

Chorus and Community

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The choral experience is so intensely communal by nature, it is easy for the perspective of choral musicians to become overly insular. We become consumed with our own insider language, and obsessions with things like “blend” or the ideal “choral sound,” the details of fine tuning, vowel unification, breaths and phrase endings, articulation, and on and on. While useful and necessary in many technical ways, this narrowness of view can also cause us to lose sight of not only the music itself, but of the larger context in which choirs both reflect and impact the larger society to which they belong. This extra-musical interaction with society happens precisely because of the unique *musical* power of choral singing. Since choral singers don’t need special instruments or special training to perform a wide range of repertoire, from simple folk songs to the most sophisticated art music, they are much more deeply woven into the fabric of different societies throughout the world than is normally the case for instrumental ensembles.

Therefore, a volume such as *Chorus and Community* is especially welcome. This is a remarkably diverse collection of essays by musicologists and sociologists edited by Karen Ahlquist, chair of the music department at George Washington University,. While many of the writers have some experience singing in choirs themselves, the perspectives they bring are those of observers looking closely at both the internal and external dynamics of choirs as unique social/artistic entities.

It is especially eye-opening to see several close examinations of mainstream Western choral traditions alongside accounts of choirs in places such as Tanzania, Mennonites in the steppes of Russia, or singing brotherhoods on the island of Sardinia, not to mention pictures of life within Yiddish choirs or the Hall Johnson Choir in New York City in the 1930’s, the ILGWU union chorus in the coal country of eastern Pennsylvania, and a welcome account of the birth and development of the GLBT choral movement in the US.

Among the examples most likely to be unfamiliar to American ears, the recording of the Sardinian Brotherhood quartet singing a *Stabat Mater* on the CD that accompanies the book is worth the price of the volume alone. I have never heard anything quite like it! As the culmination of a year-long competition among the 30 singing laymen of the Brotherhood of Santa Croce, four singers are selected to perform music written especially for their church in the northern village of Castelsardo on the Italian island of Sardinia. The music consists of non-metered, sustained four-part chords connected by the singers with swoops and slides, using a powerful and extremely masky tone with an intense vibrato. For those unaccustomed, it must be either quite painful or extraordinarily

exhilarating to hear in person. The singers strive for the ideal of the “quintina,” or fifth voice heard when the fundamental tones of the four singers are perfectly in line. The group’s slight chuckling at the end of the last note on the recording may reflect a release of some of the personal tension built up as the singers vie for the approval of the prior who selects the final quartet each year. Earlham College ethnomusicologist Marc Benamou’s narrative of the interpersonal dynamics of this rivalry and the keen sense of pride in the Brotherhood’s distinctive style of singing is fascinating.

An essay by Wesley Berg of the University of Alberta tells of a very different religious community, the Mennonites, who fled the Prussian militaristic society of the late 18th Century to accept Catherine the Great’s invitation to foreigners to populate her country. Berg tells the story of how when times became hard for these isolated communities towards the end of the 19th Century, one of the main cultural factors in their social survival was the strong leadership of choral director Kornelius Neufeld. His leadership made the continuity of their singing tradition one of the main things that held the community together when all else was falling apart.

In another essay, Gregory Barz of Vanderbilt describes social circumstances just the opposite of cultural isolation: the cultural polyglot growing from the recent rapid urbanization of Dar es Salaam, the capitol city of Tanzania. Here, the Tanzanian *Kwaya* forms a critical extended family unit for migrants from a diverse range of rural tribal areas who have been torn from the close-knit social organization of their tribal customs. Barz is surprised to find that the musical result of this mixture of local styles is not a common, homogenized “urban” musical style, but one where the different singers can still identify melodic characteristics that come from their home villages.

An example of choral singing in support of community and cultural identity much closer to home is Jill Strachan’s summary account of the dramatic growth of the gay and lesbian chorus movement in the US since the mid-70’s, with a focus on Washington, DC. Providing a source of positive, unifying energy to a movement that was struggling emerge from the cultural shadows, Strachan discusses how the importance of inclusiveness affected everything from how the choirs were run to the repertoire chosen.

Three other essays show how choirs that started out with an explicitly political purpose often outlive their original agenda to end up pursuing mostly musical and social goals. In an essay entitled, “From Communism to Yiddishism,” Marion Jacobson tells the story of how choirs devoted to promoting labor activism in the urban sweat shops of 1920’s and 30’s evolved into the Yiddish choirs in New York which are now devoted primarily to the preservation of Yiddish language and culture. In the Soviet Union during the same period, Amy Nelson describes how “Choral Circles” were formed as outlets for social contact where the values of the revolution could be promoted. But in the end, the songs that people remembered and liked to sing the most were the ones with the best tunes, whether or not they still promoted the current party line. Back in America during the postwar period, as recounted by Kenneth C. Wolensky, the International Ladies Garment Workers Chorus in northeastern Pennsylvania provided critical musical encouragement to the dramatic growth of their union. Today, the familiar song “Look for the Union label”

persists through the active efforts of choral alumni long after the garment industry has left the region.

Choral music played no more important social and political role than it did during the pursuit of civil rights for African Americans from the end of slavery to the present day. Dutch musicologist Helen Metzelaar offers an unusual perspective by looking at the historic 1877 European tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers through the eyes of a religiously divided Dutch public. Their surprise at seeing former slaves singing with such self-possession and dignity shined a mirror on their society's own recent participation in the slave trade. Religious differences were exposed between those who were comfortable with performance and fund-raising in the church sanctuary, those who condemned it, and those who held on to overt racial prejudice. Marva Griffen Carter of Georgia State University writes of the important contribution Hall Johnson's professional choir made to the growth of the "New Negro Movement" of the 1920's Harlem Renaissance through his further development of the concert spiritual for large choirs. It is unfortunate that so few of his arrangements, many of which became well known to the general public through the landmark Hollywood movie *Green Pastures*, are still available today.

Finally, *Chorus and Community* contains two compelling essays on the social origins of the middle class choral societies in 19th century Germany and England that led to some of the most important choral repertoire in the Western canon. Editor Karen Ahlquist's own essay on the growth of German choral societies outlines some of the social and political factors that shaped these choirs and the repertoire they inspired from the leading composers of the Romantic era. From the beginning the choirs functioned as an important part of middle-class society, including opportunities for women to assume newly visible positions of leadership. The dramatic oratorios of Mendelssohn served both a morally didactic and socially unifying purpose. The revolution of 1848 and the subsequent rise of the grand opera changed the nature of the choral society socially as well as resulting in a change in the repertoire itself from dramatic narrative to spiritual reflection.. This chapter is a welcome reminder of how even the most iconic masterworks of the repertoire come from a particular social circumstance and time.

In England in the mid-19th Century, a new form of musical notation was developed and vigorously marketed specifically to promote the temperance movement through the singing of morally uplifting hymns and cantatas. As told by Charles Edward McGuire of Oberlin College, Charles Curwen promoted a self-named method (actually invented for public school use by a woman named Sarah Glover) that succeeded in drawing large numbers of middle class people to massed choral singing for the first time. McGuire shows how Curwen's narrowly focused and strongly anti-Catholic mission was subverted by the very success of his method, which led to the birth of the many quite independent regional choral festivals still active today. These festivals commissioned numerous large works which soon became part of the standard concert repertoire, including Edward Elgar's profoundly Catholic *Dream of Gerontious* (which remains one of the most frequently performed oratorios in England, though not America, even today).

Rounding out this diverse collection are two essays covering topics more immediately familiar to contemporary American choral directors. Melinda Russell examines the changing choral culture of Decatur, Illinois as it goes through the process of de-industrialization affecting many cities in the American northeast and Midwest. Rosalyn Smith looks at the conflicts between “professional” and “amateur” status of singers in a symphonic choir in modern Australia.

Anyone dipping into this fascinating and eclectic collection of essays will no doubt come back to their own choirs with a fresh perspective on how singing is such a vital part of the fabric of our communities and our culture. The effort to sing beautiful phrases and put our final consonants in the same place becomes something understood as valuable not only for its own sake (as surely it is), but as part of a rich tapestry of human connection and social aspiration.