

A Life of Song: Considerations for the Collegiate-Based Town and Gown Choir

by John C. Hughes and Jon Hurty

“There was nothing in my childhood, only work... But I have forgotten one thing—the singing. There was such a lot of singing in the villages then, and this was my pleasure, too. Boys sang in the fields, and at night we all met at the Forge and sang. The chapels were full of singing... So I lie; I have had pleasure. I have had singing.”

—Fred Mitchell,
quoted in *Akenfield: Portrait
of an English Village* by
Ronald Blythe¹

Perhaps more so than any other type of choral ensemble, collegiate-based multigenerational choirs embody “a life of song,” the theme of the 2017 ACDA National Conference. Many colleges and universities offer a “town and gown” choir—an ensemble open to students, faculty, staff, and singers from the surrounding community. For the purposes of this article, the term town and gown

choir will describe a multigenerational choir that functions primarily in a college or university setting and includes both students and community members.

Undergraduate students away from home for the first time stand next to community members who have sung in the choir for decades. There are benefits for everyone who participates in this kind of ensemble. Musically, community members’ years of experience are advantageous, and younger voices balance more mature sounds. Furthermore, students recognize that regardless of major or profession, one can and should make singing a lifetime activity, and community members are energized by their interaction with young adults. This article explores the musical, social, and vocational benefits of these choirs and discusses the opportunities and challenges that are specific to town and gown choirs. The authors (who conduct multigenerational choirs at their respective institutions) offer suggestions for leading these unique ensembles.

Challenges and Opportunities

Every choir, whether high school, church, university or professional, comes with its own potential for success and inherent challenges. Multigenerational town and gown choirs are no exception. Two of the primary challenges are the wide range of individual skill levels of singers and limited rehearsal time—both of which can engender performances that are not of the highest quality. However, these challenges can also provide special opportunities for conductors and ensembles. Conductors have the opportunity once or twice each week to unite people of different generations and talent levels into something larger than themselves. By creating what Weston Noble refers to as “the special world,” when “everything is in line—we are momentarily whole,” conductors can guide choir members beyond social and generational divisions and toward oneness with each other.² The unique setting of these choirs provides particular opportunities.

Repertoire selection and using the skills, knowledge, and talents of the surrounding academic community can help everyone be more engaged in the artistic process. Examples include asking a German major to read a German text aloud or provide a translation for the group or inviting an English professor to lead a discussion of the text. One could even develop a course that addresses the context, history, and related material of a major work that the choir is preparing.

At Augustana College, we have an interdisciplinary general education requirement called “Learning Communities.” In conjunction with

a performance of Britten’s *War Requiem*, I (Jon Hurty) collaborated with English and Religion faculty to offer a Learning Community course exploring the musical, social, religious, textual, and historical context of the piece. In addition to the normal coursework, students did research on various aspects of the work, then shared their information with the larger ensemble through email and short presentations.

Involving the singers and sparking discussion about the music and text not only bridges the generation gap but also unifies them as an ensemble. Town and gown choirs can be more than a class to students or

another weekly obligation for community members. Rather, they can be an event that members look forward to in their own way—a break from exams and papers, a night out for parents of young children, or a social activity for retirees. Interesting repertoire presented in an engaging and collaborative manner is perhaps the fastest way to create a feeling of community.

Town and gown choirs can also help conductors establish a local singing culture. The addition of recent college graduates and high school students can not only improve the group’s musical quality but can also infuse the ensemble with new energy and invigorate its sense of potential. Alumni who stay in the area after graduation may be invited to sing in the choir. They will be familiar with the conductor’s rehearsal process and can serve as ambassadors for the ensemble. If a conductor is skilled at creating a fulfilling rehearsal climate and rewarding performance experiences, younger members will make time in their busy schedules to participate. When current college students see recent graduates participate in the ensemble, they may be more likely to continue to sing after graduation.

Sometimes community members ask if their high school or even junior high school children can be involved in this kind of choir in order to provide a kind of family activity. The question arises as to whether it is appropriate to have such young singers in the ensemble. This kind of situation can be resolved by talking to the parent and child and making sure the young singer understands

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the commitment and the parent is aware of their responsibility in guiding and helping the child learn the music. Because this is not a common situation, it may not be a problem to have one or two younger voices in an ensemble. Regardless, conductors should be upfront and clear about expectations.

On the other end of the spectrum, working with aging voices is a persistent issue in town and gown choirs and one that is somewhat unique to these ensembles (along with church and community choirs). While some professional, symphonic, and opera choruses impose age limits, many collegiate-based choirs invite singers to participate as long as they would like. As the population of aging adults in the United States continues to grow, conductors need to develop strategies to help older singers. Working with aging voices is a topic too large for this article; however, many useful resources on the topic exist.³

The main thing to consider is that unlike other collegiate ensembles that may comprise music majors or other serious college-age singers, town and gown choirs are most likely made up of people who have either not taken voice lessons, taken them only occasionally, or have not studied voice for many years. Therefore, the warm-up exercises at the beginning of a rehearsal are probably the only vocal training these singers receive. It is imperative to make vocalises meaningful to aging singers, who increasingly struggle with flexibility, agility, and intonation.⁴ In her book *Sing Into Your Sixties... and Beyond! A Manual and Anthology for Group and*

Individual Voice Instruction,⁵ Sangeetha Rayapati presents five primary areas that should be addressed. Although these categories of warm-ups can be applied to voices of any age, it is

more critical within the context of the aging voice to include regular and carefully planned warm-up sequences.



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- 1) Improving respiration—Panting, pulsations, brrr (lip trills)/sniff, staccato.
- 2) Managing vibrato—This is a particularly important element in working with aging voices in the choir and can include crescendo/decrescendo, visualization of purity of tone, and lightening the tone/concept.
- 3) Improving phonation—Sing/song and elevated speech level, lip trills, slides, and glides.
- 4) Improving resonance—Experiment with nasal and breathy sounds, hum/chew, descending slides, octave leaps, arpeg-

gios, using the sound “ner” in sequence.

- 5) Improving Articulation—Word plays, tongue twisters, hung-a, alternating vowels, tongue flapping.

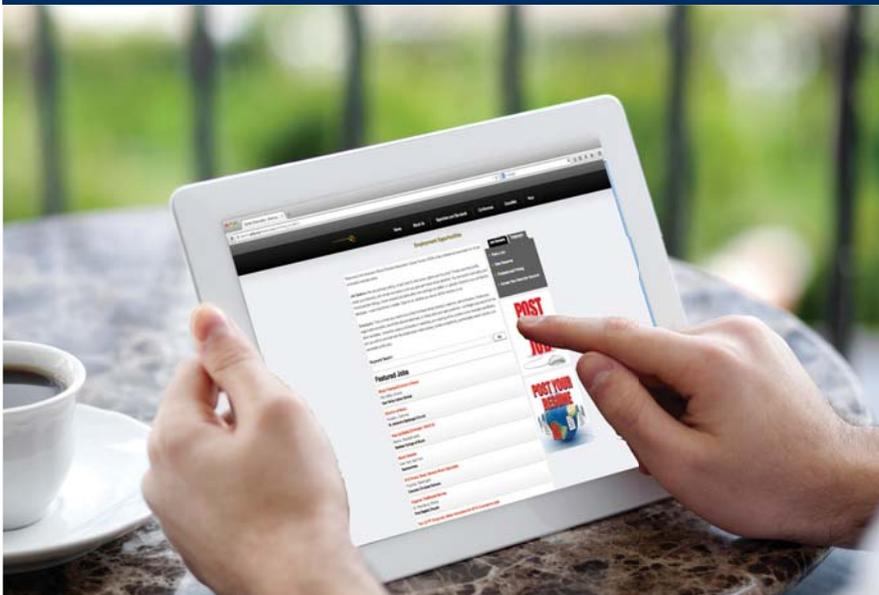
Another issue is whether or not to audition choir members. Sometimes, particular groups have a history of not auditioning singers. Altering that tradition can be difficult and may change the character of the ensemble. When I (Jon Hurty) arrived at Augustana College, the Handel Oratorio Society had been a completely non-auditioned choir for over a hundred years. I was interested in finding out more about

the singers and their ability levels, so I asked everyone to schedule a time so that I could hear them sing. This was not going to be an official “audition,” but rather an opportunity for me to get to know the singers and hear them sing a short passage. The uproar was deafening. Although I did follow through with the process, many singers were upset and thought that my primary motive was to try to “weed out” anyone who I thought was not good enough to be in the group. Ultimately, it worked out. I did not re-audition members in subsequent years, most singers stayed in the group, and I did get a sense of what kind of singers were involved. However, it was a relatively traumatic experience and one that I would recommend approaching carefully. Of course, if the goal is actually to change the character of the group from a non-auditioned to an auditioned ensemble, then a conductor must move forward with that goal in mind. One must first, however, determine whether the group is going to move to a new practice before embarking on that kind of change.

There are a number of other particularly problematic issues related to non-auditioned town and gown choirs. Singers with little or no experience may join and feel lost. Likewise, people with poor reading skills or significant pitch issues can disrupt the rehearsal process and adversely affect a performance. Conductors should prepare for these issues in two ways. First, proactive steps can be taken to address these issues in general. For example, email PDFs of marked scores to singers and

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ask them to transfer markings into their scores outside of rehearsal at their own pace, or place a score on a document camera that projects the image when giving markings to help people follow along. Pass out rehearsal schedules. Be prepared to teach notes and rhythms and how to sing them. In other words, remember that these are not professional singers. Inform choir members about learning-track providers such as www.cyberbass.com or www.choraltracks.com and encourage them to practice outside of rehearsal. Preempting issues is essential to limiting frustration (on both the singers' and conductor's part) and ensuring a smooth rehearsal process and successful performance. Second, establish personal relationships with members of the choir. Each singer and situation is unique and should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Establishing positive working relationships with singers is crucial to having difficult conversations about continuing to sing in the choir.

Another issue is finding ways to engage the best singers in a community into the town and gown choir. One method of attracting higher-level singers is to create a "core" group or a separate group of auditioned community singers that sings for major performances but also has additional separate performances during the year. These singers often do not want to make a commitment only to singing major works with non-auditioned singers but will do so if they have another outlet for smaller and perhaps more refined singing experiences. It is also possible with many major works to find

movements or passages that require a smaller ensemble, such as some of the *concertino/ripieno* sections in Handel's *Messiah* or *turba* choruses in Bach's Passions. Although this needs to be handled carefully, many of the non-auditioned singers understand that they too have the opportunity to audition for the select group. They also understand that their performances are enhanced by the addition of singers who might not normally choose to be in the group.

Standing arrangements are particularly important for choirs that have a range of generations. Given their own choice, most singers

would decide to sit with their friends and especially not with someone in another age group. For the highest impact on the group, it is important to establish a seating chart as soon as possible in the rehearsal sequence. Depending on the goal, many choices can be made. Options include:

- 1) Mixing younger and older voices together in every other seat. Doing so mixes the sound qualities of the voices and creates the best overall blending of disparate voices. Second, and perhaps even more im-



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portantly, it creates a social environment where singers with different goals and ages intermix socially.

- 2) Placing stronger voices in the back of the arrangement. Some strong singers gravitate to the front of the risers because they feel more connected with the conductor and have a better sense of hearing the whole ensemble, but by putting stronger voices in the back, less confident voices will hear stronger voices, and they will provide better leadership for the entire ensemble.
- 3) If the group is large enough, it is also possible to create small pods of younger and older singers that are influenced by each other. This allows sing-

ers to be close to their friends while still providing the musical and social mixing that is so important to town and gown choirs.

Many other options are available depending on the size of the group, the acoustic of the hall, accompaniment, etc. However, the primary goal should be to use the standing arrangement to encourage community and a higher level of musical achievement.

Case Studies

Town and gown choirs are as unique as the institutions they serve. In Table 1 on pages 56-58, five conductors of collegiate-based multigenerational choirs describe their respective ensembles. Respondents come from a variety of institutions,

including small, private colleges, Big Ten universities, and an Ivy League school. Each of the ensembles represented has its own constituency, culture, goals, and focus. They vary in size from around 65 singers to almost 200; some require auditions and others do not; some focus on choral-orchestral works while others perform a wide variety of repertoire. Regardless of these differences, each of these choirs meet once or twice per week to offer people of all ages and walks of life a meaningful musical experience.

Conclusion

Because some collegiate-based multigenerational choirs have been in existence for many decades, many readers might assume that this kind of ensemble is limited to those institutions with longstanding traditions.

Table 1 - Town and Gown Choir Case Studies

	Camerata, University of Iowa, David Puderbaugh, conductor	UMS Choral Union Ann Arbor, MI Scott Hanoian, music director and conductor	Choral Union, Ripon College, John C. Hughes, conductor	Handel Oratorio Society, Augustana College, Jon Hurty, conductor	Yale Camerata, Yale University, Marguerite Brooks, conductor
How many people sing in the choir?	c. 75 (63 student, 12 faculty/staff/community members)	180 (approximately 60 students, 120 non-students)	65 (35 students, 30 non-student members)	140-200 (depending on the project, 60 students and 80-140 non-student members)	112 (32 students, 80 non-student members)
How often and for how long does the ensemble rehearse?	Tuesdays and Thursdays, 7:15-9:15 p.m.	Mondays 7:00-9:30 p.m.	Thursdays 7:00-9:00 p.m.	Mondays 7:00-9:00 p.m.	Once a week. Chamber chorus, 55 minutes; large chorus, 2.5 hours.
How many concerts per academic year does the choir perform?	4-6	5: <i>Two Messiah</i> performances in December and usually three other performances	3	2: <i>Messiah</i> in December and another oratorio in the spring.	2-3 per term

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Is an audition required?	Yes	Yes for new members and every other year for continuing members	No	No	Yes, and a voice check every year for those not in the chamber chorus.
What is the attendance policy?	Students: 2 unexcused before grade drops to C. Each absence thereafter: one letter grade lower. No absences allowed within 10 days of university session of a concert.	1 absence is allowed per concert rehearsal period.	All participants can miss one rehearsal per semester.	Community members are allowed two absences for each performance sequence.	One absence jeopardizes membership if they do not make up work done in that rehearsal, including markings, on their own.
What repertoire, if any, do you focus on?	Renaissance–present. At least one concert per year focuses on choral/orchestral repertory.	Major works for chorus and orchestra	Our concerts consist of a variety of pieces; however, the choir often does a ten- to twenty-minute piece as a centerpiece of the concert.	<i>Messiah</i> in December. Major works for chorus and orchestra in the spring.	We perform music of all periods, including a focus for a number of seasons on the J.S. Bach <i>Christmas Oratorio</i> . We also have a special commitment to music of the 20th and 21st centuries.
How often does this ensemble collaborate with other ensembles?	At least once per year, Camerata joins the other UI choirs in a mass choir/orchestral concert.	Nearly always with an orchestra.	Choral Union collaborates with the college orchestra approximately every other school year. In the past, the ensemble has performed in conjunction with the Green Bay Civic Symphony.	December <i>Messiah</i> with contracted professional orchestra. Spring is approximately every other year with the college symphony orchestra and alternate years with the local regional professional orchestra.	Usually once a year. If we need to, we hire instruments.
Are there fees associated with participating in the ensemble?	Concert attire and the scores for the major work concert.	Scores and concert attire. Students may also take Choral Union as a class and pay the appropriate fee to receive credit.	Students do not pay anything. Non-student members are not required to pay anything either, but a \$20/semester donation is recommended to offset the cost of music.	No	No
Do you provide any music literacy training?	No	No. Once in a while we provide optional enrichment courses.	No	No	On an ad hoc basis.

Table 1 continued

This page contains the remaining questions from the case studies of town and gown choirs. Some of the answers were too long to fit within the original table structure on pages 56 and 57.

How do you recruit and engage younger community members?

Camerata, University of Iowa We do not have a satisfactory way to reach out to the community because there is no budget for ads, posters, etc. Community members (not affiliated with UI) tend to be people who actively sought out the choral program, or we have people connected to UI employees/students/family members who received our on-campus communications.

UMS Choral Union Summer Sings, newspaper ads, emails from the University Musical Society, webpage, word of mouth, former students, interesting repertoire and performance collaborations.

Choral Union, Ripon College Making the rehearsals fast paced and programming challenging and satisfying music helps spark interest. Reducing the rehearsals from twice per week to once per week has helped parents with small children be able to participate.

Handel Oratorio Society Word of mouth, individual contact, media, and social media. We also sometimes combine with my younger auditioned ensemble, which has in general younger members.

Yale Camerata Word of mouth, social media, working with local arts magnet school. It helps to continually remind participants

that we don't mind having kids in the rehearsal room.

What is a recent accomplishment with this ensemble that you are especially proud of?

Camerata, University of Iowa In fall 2014, I was able to have Camerata appear on a high school conference honor choir festival I was guest conducting in central Iowa. It was great to see the choir, which is primarily non-music majors, rise to the occasion and represent UI and the School of Music as professionally as a music major ensemble. They performed well and showed the high schoolers that choral singing is a possibility in college.

In fall 2015, Camerata observed the Civil War anniversary by singing three movements of Paul Carey's *Civil War Requiem*. Through Skype, the choir interacted with the composer; it was a joy to hear the choir ask the composer probing, insightful questions about the music and his inspiration in writing it.

UMS Choral Union We were part of the William Bolcom *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* recording (Naxos) that won four Grammy awards in 2006. We were also part of the Milhaud *Oresteian Trilogy* recording (Naxos) that was nominated for a Grammy in the Best Opera Recording category in 2015. We also sang with the New York Philharmonic Brass during a UM football

halftime show conducted by Alan Gilbert.

Choral Union, Ripon College In 2015, Choral Union performed a themed concert to mark the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. The highlight of this program was Jeffrey Van's *A Procession Winding around Me* with the incomparable Fareed Haque playing guitar. The college's Symphonic Wind Ensemble also performed music inspired by the Civil War, and a music class curated an exhibit in the concert hall's lobby of local artifacts from the period. Our collaborative and crosscurricular concert was well received and truly helped the singers connect with the music on a deeper level.

Handel Oratorio Society One particular accomplishment does not stand out in my mind. However, I am very proud of the willingness and positive attitude of the ensemble to be involved in a wide variety of pieces, projects, and styles.

Yale Camerata Though I am the conductor of this chorus, our graduate student conductors serve as assistant conductors both in rehearsal and in concert. The singers (many of whom are professional singers, teachers, conductors, and instrumentalists) are proud of the fact that they contribute to the education of these future colleagues.

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Likewise, conductors currently leading town and gown choirs might feel that they cannot make changes to how these ensembles operate. Some caution is advised when implementing changes; however, organizations and programs that do not continually innovate are missing opportunities to grow and to better serve their singers.

In some cases, there can also be opportunities to start fresh either by restarting a previously existing ensemble or beginning something new. Christopher Aspaas, associate professor of music and director of choral activities at Texas Christian University, recently restarted TCU's Choral Union. When asked about his reasons for doing so, he writes:

Restarting the Choral Union at TCU is about engaging the lifelong learner and musician. This ensemble is dedicated to support members' continued growth as vocal musicians in addition to providing a conduit to connect them with other singers. I want their Monday night experience to support their singing in church and other ensembles and impact our greater singing community in the Fort Worth area. We are going to make great music and have a wonderful time doing it! Also, I want my students at TCU to see that singing is a lifelong endeavor, not just something that happens in school. My grandmother sang in her church choir until the age of eighty-seven when macular degeneration stole her

ability to read the music. Choir was an integral part of her community.

Conductors should not be afraid to try new things, regardless of whether they want to establish a new town and gown choir or are looking for ways to lead their current organization more effectively and efficiently. With prudent leadership, these choirs can go beyond simply preparing for performances. Conductors of these ensembles have an opportunity to open dialogue between members of a heterogeneous group of individuals. Finding common ground, exploring differences, and ultimately making music together forges understanding and inclusivity. Members are part of something bigger than themselves regardless of their ages, occupations, or skill levels. People need and value the unity and sense of belonging choirs offer.

Town and gown choirs provide a unique opportunity for all participants, regardless of age. Although every ensemble has its own unique structure, history, and traditions, the cultivation of a localized singing culture, wherein singing is valued and routine, could be seen as the highest call of conductors. They can strive to make high-level, communal singing available so that everyone can say, "I have had pleasure. I have had singing." 

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NOTES

¹ Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 48.

² Weston H. Noble, *Creating the Special World*, ed. Steven M. Demorest (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 18.

³ Interested readers should consult Brenda Smith and Robert T. Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy and the Older Singer* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2012); Sangeetha Rayapati, *Sing Into Your Sixties...and Beyond! A Manual and Anthology for Group and Individual Voice Instruction* (Delaware, OH: Inside View Press, 2012); Victoria Meredith, *Sing Better As You Age* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2007); Sarah Parks, "Enriching Choral Opportunities for Aging Voices," *Choral Journal* 53, no. 11 (June/July 2013): 32–41; Kimberly VanWeelden, Abby Butler, and Vicki A. Lind, "Working with the Senior Adult Choir: Strategies and Techniques for a Lifetime of Healthy Singing," *Choral Journal* 43, no. 5 (December 2002): 61–69; and Robert T. Sataloff, Deborah Caputo Rosen, Mary Kawkshaw, and Joseph R. Spiegel, "The Aging Adult Voice," *Journal of Voice* 11, no. 2 (June 1997): 156–160.

⁴ VanWeelden, Butler, and Lind, 61.

⁵ Rayapati, 1–24.