



Repertoire & Resources

Lifelong Choirs

Cultivating Excellence in Lifelong Singers

by Jack A. Cleghorn

When I learned of the death of Helmuth Rilling, I reflected on the profound influence his work made on generations of singers, teachers, conductors, and institutions. For many, his work is linked with a precision of style and the interpretation of Bach; therein, musical excellence. For others, his impact lived in the rehearsal room, where his love and knowledge of music and economy of language shaped their very craft.

During my time at Westminster Choir College, I had the opportunity to observe Rilling in rehearsal and participate in group conversations with him off the podium. Like many young conductors, I was curious to know his process. What were his outlooks and pedagogical practices that distinguished good ensembles from exceptional ones? At some point during a rehearsal, one of my colleagues asked him a question that has stayed with me for years and, in many ways, shaped my thoughts on ensemble singing. The question invited a complicated yet direct answer.

“How do you get a better choir?”

Rilling responded without hesitation: “Get better singers.”

The room erupted in laughter, partly because the an-

swer was both obvious and profoundly true.

Admittedly, my first assessment of Rilling’s response was not what I have now come to believe it means. What remains most striking is that the answer did not come from a conductor concerned only with the performance outcome. Rilling’s career reflected a deep investment in formation. He cultivated educational environments built around long-term artistic growth that extends beyond the recordings and performances. This context matters because his response did not emerge from abstraction. It came from a teacher who spent a lifetime cultivating excellence.

We, as stewards of the lifelong choir community, are invited to consider how excellence is formed in environments where singers arrive with different levels of preparation, whose voices are changing, and who have varied motivations for participation.

Rilling’s answer remains difficult to dispute. Better singers very often create better choirs. Musical literacy, vocal technique, stylistic awareness, listening skills, and experience all contribute to the success of an ensemble. In auditioned choirs, conductors have the ability to shape an ensemble and its quality through recruitment and selective membership. Conservatories, professional choruses, advanced collegiate ensembles, and at times even our music in worship and community choirs can function



within this framework—which, for those of us working in lifelong choirs, makes the answer far more complex.

Rarely do conductors of community choirs, worship ensembles, senior choruses, or volunteer-based organizations, to name a few, begin with a curated roster of singers. Rather, we tend to inherit a broad community and spectrum of experience, training, motivation, and confidence. While some may come to us with extensive musical backgrounds or experience, many others will not read music fluently. Some members return after years away from singing, some join seeking a creative outlet, purpose, or connection. So, within such ensembles, our question and our goals shift. At this point, it is not about *finding* better singers; it is about *creating* them.

Lifelong choirs operate according to a different pedagogical model than a highly selective or elite ensemble, which is why this distinction matters. In those advanced ensembles, excellence is often shaped through

selection. In lifelong choirs, excellence is often shaped through formation. This poses a unique challenge. Formation is a process, not an event. It is a slow, cumulative act dependent on cultivation instead of filtration.

As lifelong choir conductors, we serve voices that are evolving across multiple stages of life. Older singers adapting to vocal changes, young adults learning ensemble habits, and middle-aged singers returning after years away from music making all inhabit the same space. Unlike an academic environment where singers come and go at predictable intervals, we are challenged to sustain participation over years and, in some cases, decades. This creates a pedagogical environment and an ensemble that becomes, in itself, part of the teaching process.

True, singers learn from their director; but they also learn from each other. Veteran members of an ensemble model rehearsal etiquette, diction, and proper

DR. BOBBIE BAILEY SCHOOL OF MUSIC
Congratulations
TO DR. RYAN FELLMAN



THE NEW **DIRECTOR**
OF **CHORAL ACTIVITIES** FOR
THE BAILEY SCHOOL OF MUSIC



where **PASSION** is *heard*

alignment. Confidence and musical vocabulary are absorbed by younger singers through participation, listening becomes instructional, and repetition becomes development. It is this belonging that creates conditions where singers are willing to take more risks, become more vulnerable, and grow as artists.

We all see the value, both socially and emotionally, of being a member of a choir. Participation itself, the communal experience, is also a pedagogical function. Participation is a mechanism of growth. The practical experience and research we have all encountered remind us that singers are not static. The dynamic nature of our singers is particularly evident when working with changing voices. Health, age, life, and use all contribute to this evolution. The effects of aging are often evident in changes to stamina, breath support, and vocal range. Because of these factors, conductors of lifelong ensembles cannot rely on fixed assumptions about sound and capacity. We must adapt. Adaptive work is not second to artistry; it is artistry.

Conductors of lifelong choirs navigate the intersection of pedagogy, community, and musicianship. It requires—indeed, demands—that we maintain the highest standards of excellence while recognizing that our singers develop along different timelines. It requires us to pursue musical and pedagogical excellence, and a commitment to learning as a director and as an individual, all without losing sight of the human continuity that sustains our ensembles.

For these reasons, the definition of a better choir calls for expansion, or perhaps a new lens. I firmly believe that lifelong choirs expand the held definition, or current focus, of excellence and “better” beyond precision alone. True, a better choir may demonstrate a command of diction or stylistic nuance or finer intonation, but what is the purpose and goal of the ensemble? We are taught from early in our careers to have a critical ear that constantly and meticulously catches any error. It can be a daunting task to step back from those ingrained perceptions.

Better choirs may reflect increased confidence, deeper listening, stronger attendance, or a greater sense of shared ownership. Better choirs are ensembles that provide the tools for hesitant singers to trust their voices. Better choirs are places where singers remain engaged

rather than excluded. Better choirs may be those where community strengthens artistry rather than competing with it.

We are reminded through lifelong choirs that excellence and belonging are not in opposition; they are mutually reinforcing. Rilling’s answer to us young conductors all those years ago remains true. But we conductors of lifelong choirs ask different questions. Not simply where better singers are found, but how they are formed.

This is a distinct contribution of lifelong choirs to the choral ecosystem. Here, we are reminded that artistry is not merely a byproduct of selection but rather one of consistency, patience, and care. We do not bend finely tuned singers to our vision. We walk with our singers in change and development through new seasons of life.

I ask us to value the process in conjunction with the product. I suggest that musical excellence emerges not only from mountain-top artistic experiences but also from a group of individuals, willing to commit itself to one another as a community. Repeatedly. In a way, it is more of a covenant.

Our profession is one whose metric is often polish and precision. Those qualities should not be discounted or diminished, and lifelong ensembles should not be excluded from those abilities. However, lifelong choirs offer another measure of success: singers who remain engaged, singers who grow in knowledge and ability, singers who feel heard, singers who return because they believe in the ensemble and what they are creating.

Lifelong choirs and the choristers who inhabit these ensembles don’t exist for performance alone. We, the stewards and participants of lifelong choirs, sustain voices, shape identity, and cultivate communities capable of singing together across a lifetime. **C**

Jack A. Cleghorn is choirmaster and organist at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and the national R&R coordinator for lifelong choirs for ACDA.

jack@stpaulsfay.org