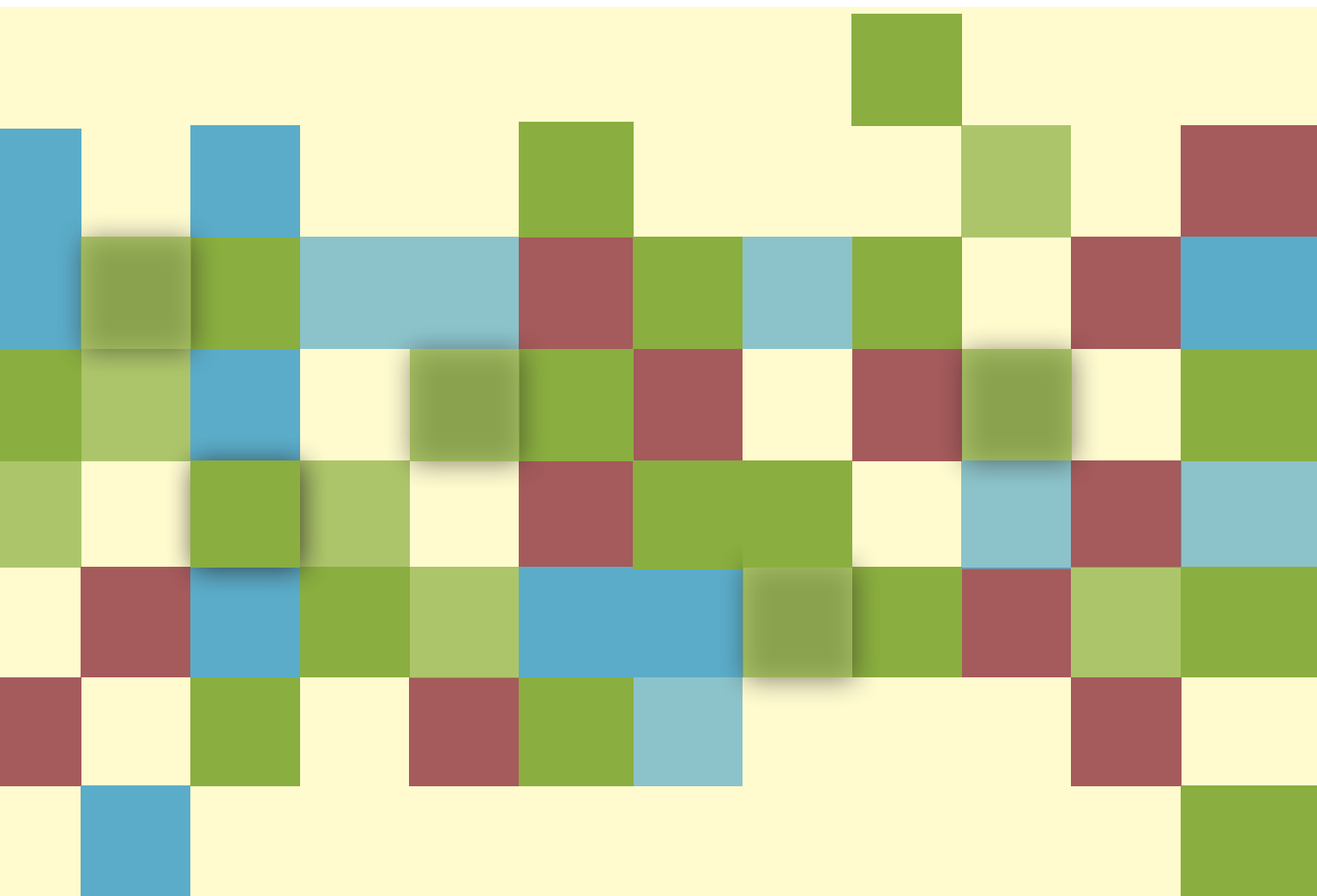
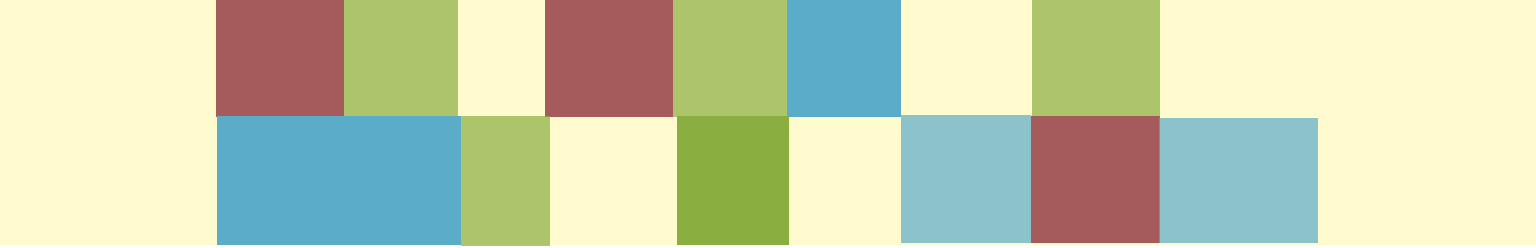


# The Keys to Collaboration: Unlocking the Power of Partnership for Choral Organizations

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Choral singing is a model example of collaboration at every level. Singers collectively work to achieve blend, balance, and harmony. Conductors guide singers through music to ensure togetherness, integrity, and expression. Beyond the stage, audiences provide a conduit for shared emotional experiences and opportunities for music to make meaning in our communities.

For decades, ACDA has embraced the importance of collaboration as a means to strengthen the placement of choral music in the cultural firmament of the United States. ACDA's commitment to collaboration was cemented during the organizational restructure that created the Advocacy & Collaboration National Standing Committee. By engaging its members through focused areas of leadership, ACDA was able to provide greater awareness and relevancy to topics that impact nearly every choral organization, with advocacy and collaboration chief among them. Many of ACDA's peer organizations place great value in col-

laborating throughout the choral network and the broader arts sector. This article features a Q&A with three such organizations:

- (1) The National Endowment of the Arts: an independent federal agency that serves as a catalyst for arts participation through grantmaking and fostering public and private support of the arts
- (2) Chorus America: an advocacy, research, and leadership development organization that advances the field of choral music
- (3) The National Association of Music Merchants Foundation: the charitable arm of the organization that represents businesses who make, sell, distribute, and teach through musical products worldwide

With their national grantmaking capacity and wide-reaching purviews, these organizations provide significant insight into the key elements of successful and impactful collaborations in the choral field.

Representing the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) is Ann Meier-Baker, Director of Music & Opera, who oversees grantmaking to nonprofit choruses, chamber music organizations, jazz ensembles, and opera companies. Chorus America (CA) is represented by Kim Sidey, Director of Grants, who manages CA's grantmaking activities, including the notable Music Education Partnership program, which funds collaborations between community singing organizations and schools. The National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) Foundation is represented by president and CEO, John Mlynczak.

The following commentary provided by these knowledgeable leaders dissects the anatomy of a truly successful and impactful collaboration. From their survey of the national field, their expertise serves as powerful testimony to how deeply choral music can make a difference through partnerships. While not every detail may be applicable to every choir, the ensuing responses offer a knowledgeable perspective on how choral leaders can leverage the ability of choral music to make a difference in the lives of their singers, audiences, and communities.

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## What role do collaborative efforts play in the art of choral singing?



**Ann Meier-Baker (NEA):** Choruses are all about collaboration. I once heard Anton Armstrong put it this way: “You’re a stand-out in choral singing when you don’t stand out.” Choral music depends on singers who listen, who pick up on one another’s contributions, and weave what each voice has to offer into the greater good. Each member must give a little here and take a little there in an effort to selflessly nurture the music for a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.



**John Mlynczak (NAMM):** Collaboration among ensembles nourishes the overall public view of the arts. By bringing people together, collaborative efforts strengthen perceptions of music advocacy, policymaking, and workforce development. When

people both in and out of the industry come together, their collective impact amplifies the need for funding and support of music and music education.



**Kim Sidey (CA):** Choral singing is inherently collaborative in nature. It taps into our human spirit and desire to connect with others, so it’s no surprise that partnerships can be key to promoting choral singing. Collaborations join together people from different groups, create spaces to reach people as they are, and become a vehicle for sharing new ideas and shared creativity.


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## What are some best practices that you’ve observed of impactful collaborative efforts that involve choral singing?

**Meier-Baker (NEA):** Effective collaborations include a few key elements. For one, the collaborators focus on what they’re going to *give* to the project, not just what they’ll get from it. Collaborative efforts can magnify the impact, but they also can significantly increase the amount of work and attention that each partner has to contribute.

Second, the most valuable collaborations are often not choruses working with other choruses. Rather, partnerships can be most powerful when different kinds of organizations work together to address an issue of overarching concern to their community. One example of this is the Urban Voices Project, an affiliate of the Street Symphony in Los Angeles. They provide accessible community singing and music education to unhoused individuals in Skid Row. They also offer special events throughout the year that connect participants to social services and health care.

Another example comes from rural Utah. To combat the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes, the Moab Music Festival collaborated with Japanese American composer and musician Kenji Bunch to create a work that shone light on the terrible history of confinement camps for Asians in the 1940s. Star Trek actor, author, and activist George Takei—who, with his family, spent four years in two internment camps—agreed to become the narrator for the piece. The partnership be-



tween the Festival, Bunch, and Takei eventually led to another original work that premiered in 2021 with support from the NEA.

In northeastern New York, the Saratoga Opera mounted a new production of composer Lembit Beecher and librettist Hannah Moscovitch's *Sky on Swings*, a musical and theatrical exploration of Alzheimer's disease as seen through the eyes of two women at different stages of dementia. They partnered with the Alzheimer's Association of Northeastern New York to create associated public events that explored the challenges of living with the disease and those caring for them.

One final element that unites these examples and so many others is the understanding that relationships among partners need to be nurtured and strengthened over time. Partnerships rely on people, and—just like any relationship—require open, thoughtful, and frequent communication about shared priorities and opportunities.

**Sidey (CA):** Many successful collaborations are community-led, where the needs and ideas of their stakeholders (e.g., participants, personnel, family members) shape programs and solutions that suit their local needs. Partners that engage in active listening and work from a curious mindset tend to learn a great deal from these types of individuals. Getting to know a community's needs and desires often helps partners articulate a shared definition of success.

Additionally, many impactful collaborations recognize that this type of work is people-powered. As such, they invest in individuals that make this work possible. Whether that means using grant funds to compensate teaching artists at fair market rates, supplementing teacher pay for additional assumed work, or financially honoring individuals for advisory roles, the act of recognizing the fair value of an individual's labor is an important part of a successful collaboration. When monetary compensation is not possible, project leaders might consider alternate forms of compensation, such as providing resources or supplies, offering professional development opportunities, and facilitating meaningful networking.

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## How do you measure the success of collaborations?

**Meier-Baker (NEA):** Measuring success can be difficult, which is why so many organizations resist doing it at all. From the onset, establishing clarity on a project's overarching goal is of primary importance. This goal must be routinely revisited and remain at the partners' top-of-mind so that any mid-course corrections can be made. A key question might be *what type of impact are you hoping to make?* For a broad impact, success may look like the total number of individuals reached. For a deeper impact, success may involve a smaller number of participants whose transformation demonstrates a lasting investment. Another common question relates to the "customer" of the project. Are they the singers themselves, or are you focusing more on the experience of the audience? Answering such questions will help identify which aspects of the project need to be measured to properly evaluate success.

**Mlynczak (NAMM):** It starts with clearly defined goals, a shared agenda, and individual roles and assignments for everyone involved. After continual progress, a first measure of success is the willingness of collaborators to continue to "show up" for the work at hand. At NAMM, a critical part of our work is building a coalition for music advocacy. In this space, success is defined by the readiness of individuals and organizations to continue to participate in advocacy work both at NAMM-sponsored national events, such as our policy-related work with federal legislators, and among grassroots efforts in their own communities.

**Sidey (CA):** Success can look very different from one project to another. In our grantmaking, we take time to learn and understand how projects define success and identify the changes they hope to observe or measure as a result of their work. As a funder, we rely on a partner's definition of success and not our own. Allowing grantees and project partners to define success is a valuable way of recognizing their community knowledge and expertise. Operating from a place of shared values nurtures freedom and trust to let grant partners define success and identify appropriate methods to observe or measure progress.

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**How might a choir obtain funding for a collaborative effort through your organization (or elsewhere)?**

**Sidey (CA):** Applications for our Music Education Partnership occur every other year, and we are delighted to provide multi-year funding to support selected partnerships for two school years. This multi-year commitment echoes clear research that states longer-term support is critical for successful project implementation. As any choral educator will tell you, this type of work takes time.

Chorus America also supports the commissioning of new works through the Dale Warland Singers Commission Grant presented in partnership with the American Composers Forum. Eligibility for this opportunity rotates by chorus-type on a three-year cycle.

**Meier-Baker (NEA):** The application criteria and process is available to all on the NEA website, [www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov). In my experience, however, seeking funding from grantmaking organizations isn't the only way to go about this. Sometimes, it's quicker and more efficient to ask individuals to financially support a project that you know they will care about. In reality, grantmaking agencies and foundations may change their focus from time-to-time. Meanwhile, people (especially local people) tend to stick with their priorities.

**Mlynczak (NAMM):** The NAMM Foundation supports the Best Communities for Music Education program. For over twenty-five years, this designation has celebrated districts and individual schools for their support and commitment to music and music education, as well as their efforts to ensure access to music for all students as part of a well-rounded education. While the Foundation does not provide direct grants to schools or organizations, working as a community to obtain this designation nurtures the local narrative surrounding music and music education and strengthens a compelling case for funding opportunities.

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**What advice would you give a choral leader who aspires to develop more impactful collaborations with their choir?**

**Sidey (CA):** Prioritize shared goals and invest in your people. Remember, collaborations are driven primarily by people, so getting the right players and the right mindset in place is critical for success.

**Meier-Baker (NEA):** Choirs are composed of people with various skills, experiences, and networks. Each member of a partnership should have a tailored “job description” that will help them leverage their unique strengths for the good of the whole. It's easy to take a one-size-fits-all approach, but as is more often the case, one size only fits one. Be open to possibility.

**Mlynczak (NAMM):** Think big and believe in the power of a collective agenda. Music is a community-centered activity. Focusing on the local community and spreading the joy of music to those closest to you will ensure that support for music prevails over time.

## Conclusion

ACDA's Advocacy statement says that choral music “builds connectivity throughout communities,” a sentiment certainly echoed by the organizations presented in this interview. Collaborative efforts among choral organizations and other partners, especially at the local level, yield a great potential to make a difference in the community and build considerable support for the future of choral music.

One thing is clear: one-sided partnerships are rarely successful. As the interviewees suggested, the development of successful partnerships—especially with collaborators outside the arts sector—require mutual goal setting, shared roles and responsibilities, and benchmarks for success. Prioritizing the local community's needs is especially key, and providing opportunities for stakeholder buy-in maximizes the potential for lasting change and impact.

As inherently communal entities, choirs have the ability to bring people together, build lasting relationships, and collectively create something remarkable. The possibility of partnerships—especially with organizations outside the realm of the arts—unlocks opportunities for new audiences, community investment, and lasting impact. 