

# World Musics & Cultures

## A Section of Repertoire & Resources



### World Musics & Cultures



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#### **Choral Music in Paraíba, Brazil: An Exploratory Case Study**

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Singing in a choir is a multifaceted and transformative experience—simultaneously artistic, physical, emotional, and cognitive. In the United States, organizations such as ACDA play a vital role in sustaining choral traditions, particularly those rooted in Western European music traditions, built on a music literacy foundation. However, communal singing practices across the globe often diverge considerably from these conventions.

This study investigates the experiences of four choral conductors from the United States—three of whom have participated in ACDA’s International Conductors Exchange Program—as they engage with seven Bra-

zilian choirs in João Pessoa, Paraíba. These ensembles reflect a broad spectrum of missions and values, including aesthetic expression, community engagement, inclusivity, and sociopolitical activism. The conductor-singer relationships, rehearsal practices, and selected repertoire within these groups are uniquely tailored to their respective contexts. Notably, these choirs place a pronounced emphasis on their core values and social missions over technical performance outcomes. As a result, their approaches to music learning prioritize collective identity and belonging, producing significant and distinct benefits for each ensemble.

This experience was possible because an institutional agreement developed between Syracuse University and the Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB). Signed in 2019 to promote intercultural and academic collaboration among faculty and students, this partnership enables sustained engagement with a diverse range of choral groups in João Pessoa through a series of artistic residencies. Central to this initiative has been the leadership of Eduardo de Oliveira Nóbrega, Professor of Choral Music at UFPB and founder of the Festival Paraibano de Coros (FEPAC). The initiative offered valuable insights into João Pessoa’s choral landscape, which, for the purpose of this study, is categorized into four principal domains: university-based choirs, workplace or corporate choirs, correctional facility choirs, and community-based choral groups. To better under-



stand this choral landscape as we contextualize these four domains, we must begin with FEPAC.

## Festival Paraibano de Coros

One pivotal element in choral music in João Pessoa is the Festival Paraibano de Coros. Established in 2002, FEPAC has emerged as one of Brazil's leading platforms for inclusive choral expression. The festival convenes choirs representing a range of institutional affiliations—including universities, businesses, correctional facilities, religious organizations, and healthcare facilities—fostering cross-sector dialogue through collective musical performance. Founded and directed by Nóbrega, FEPAC is grounded in the principle that all choirs, regardless of size, skill level, or musical genre, are welcome. Ensembles are encouraged to define their own standards of excellence according to their distinct missions, fostering an ethos of inclusion and mutual respect.

## University-based Choirs

In both the United States and Brazil, choral singing remains a vibrant and integral component of university life, with thousands of students regularly participating in campus-based vocal ensembles. In João Pessoa, the capital of the state of Paraíba, Brazil, our research engaged with two such university choirs that exemplify the diversity and vitality of choral practices in higher education.

At UFPPB, the *Coral Universitário Gazzzi de Sá*—founded in 1967—functions as an inclusive ensemble welcoming students, faculty, staff, and community members. Under the leadership of Professor Eduardo de Oliveira Nóbrega, the choir has cultivated a mission centered on fostering human connection and social integration through collective music making. The ensemble's repertoire foregrounds Brazilian cultural identity, regularly featuring compositions by José Maurício Nunes Garcia alongside arrangements of Brazilian folk and popular music. Their performances are frequently characterized by sophisticated staging and expressive interpretation, reflecting a commitment to theatrical and musical integration. Nóbrega is widely recognized as a leading

advocate for choral music in João Pessoa, and the *Coral Universitário Gazzzi de Sá* serves as the anchor ensemble for FEPAC, traditionally opening the festival in collaboration with the local symphony orchestra.

A short distance away, at UNIPÊ—Centro Universitário de João Pessoa (University Center of João Pessoa), the *Coral Universitário do UNIPÊ* brings together more than sixty students who rehearse three times per week. Their repertoire spans a wide array of musical traditions, including northeastern Brazilian folk genres such as *xote* and *baião*, sacred motets from the Western European canon, and selections from American popular music. A distinctive feature of this ensemble is its incorporation of choreographed movement, often designed and taught by student leaders, to enrich the visual and expressive dimensions of performance. Notable presentations include extended medleys from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and arrangements of classic rock songs, performed with dynamic vocalism and choreographed staging. Under the direction of João Alberto Gurgel, the choir fosters an inclusive and collegial rehearsal environment where students are encouraged to contribute creatively, form social bonds, and deepen their engagement with musical performance. One ongoing challenge faced by the ensemble is the high turnover rate of singers due to academic schedules and graduation, necessitating frequent rebuilding of the ensemble's cohesion and skill base.

## Workplace or Corporate Choirs

Workplace or corporate choirs have a longstanding tradition in Brazil and are gaining increasing recognition in other countries as part of a broader global trend in communal workplace singing.<sup>1</sup> Like community or religious choirs, these choirs serve multiple purposes: some perform at company functions and public events, while others focus more explicitly on fostering interpersonal relationships and workplace cohesion. In contrast to institutionalized models of community music making, workplace choirs have specific goals and objectives that differ from other choral groups. A workplace choir may exist under a certain management team and then be dismantled with changes in leadership. They may come together to record a project that will be distrib-

uted at the company's end-of-year party or to address human resources goals. Their formation, leadership, and sustainability often rely on the conductor's ability to adapt to each organization's culture and needs.

While musical engagement is a central activity of these choirs, their significance extends far beyond artistic output. Participation in workplace choirs often results in positive extra-musical outcomes, including shifts in organizational hierarchies, individual identity redefinition, and increased empathy among colleagues. For instance, it is not uncommon for a custodian to assume a featured solo while the CEO—despite holding the highest rank within the workplace—may require more musical support. Such role reversals can humanize colleagues, foster mutual appreciation, and reshape professional relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Brazilian music educator, researcher, performer, and

composer Eduardo Lakschevitz has written extensively about the unique demands and social functions of workplace choirs in Brazil. He argued that effective leadership of such ensembles requires competencies that do not always conform with the traditional Western European choral training model.<sup>3</sup> Most participants in Brazilian workplace choirs, for instance, have not been trained in Western music notation and instead rely primarily on oral literacy and musical intuition. As a result, conductors must adapt and facilitate participatory rehearsal processes that program repertoire in collaboration with singers. Choosing repertoire becomes a collaborative activity where participants' suggestions are welcome and valued and aligned with the choir's identity and company principles.<sup>4</sup>

Lakschevitz shared that his work with company choirs demanded a shift in both pedagogical practice



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and philosophical orientation. Rehearsals often included rearrangements and improvisations initiated by choir members, meaning that the final performances frequently diverged significantly from the original written scores. Furthermore, workplace choir members regularly performed for small audiences, or at times, for no external audience at all—functioning as both performers and listeners. These realities led Lakschevitz to adopt a sociological perspective, acknowledging that the interpretive process and audience-performer dynamics in corporate choirs diverge significantly from conventional choral paradigms.

A case that illustrates these dynamics is the Coteminas Inclusive Choir, which Nóbrega founded in March 2002 at the textile manufacturer in João Pessoa. Coteminas operates twenty-two plants with over thirteen thousand employees and produces approximately 20 percent of Brazil's cotton. The choir was established to provide an inclusive artistic outlet for factory workers. It was open to all employees regardless of rank or musical background. Notably, fifteen deaf members participated in the ensemble using Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) to contribute expressively during rehearsals and performances. Rehearsals occurred twice weekly for one hour and emphasized egalitarian participation—whether through vocal performance or expres-

sive gesture.

The Coteminas Inclusive Choir embodied an ethos in which inclusion was not an ancillary feature but a core value. Artistic excellence was not prioritized over engagement and enjoyment; rather, musical participation itself was celebrated as a mode of personal expression and collective identity. As with other inclusive ensembles, Coteminas choir members were socially invested, enthusiastic, and attuned to audience response. The choir aligned with the broader objectives of the company's human resources department, aiming to build a sense of community among employees and to affirm sign language as a legitimate and valued form of communication.

The long-term success of workplace choirs often hinges on institutional support, leadership alignment, and strategic integration into organizational culture. Despite its vibrancy and commitment to inclusion, the Coteminas Inclusive Choir was disbanded following administrative restructuring in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This underscores the vulnerability of such initiatives, which are heavily dependent on fluctuating corporate priorities. Nevertheless, the Coteminas Inclusive Choir case provides a compelling example of how music can serve as a vehicle for equity, communication, and workplace transformation.

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### Correctional Facility Choirs

Music making in correctional facilities offers a powerful means of self-expression, emotional processing, and community building for individuals who are incarcerated.<sup>5</sup> Community-based initiatives in prisons require music leaders to recalibrate their pedagogical and relational approaches, often prioritizing restorative practices over traditional performance outcomes. While music skills such as conducting and music literacy remain important, effective leadership in these environments draws heavily on interpersonal intelligence and cultural sensitivity, aiming to restore participants' humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Arts programs in correctional facilities have emphasized the potential of music to improve self-image, re-establish human dignity, and cultivate communication within and beyond the walls of confinement. Through

the cultivation of positive group dynamics and artistic agency, prison choirs can become transformative spaces for personal development and belonging.<sup>7</sup> In our study, these practices were observed in the work of Daniel Berg, a choral conductor who leads ensembles at two correctional institutions in João Pessoa, Paraíba.

According to the Secretaria de Estado da Administração Penitenciária da Paraíba, as of January 2025 the state held 16,452 individuals across multiple custodial contexts including permanent detention (7,551); temporary detention (3,082); work release programs (827), home detention (1,425), and electronic monitoring curfews (3,567).<sup>8</sup> Our interactions happened with choirs in two facilities: Penitenciária Desembargador Sílvio Porto, a male correctional institution; and Penitenciária de Recuperação Feminina Maria Julia Maranhão (Bom Pastor), a women's facility.

At Penitenciária Desembargador Sílvio Porto, inmates serving long-term sentences participate in *Vozes Para Liberdade* (Voices for Freedom), a prison choir led by Berg. Rehearsals occur weekly for 1 hour and 45 minutes, including thirty minutes of music theory, a fifteen-minute vocal warm-up, and one hour of ensemble practice. The repertoire spans spirituals, such as “Let My People Go,” as well as inmate-composed and arranged pieces. The ensemble's name captures the emotional and symbolic weight of singing in prison, where, as Berg notes, “they cannot sing *piano* because for them, singing is freedom—it must be loud, full-blown.”

Inmate testimonials reinforce the choir's role in restoring a sense of humanity. Participation alleviates emotional isolation and creates a temporary reprieve from carceral realities. Singing allows members to access and express feelings often suppressed in prison environments, providing a unique pathway to a sense of community and belonging.

*Vozes Para Liberdade* has performed at churches, schools, and FEPAC, and has been directed by Eduardo Nóbrega since 2002. Their early appearances at FEPAC were heavily restricted: singers were held in guarded dressing rooms, performed under supervision, and were returned immediately to the correctional facility. Over time, advocacy efforts by Nóbrega and Berg led to the gradual humanization of their participation. By 2023, singers were permitted to perform without

handcuffs, and security staff wore civilian clothing. That same year, the governor of Paraíba authorized a visit with family members post-performance—an unprecedented gesture of dignity and trust.

At the *Penitenciária de Recuperação Feminina Maria Julia Maranhão*, the women's choir *Vozes Passageiras* (Transient Voices) involves approximately twenty-five incarcerated women in a fluid, transitional format. The facility houses 173 individuals—120 already sentenced and 73 awaiting sentencing or enrolled in work programs. Unlike the structured curriculum of *Vozes Para Liberdade*, this choir engages participants in a two-week series of music lessons, encompassing both instrumental and vocal instruction. Though their musical training is less intensive, participants in *Vozes de Passageiras* also experience the transformative potential of communal music making. Their performances—both within the prison and in community venues including FEPAC—offer moments of visibility, social engagement, and personal affirmation.

These two choirs demonstrate the varied models of music engagement in correctional facilities and the role of choral music as a vehicle for restoration, agency, and dignity. While structural differences exist between the two ensembles, both serve as platforms for social reintegration and emotional well-being. The leadership of Daniel Berg exemplifies the multidimensional skill set required for effective prison music programs, where artistic practice meets the complexities of correctional life. Through music, incarcerated individuals reclaim a part of their identity often denied within institutional systems—reminding us that even behind bars, voices can rise.

### Community-based Choirs

In João Pessoa, community-based choral singing plays a significant role in enhancing both individual well-being and collective social cohesion. One such example is *Coral Nova Voz* (New Voice Choir), housed at *Clínica Nova Diagnóstico*, a medical imaging center. Founded in 2016 by eighteen employees and directed by Hélio Nunes, the ensemble rehearses weekly and performs in diverse venues including churches, hospitals, institutional events, and FEPAC. As with other



inclusive choirs in Brazil, *Coral Nova Voz* intentionally seeks to dismantle hierarchical structures within professional settings by fostering connections between doctors, nurses, administrative staff, and patients. The ensemble is notably multigenerational, with many of its members being older adults who have engaged in community music making for several years. Observations revealed that participation in the choir fostered a strong sense of pride, purpose, and identity. Members frequently articulated that singing within this ensemble contributed to their emotional resilience and sense of belonging. Despite the inherent distractions of rehearsing in a busy hospital lobby, the choir's presence provides a source of comfort and emotional uplift for individuals awaiting medical procedures.

Similarly, the *Coral do Instituto de Previdência Municipal*,

a municipal government-sponsored choir, exemplifies the integration of music and social care. Comprising approximately thirty members between the ages of sixty-five and ninety, this ensemble convenes twice a week for morning sessions involving vocal music, folk dance, and shared meals. Their repertoire is accompanied by accordion, bomba, and triangle, and centers on Brazilian folk and popular music, arranged by local composer and conductor Yuri Ribeiro. Choir members frequently emphasized how participation enables them to remain active, engaged, and socially productive—key indicators of successful aging and well-being. Members of this ensemble engage in social activities outside the rehearsal time, where music continues to be an integral part of the gathering through singing and dancing.

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## Conclusion

This exploratory case study sought to investigate the sociocultural and artistic dynamics of choral singing in João Pessoa, Brazil. Three of the researchers participated in ACDA's International Conductors Exchange Program, which served as a catalyst for immersive fieldwork involving rehearsal participation, performance, and dialogue with local choral communities. Employing a methodology grounded in participant observation, this study aimed to generate insights into the varied functions of choral music across social, institutional, and cultural contexts.

Findings underscore the diversity of choral practice in João Pessoa, highlighting ensembles that diverge from traditional Western models in terms of structure, goals, and musical pedagogy. However, it is important to note that this model is not reflective of all choral music in Brazil—a large, vast, and diverse country with many choral ensembles whose musical goals are aligned with Western European music traditions. In João Pessoa, the choirs studied pursued multiple aims, ranging from artistic excellence to community building, emotional expression, healing, and self-affirmation. While generalizations should be avoided, the narratives emerging from this inquiry point to a shared emphasis on collective identity and mutual support.

FEPAC served as a central node in this network of choral engagement, bringing together participants from all walks of life—including students, elders, health professionals, incarcerated individuals, factory employees, and religious practitioners. Through these encounters, we witnessed how group singing operates as a tool for dismantling social hierarchies, fostering emotional resilience, and cultivating belonging. Regardless of setting or demographic composition, the choral ensembles observed demonstrated the transformative capacity of music to bridge divides and generate community—affirming choral practice as a vital component of cultural and civic life in João Pessoa. 

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anne Haugland Balsnes and Dag Jansson, “Unfreezing Identities: Exploring Choral Singing in the Workplace,” *International Journal of Community Music* 8, no. 2 (2015): 163–78.
- <sup>2</sup> Haugland Balsnes and Jansson, “Unfreezing.”
- <sup>3</sup> Eduardo Lakschevitz, “Um canto comum: Olhando o coro como um mundo artístico” (Doctoral diss., Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2009).
- <sup>4</sup> Lakschevitz, “Um canto comum.”
- <sup>5</sup> André DeQuadros, “Case Study: ‘I Once Was Lost but Now Am Found’—Music and Embodied Arts in Two American Prisons,” in *Oxford Textbook of Creative Arts, Health, and Wellbeing: International Perspectives on Practice, Policy, and Research*, Stephen Clift and Paul M. Camic, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2016): 187–191.
- <sup>6</sup> Inês Lamela and Paulo Maria Rodrigues, “Understanding Leadership in Community Music-Making Projects Behind Bars: Three Experiences in Portuguese Prisons,” *International Journal of Community Music* 9, no. 3 (2016): 257–71. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.9.3.257\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.9.3.257_1).
- <sup>7</sup> Lamela and Maria Rodrigues, “Understanding Leadership.”
- <sup>8</sup> Tribunal de Justiça do Estado da Paraíba, “Sistema Prisional,” accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.tjpb.jus.br/gmf/sistema-prisional>.