

# Stretching the Skills of Your Community Choir

by Michael Kemp

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Let's face it. Conducting a community choir is different from conducting with advanced college or professional choirs. Although interpretive goals are basically the same for all choirs, conductors working with amateur choirs must employ many skills and sensitivities beyond those that are taught in standard choral training. A community choir is composed mostly of amateurs who, by definition, simply love to sing. These singers care about quality. They work hard to sing well and improve their musical skills, but for them singing is essentially an enjoyable and fulfilling pastime. A significant difference among community choirs and college or professional choirs is that the mem-

bers of a community choir don't have to be there. They are neither graded nor paid. As a result, conductors of amateur choirs have the added responsibility to motivate their singers to be there, a skill not often taught to conductors. In addition, because most amateur choir members have not had private voice lessons, rehearsals must include continuous reinforcing of fundamental vocal skills. The most significant of these fundamentals are posture, breath support, and tone placement. The language often used to explain these concepts is obtuse to most amateur singers. They know they should sit up, but what that means specifically might be unclear and interpreted differently by almost everyone. The same is true regarding breath support and tone placement. This article will provide ideas and explanations in language that is accessible for amateur singers.

## Posture and Spinal Alignment

Unintentionally, amateur singers tend to slump forward with their upper torsos and then look up at the conductor, jaws lifting forward. When they begin to sing with this posture, tension is created in the upper abdominal wall, which slows the amount of upward air flow. Inadequate air flow puts strain on the larynx and creates pitch instability and weak sound. With seniors, it produces what we interpret as

an “old” sound. Singers need to be consistently reminded to hold their upper torsos in a higher position, in what the Alexander Technique refers to as perpetual lengthening. This should be a fluid feeling as opposed to a rigid, stiff position. Heads should be facing forward instead of looking down toward the floor. Following is a procedure to help your amateur singers assume exemplary singers’ posture:

- Whether sitting or standing, have singers look up as if into a tree, naturally bending their upper torsos slightly backward. The object of this is the resulting feeling of the lower back, which should be retained during the next steps. *(Editor’s note: The original article available at [acda.org/choraljournal](http://acda.org/choraljournal) includes eight positioning photos.)*
- Retaining the lower back in that resulting position, elevate the back of the top of the head straight up, as high as possible.
- Now, while still elevating, bend the head slightly down toward the upper torso, and then the upper torso slightly down toward the lower torso. This slight rounding of the still elevated body is the perfect foundation for singing. Professional opera singers have told me this slight rounding is critical.

This posture is imperative, whether standing or sitting. To countermand the tendency to slump forward, have singers instead lean slightly back, keeping the upper abdominal wall from tightening, a restriction that diminishes breath support. The upper torso must not be allowed to collapse forward and down, but rather must retain this elevated position. Sitting forward in your seats is not as crucial to good singing as staying elevated.

In order to be aware of the posture of singers, a conductor must look at them often. When there is a section of the music in which you don’t need to follow the score closely, concentrate visually on your singers.

### **Breath Support and Air Flow**

The term vocal cords is misleading. Singers do not have vocal cords, but simply two flaps of skin in the larynx called vocal folds. The vocal folds are drawn together by upward air flow, a phenomenon called the Bernoulli Effect. The elasticity of the skin then pulls the vocal folds back apart, and the air flow brings them back together again. This con-

tinual process creates vocal sound. Breath support is the key to moving maximum air flow through the vocal folds, the only way the folds can work efficiently. The vocal folds act involuntarily, being activated not on their own, but only by upward air flow. Discomfort in the vocal apparatus during singing is most often caused by illicit physical effort centering in the vocal folds, instead of singers allowing the folds to work involuntarily.

#### *Breath Support Analogy #1*

After making sure your singers are in a healthy posture of perpetual lengthening, an efficient way to teach breath support is the “fire breathing dragon” analogy. Imagine a medieval dragon burning down a village with its fiery breath. That fire would have emerged from an extremely open throat, gently and consistently spewing the fire up from the belly and out the mouth. This is the physical sensation you should experience while singing. Be an actor and imitate what this would feel like to an imaginary dragon. Get accustomed to the idea initially by making a lot of breath sound. Then do it again, but this time a little more gently and without making sound, being particularly aware of what is happening physically in your lower torso. Your tummy should feel as though it is pushing in the direction of your backbone.

Now repeat the “fire breath,” but do it without making any sound and pushing a bit more gently. Be careful not to engage in the “fire breathing dragon” effect with too much force and jerkiness. Good breath support should result in singing that is carried forward by a consistent, gentle stream of air flow. In the process exhibiting good breath support, the musculature of the lower torso should feel similar to the gradual gripping of a good handshake.

As a reminder of this “fire breathing dragon” effect, place one fist on your sternum and your other hand on top of your fist.

Now using the gentle but solid breath support described above, hum a quiet, sad moan, aiming the sound into your hands. Do not allow any effort to initiate in the vocal apparatus.

Have singers place a hand lightly over their throats as a reminder not to allow effort there, and then, still utilizing the “fire breathing dragon” breath support, hum a few medium-range pitches. The only noticeable physical effort should come from the lower torso, the sole basis for lifting the air flow.

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## *Breath Support Analogy #2*

Another useful analogy is to have singers think about the physical effects of jumping on a trampoline or a pogo stick. That sense of going down and springing back upward is what the initiation of vocal sound should feel like. Remind singers to “trampoline” the first note of a phrase, going down in their bodies for breath support, with a sense of getting under the note and lifting it. They should also “re-trampoline” the target notes within a phrase, or whenever they feel pressure creeping up into their throats. Relaxing the lower torso for each breath just prior to renewing this trampoline effect is essential to keeping the singing voice relaxed.

## *Breath Support Analogy #3*

Good singing should feel like wearing imaginary suspenders, pulling down on the front straps while singing, yet another useful analogy for breath support.

Singing should feel like long-distance speaking, rather than talking on the phone. In long-distance speaking, we naturally project our sound, automatically supporting and using more air. Have singers sing a simple phrase with their hands up to their ears, as if singing into a cell phone. Then repeat the phrase, projecting the sound to someone on the other side of the room. The result of this long-distance singing is more effective breath support.

## *Things to Avoid*

As much as possible with amateur singers, and especially with aging singers, avoid staccato warm-ups and glottal attacks of vocal entrances. Singing must be primarily *sostenuto*, a horizontal singing style that focuses on linear flow. Vertical punching should be used sparingly, only for necessary musical effects. Why? Because consistent air flow and breath support, from one note to another, is important. Even the initiation of the first note should already be a part of the journey through the melodic phrase, with a trajectory aiming down the phrase. Staccato singing stops this horizontal flow, and then amateur singers struggle to re-initiate ongoing air flow.

Besides affecting the quality of vocal sound, increased air flow and breath support solve the problem of singers running out of air, a major complaint of singers over the age of fifty. Although it seems contradictory, if you want to sing longer on one breath, use more air (and more “fire breathing dragon” breath support), rather than less. Don’t try to control the amount of air being used. The more air you

use, the more efficiently the air is used, and therefore less is wasted, leaving more air with which to sing. Increased air flow and breath support are also assets in developing better agility on fast moving notes and in helping singers move gracefully between registers.

## **Tone Placement**

Though posture and breath support are for me the foundational vocal concepts, tone placement is a crucial ingredient in helping singers brighten and project their voices. Here is a simple way to explain tone placement:

Ask your singers to feel with the tips of their tongues the hard surface behind the upper teeth above the tongue. Explain that this is called the hard palette and that they should in their imaginations aim their sound into that space, instead of just letting the sound feel as if it is falling out of their mouths.

Also related to tone placement, there is a helpful technique called “flaring the nostrils.” Have singers touch the place where the bottom of their nostrils and their cheeks come together. Where they feel their fingers on their cheeks, have them raise their cheeks and keep them in that position while singing. It feels similar to a clarinetist’s embouchure. “Flaring the nostrils” makes more complete use of the cavities in the facial structure to enhance and amplify vocal sound. This technique adds clarity to both pitch and enunciation, and significantly aids projection, the carrying power of the voice. A side benefit is that your singers look more pleasant to the audience.

Singers should generally use smaller, more circular-shaped lips and sing as if sending the sound out mostly through the top half of the mouth. Have them hold a sheet of music between their opened teeth and instruct them to imagine their sound going above the paper, not below it.

Singers should sing as if the source of the sound is coming up from the floor and out the top back of their heads, rather than the source being in their mouths and then falling down to the floor. This creates better tone placement and breath support.

Breathe through both the nose and the mouth. Breathing through only the mouth decreases natural nasal resonance that is an important part of tone placement, projection, and pitch clarity. Breathing just through the nose means that inhalation is slower and less efficient, and that the vocal apparatus needs to be re-opened and re-initiated in order to sing after each breath. So, breathe through both.

## Open Throats

Singing with an open throat should be the last concept that a conductor mentions, and only if needed. There is a danger that saying too much too soon to amateur singers about open throats could be misinterpreted, causing tone placement to slip back and down, instead of up and forward. Singing with an open throat is not about opening the mouth wider, but rather about opening unrestricted passage up and down the throat. Mention the open throat concept only if the choral sound is shallow, and then speak of it in terms of increasing the echo quality of the sound. Shallow sound becomes an increasing concern as amateur singers begin to age, but shallow singing can also slip into the sound of singers of any age, and therefore needs to be addressed. If the choral sound needs more warmth and depth, referred to here as a sound with a feeling of echo, consider this procedure (Figure 1).

Have the choir sing this simple exercise on an “aw” vowel, keeping in mind the already discussed posture and breath support. Focus on sostenuto and use a small mouthed “aw.” Repeat the exercise, but this time have the singers cup their hands around their mouths, as if to shout at someone far away.

Singers will hear from their own voices a remarkably echo-like sound. Repeat the melody once again, with the cupped hands now held eight inches away from their mouths, but instructing them do whatever it takes to sing with that same echo-like quality as before. Then repeat the phrase without using the hands at all, but still insisting on an echo-like quality.

This echoing quality is the result of singing with what we call an open throat. Remind your singers, especially your senior singers, of the importance of always feeling the echo

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The image shows a musical score for Soprano (S) and Alto (A) parts. The music is in 4/4 time and features a melody with a crescendo and decrescendo. The lyrics "Waw\_ waw\_ waw\_ waw" are written below the notes. The Soprano part is on a treble clef and the Alto part is on a bass clef.

Figure 1. Exercise on “Aw”

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quality in their sound. It is helpful to note that singing with a more open throat is also the primary solution to sharp singing and vocal scooping.

## Getting the Rehearsal Started

Motivating our singers requires a stimulating rehearsal plan. The opening of a rehearsal should reinforce the love of singing, creating positive feelings that elevate the rest of the rehearsal. During these initial rehearsal moments, avoid focusing on tedious musical brain challenges. Instead, use something melodious and singable to momentarily let the voice “out to play.” The tedium of sharpening skills and learning difficult notes needs to be faced eventually, but if the joy of singing has been reestablished first, then choir members will sing whatever needs to be worked on more enthusiastically.

Rather than beginning rehearsals with extended explanations and too much talking, simply begin the melody of a canon that everyone knows and one they can quickly memorize and then sing without music while getting to their seats. An example is this four-part arrangement this author made of Mozart’s famous “Alleluia” canon. I have always loved this canon, but because it had only three parts, it was impractical for an SATB choir. So a fourth part was created, which you are welcome to use (Figure 2 on the next page).

Warm-ups should not cover every aspect of the choral art. Save more complex musical exercises for mid-rehearsal, finessing as the need arises. By focusing initially on vocal fundamentals, these skills become the default vocal technique of our singers, an automatic part of their singing habits, and our rehearsals reap the benefits.

How does warming up these fundamental skills help our choirs? If appropriate posture and optimal breath support become habitual, about eighty percent of common vocal/choral concerns will never appear. Working initially on vocal fundamentals solves most problems before you even get to the music. Among those issues that can be solved in advance by developing a more reliable default vocal technique are flatness of pitch, listless singing, thin sounding voices, lack of agility, cracking voices, voices that tire too quickly, lifeless phrasing, and an inability to project sound. Using this approach will solve most of these common frustrations so that you can move more quickly to aesthetic considerations. Wouldn’t we all like to get there sooner?

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## Rehearsing Your Choir is Reactive

After these initial warming up activities, the conductor's job becomes a reactive endeavor, reacting to whatever is heard in the process of teaching notes. With community choirs, there is much that needs the keen attention of the conductor. Whereas advanced college and professional choirs are usually able to start in on aesthetics right away, with most community choirs, the choral instrument needs substantial fine-tuning before moving into deeper artistic issues.

Beyond refining tone quality, an important objective is to help our community choir members develop the discipline of listening carefully to one another while singing. This listening affects all aspects of precision, rhythmic ensemble, uniform articulation styles, and dynamic proportions. Such aesthetic considerations necessitate instant recognition and analysis by the conductor, followed by practical and encouraging approaches to solving whatever the problems are.

## Helping Your Choir Develop Artistic Intuitions

Amateur singers seldom have natural, artistic intuitions about issues such as the ebb and flow of momentum in

musical phrases. Typically, amateurs sing individual notes without any sense of the relationship the notes have to one another. They tend to leave aesthetic concerns to the person they consider to be the only real artist in the room: the conductor. It usually doesn't even cross their minds that they could use their own musical imaginations.

One of the most effective methods to enhance a choir's artistry is for the conductor to convince the singers that they should develop their own artistic imaginations, shaping lovely phrases, instead of singing seemingly unrelated notes.

Once choir members begin to use their own artistic imaginations, the conductor's job is to shape those cumulative artistic intuitions into one aesthetic entity. Don't let the conductor be seen as the only artistic soul in the room.

## Being Sensitive to Amateur Singers

In amateur choirs, we should be sensitive during rehearsals to the feelings of our singers, keeping in mind that one's voice is intensely personal. If you play an oboe and the sound is not all you had hoped for, you can say "it must be the reed." But, singers cannot distance themselves from their own voices in this way. In fact, emotionally they often

The image shows a musical score for a four-part vocal choir and piano accompaniment. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The vocal parts are numbered 1 through 4. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: Part 1: Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. Part 2: Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. Part 3: Al - le - ly - ia, al - le - lu - ia. Part 4: Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. The piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and provides harmonic support for the vocal parts.

Figure 2. Alleluia Warm-up  
(W. A. Mozart, arranged by Michael Kemp)

equate their voices with their own identities. Singers do not have a choice of instruments. They are stuck with the one with which they were born.

Be cautious about making negative comments about voices. When working with amateurs, comments about voices in rehearsals should not be viewed as criticism but rather as helpful and intriguing means to improve their vocal skills. Singers will be more open to working on a vocal problem if the conductor first compliments something they are already doing well (use your imagination, there is always something), and only then suggest the needed adjustment, which could be added to what they are already doing well.

In a similar regard, conductors of amateur choirs sometimes unknowingly hammer away with great intensity at vocal or musical concerns, but when singers finally overcome the problem, far less is made of the improvement than the memorable intensity of the original concern. As a result, the subconscious minds of singers linger on the conductor's temporary disappointment in them. They feel little pride in the eventual accomplishment because so little was made of it in relationship to the problem. Yet, it is pride of accomplishment that causes community choruses to sing with spirit and confidence, enriching their choral sound. So when dealing with a vocal concern, be calm, patient, and encouraging, and when the problem gets solved, overdo the congratulations!

### **Protecting the Voices of Directors**

Most choral directors find that rehearsals are tough on their voices, especially when conducting amateur choirs that need modeling and note help. As conductors begin to age, they notice this vocal stress more readily, perhaps thinking that their voices are simply getting old. That isn't the problem. We need to be more aware of unnecessary vocal strain on our own voices during our rehearsals and develop healthier habits to avoid it.

So what is it about rehearsals that tire our voices?

- We are so busy preparing for rehearsal that we fail to get ourselves ready vocally. Take a few minutes to warm up your own voice quietly before every rehearsal. Be aware of your posture and breath support. Above all in your personal warm-up, think horizontally. Begin with expressive middle range humming and move on to simple phrases in

which you can concentrate on technique. Avoid staccati.

- Conductors tend to start rehearsals by speaking loudly over the choir to settle them down, which is not a healthy start for your voice. As the rehearsal begins, be aware of your speaking voice, making it gentle and inviting and using natural inflection, rather than allowing your sound to be harsh and punched.

- Out of expediency, we tend to sing all the voice parts whenever there is a problem, often over the singing of the choir. Besides being an inefficient teaching method, when we do this, we sing too loudly. When a voice part needs note help, stop the music and have the piano slowly play the problem passages. Singing over your choir's singing results in the choir learning little, while conductors are wearing out their voices.

- When male conductors sing women's parts in falsetto, they should be sure to use ample breath support. When female conductors sing men's parts, they should mix some head voice in with the chest tone and use forward tone placement.

- When helping voice parts on the spot by singing their notes, the conductor is inevitably looking down at the music on the stand. Proper posture is compromised, the head is lowered, and the upper abdominal wall is tight. This posture results in inadequate air flow and a throaty, swallowed singing quality. When you need to model the various voice parts, pick your music off the stand and hold it as you want your choir members to hold their music, allowing you to use better vocal technique.

- When speaking to the choir, avoid leaning forward toward the singers, because this posture tightens the upper abdominal wall, diminishing the air flow needed for healthy singing. See the earlier discussion about posture.

- There will be times when you need to quickly sing voice parts and do not have the time to stop and lift up your music. In that case, develop the habit of putting one leg a little behind you, sticking your butt out slightly and arching your back so that your upper torso is high and your jaw is not jammed down on your vocal folds. The vocal result is that your voice is free and unimpeded. This type of posture is a

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physical strategy used by opera singers when they have to sing down to someone on the stage, e.g., a fallen lover or comrade. The audience can't see that they have made this slight physical adjustment, but their sound is undiminished.

## Boosting Retention at the End of Rehearsals

Here is a significant way to help choirs retain concepts worked on during a rehearsal. Use the final minutes of rehearsal for an interactive discussion with your singers concerning ideas that surfaced during the rehearsal. As individuals offer concepts that made a difference to them in their singing, the conductor should clarify the concepts. During this reminder process, the singers could write down the most helpful ideas on provided 3 x 5 cards. Strongly suggest that just before the next rehearsal, they read their notes. This intellectual closure helps the next rehearsal begin on the level that this one ended, instead of slipping back a few paces.

## Closing Rehearsals with a Cool Down

A former high school student of mine, Jarod Spector, is the lead singer in the Broadway musical *Jersey Boys*. We went out after one of his performances, but he wouldn't allow himself to converse for almost fifteen minutes, explaining that he always went through a cool-down procedure of

light humming right after a performance. Both vocally and psychologically, this seems a valuable concept for amateur choirs. It helps our choirs transition from vigorous rehearsal singing to the more gentle vocal usage of everyday life. This technique also avoids having singers leave rehearsal in a whipped, frenetic state. Consider ending rehearsal with a short moment of simple, quiet singing. This more gentle singing could be akin to the following traditional canon, to which I again added a fourth voice part. This easily memorized music can become a traditional and unrehearsed ending to each rehearsal, sending people out with a smile (Figure 3).

## Vocal Solutions for Aging Amateur Singers

Speaking of developing practical solutions to vocal problems, how do we deal with the aging singers in our community choirs? There is a superb old movie by the name of *Christmas without Snow* in which John Houseman plays a retired college choral conductor who, in his retirement, becomes the director of a non-auditioned church choir. The story line follows his budding relationship with the choir within the context of preparing Handel's *Messiah*. Whoever wrote the script must have been personally involved in an amateur choir, because among the singers in the movie is every choir character any of us has known.

One of those movie characters is a dedicated older alto

Unhurried liting tempo ♩ = 46

1 Oh, how love - ly is the eve - ning, is the eve - ning.

2 When the bells are sweet - ly ring - ing, sweet - ly ring - ing.

3 Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong ding, ding dong ding.

4 Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong.

**Figure 3.** *Oh, How Lovely* Cooldown  
(Traditional German, arranged by Michael Kemp)

with a heart of gold and genuine love of singing, but who is beginning to experience diminishing vocal skills. It is touching and sad to watch the scene in which Houseman pulls her aside and with obvious awkwardness, gives her the dreaded “too old to sing” speech. This woman, for whom singing in the choir is so important, was asked to leave the choir. This was the accepted solution to vocal problems of aging singers in past generations. Singing in the choir was at the center of this committed choir member’s life, especially so now in her senior years when life was less active and increasingly lonely. Removing her from the choir seems both insensitive and unnecessary.

You might be saying to yourself that my sentiments regarding senior singers are rather pollyanna-like, but some of these senior singers are becoming detrimental to the sound of my choir, frustrating other singers and diminishing the overall aesthetic result. We directors don’t mean to be insensitive to the needs of seniors, but we are engaged in an obvious struggle. We want to respect our seniors and keep our choir lofts filled, but we also need to protect the quality of our choirs, somewhat threatened now by the growing number of aging singers.

Which begs the question, are the diminishing vocal abilities of our seniors due strictly to aging, or can their singing skills be revived or revitalized? The fact is, we need senior singers in our choirs and they need us. Instead of giving them the dreaded “too old to sing” speech, we should do what we can to help senior singers become and remain assets in our choirs.

I became involved with senior singers when I offered to assist my then ninety-four-year-old mother, Helen Kemp, with her retirement home choir. I was immediately impressed by the passionate enthusiasm and obvious dedication of these senior singers. I caught myself wishing that my own community choir members cared so much and sang with such commitment and joy. It came to me that the perfect choir member would have the attitude of a senior singer, but with a younger sounding voice! Or, could we combine these ideas by helping senior voices sound younger?

These dedicated older singers do not have vocal problems on purpose. They clearly want to be as good as they can be, but they simply don’t know what steps to take. The more I observed their singing, the more I realized that many of their vocal problems were shared to some extent by all of them.

I volunteered to give every member of my mother’s choir a private voice lesson, and was able to identify and develop solutions to the most common of their vocal concerns. Those findings were illuminating, and so I expanded the research by giving voice lessons to senior singers of my own community chorus. Aging singers need to be proactive in re-developing certain physical habits. *The common thread to the vocal health of aging singers centers on posture and breath support.* Every rehearsal for aging singers should begin by focusing on these two basic concepts.

Posture is the most significant in helping an aging voice sound younger. Although many seniors are not able to be too strenuous, it is essential to find a way to keep their upper torsos from collapsing forward and down. Ask them to put their shoulders back and look up at the ceiling. Then retain that feeling in their torsos, but look straight ahead, head held high as if having just won an award. Next ask that they pretend to be ballet dancers, holding their rounded arms out in front of them in a ready position, shoulders still back. Now without getting too rigorous, have them go back and forth between slumping and good singing posture. The important thing is that seniors know what to do when they want to sing their best.

Many seniors use very little breath support. This discipline no longer occurs naturally, but almost all seniors can imitate, to some extent, the “fire breathing dragon.” Using the resulting physical sensation in the lower torsos, first have the choir hum a few middle-range moaning sounds, and then carry the concept into simple pitches. Follow this by singing the first six measures of “My Country ‘tis of Thee” (in the key of F) twice, first without any feeling of breath support, and then singing with breath support. When you tell senior singers to use breath support, they will now know what you mean and will be empowered to do it.

### Conclusion

Unlike most college and professional choirs, the sound, artistry and attitude of community choirs needs to be continuously developed. To be successful with community choirs, conductors need to utilize far more than the traditional skills taught in standard choral training. These additional pragmatic skills and sensitivities include:

- vocal coach



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- music theory teacher
- drama coach
- speech teacher
- psychologist and
- salesman

Look closely at this list and consider the misconception that conducting community choirs is easier than conducting college and professional choirs. Admittedly, when working with community choirs, we often have to teach basics and smooth out rough edges, but the result is well worth the effort. As the name “community chorus” implies, there is a built-in sense of community, a feeling much like an extended family. The singers form an amazing array of intelligent, dedicated, and extremely interesting people, and it is a privilege to be a part of enriching so many lives with beauty. 