, and the arresting lyrics in mind, at about 2:00pm on the first day of trial actions, the crowd of demonstrators moved across the street to sing in solidarity directly in front of the courthouse (outside of the designated zone in Exchange Plaza). In anticipation of the possibility of arrest, organizers asked us to remain in our "affinity groups," we were read the rules of engagement. A few demonstrators remained behind lest they get arrested. Still singing, we began to march directly toward the group of police officers who had been watching us from across the street all morning. It was unclear whether we were going to get arrested or not. In the end, no one got arrested, but the willingness to do so enacted conviction in the belief that civil disobedience and willingness to go to jail for climate justice is morally justified.

In all of these examples, participants enacted a demonstration of the convictions of the movement, collective singing as a reasoned proof of "the cause's moral and political convictions" (Prelli, 2009, p. 85).

### **Collective Singing as Reasonable Argument**

Is music/singing a reasonable response to climate change? On first glance, it would be easy to assume that it is not, as we did when we first heard about the actions; how can singing actually do anything to stop the emission of greenhouse gases and the carbon-based economy? Yet, we argue that singing/music can be a reasonable response—albeit just one of many tactics. Specifically, vocal music and

collective singing are reasonable considering the rhetorical situation. The Peaceful Uprising trial actions were not meant to literally solve climate change, rather they were epideictic discourse meant to show solidarity with DeChristopher and uphold the convictions of the Peaceful Uprising movement. And, in so doing, the actions indirectly address the solution to climate change. By reinforcing the belief that civil disobedience is a just action, the demonstrations called forth additional acts of civil disobedience in response to the climate crisis.

Collective singing is also a reasonable response because of its constitutive potential—"the basic elements of the lyrical structure must both support and maintain attitudes and values as well as create and develop them" (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972, p. 275). In this way, music/singing can act as the ego-function of a social movement thus building and/or solidifying the collective identity of the movement (Gregg, 1971). The songs themselves lyrically do this work in emphasizing "we" through the repetition of lyrics such as "we shall overcome," "we are not afraid," and "we are singing for our lives." While we are not arguing that the songs *only* served the ego-function, it is worthwhile to note that, as Tim said, "We will be a movement when we sing like a movement." In this case, vocal music and collective singing provided motivation, feelings of solidarity, and perhaps even made participants more willing take actions in line with the movement's convictions (see Stewart et al., 2006). If we step back from the movement, from our memories of the events, from our emotional responses, however, we also come to see that singing can legitimately serve as a coping mechanism in the face of intimidation. Climate change activists face insurmountable odds against not only the government but also multi-national corporations working for one of the most lucrative yet environmentally destructive industries. In the case of the DeChristopher actions, there was nothing we could do to sway the outcome of the trial. There is still nothing that we can do to negate the fact that Tim faces two years in prison. Singing is one thing that we could do. And that is what participants did; they sang with joy and resolve to show solidarity and enact their convictions on a cold February day.

## **Conclusion**

We contend that music/singing can be reasoned argument as well as a reasonable tactic for social movements. Through characterizing collective singing as an embodied demonstrative argument, we have expanded our understanding of argument and reason to include the possibility of vocal music and collective singing. In addition, our findings have broader implications for the study of music and social movements. First, our analysis offers a way to understand how both lyrics and embodied singing acts as arguments, and more broadly as rhetoric. While extant scholarship considers lyrics and melodic structure, our analysis considers collective singing as a situational embodied act that includes, but is not limited to, lyrics and melodic structure. There are embodied aspects of singing

that cannot be accounted for through analysis of lyrics and melodic structure only. Concerning social movements, in addition to providing further support for the salience of music to social movements, our analysis has implications for what leader-centered social movements mean and can be in the new century. New Social Movement theory suggests that we have moved away from traditional leader-centered models of group action. In this example, however, DeChristopher is a leader that inspired the climate change movement as a whole. His catalytic act of civil disobedience not only invigorated the movement to consider more acts of civil disobedience (McKibben, 2011) but also installed DeChristopher as a spokesperson and martyr for the cause. His leadership continues to drive the movement even as he faces jail time. This type of leader-centered movement can, purposely or inadvertently, constrain the possible tactics and responses to a rhetorical situation while enabling members to pursue others. Participants' immense loyalty to DeChristopher enabled singing in the face of intimidation, yet constrained other possible tactics so much so that when such tactics emerged the group quickly silenced them by singing louder. In order to explore these implications, further analysis of the argumentative and rhetorical dynamics of vocal music and collective singing, particularly the DeChristopher trial actions, is warranted.

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