

# America's First College Community Chorus: A Brief History

by Daniel Kleinknecht

East coast cities were the first in America to develop strong interests in music. The St. Cecilia Society was established in Charleston, South Carolina (1762).<sup>1</sup> Boston had the Handel and Haydn Society (1815) and Lowell Mason's Academy of Music (1838). In 1939 Chicago opened its first public music school.<sup>2</sup> St. Louis forged new ground in 1839 by forming a Philharmonic Society.<sup>3</sup> During the nineteenth century, choral music could be found in only a handful of American colleges and universities. While educational institutions like Brown,<sup>4</sup> Yale,<sup>5</sup> and Dartmouth<sup>6</sup> did have all-male singing groups, Oberlin College was in all likelihood the first to have a mixed chorus.

Oberlin's Musical Union (originally called the Musical Association) formed as a result of student interest in choral singing. In February of 1837 seven young men petitioned their "beloved instructors in behalf of a number of students who feel deeply interested in the cause of sacred music."<sup>7</sup>

Upon approval of the idea of forming a choral group, the college faculty named George Nelson Allen as the director. In his home of Boston, Allen was a student of hymn composer and public-school teacher Lowell Mason. Allen, as a seminary student, was drawn to Oberlin primarily because of its liberal sentiments regarding slavery. In 1837, with the formation of the Musical Union, he was appointed Teacher of Sacred Music, replacing Elihu Parsons Ingersoll, first Professor of Music in any American college. Allen's position was changed to Professor of Music in 1841.<sup>8</sup>

At Oberlin Allen offered free choral classes in the manner of the New England singing school. These classes were well attended by students. One hundred students enrolled in 1839, and by 1841 there were nearly two hundred and fifty. Undoubtedly these classes fed into the Musical Union's roster.

Membership in the Musical Union at first depended upon successful completion of an audition, but it seems that devout moral and Christian attitudes were more important. Article 9 of the Constitution of the Union stated, "Any member convicted of immoral conduct that would be a disqualification in a candidate for membership shall be debarred from the exercises of the society."

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Thomas Hastings visited Oberlin in 1845. As director of music at Broadway Tabernacle, editor of hymn-tune collections, and composer, Hastings's visit created a great deal of excitement for Oberlin. Music at Oberlin, in turn, must have impressed Hastings, as he is recorded as having said that Oberlin had "the finest choral music in the country."<sup>9</sup>

The power of the large choral ensemble reached everyone in the community at one time or another. In 1857 College Professor Cowles reported to his wife, "Professor Babcock . . . is leading the choir every evening till nine, and they sing LOUD. I fear some of them will suffer for these late hours and violent exercise of voice."<sup>10</sup>

As early as 1840 the Musical Union began giving concerts independently from the church. This marked the time when music was recognized not only as a tool for worship but also for its aesthetic qualities.


Throughout the 1800s the Musical Union sang at Rhetoricals and Commencement exercises. For these concerts, choral montages were arranged. One such work was called the *Oratorio of Absalom*; it was given at the 1853 Commencement. For this oratorio, works by Hummel, Haydn, Beethoven, and Rossini, and even an aria or two by Allen, were used. The performances must surely have been successful: "The church was filled each night; over \$500 was taken in at 25 cents per person. The crowd was further swelled by the holders of complimentary tickets, which were distributed to all singers."<sup>11</sup> For this performance a modest eleven-piece orchestra accompanied the ensemble. In 1860 the accompanying orchestra grew to thirty-two instruments including an organ.

Handel's *Messiah* received its Oberlin premiere in 1849. Later, with the 1878 performance of this work, the Musical Union embarked on a marathon number of performances of this work. From that date until 1917 *Messiah* was performed fifty-two times.

During those years the group kept

growing in numbers. By 1902-1903, the Musical Union had two hundred fifteen members; in 1904 it had two hundred forty-five members. The Boston, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Chicago orchestras all collaborated with the ensemble between 1903 and 1929.<sup>12</sup>

It is understandable that large population centers would support musical activities, but why would a tiny town with a college barely four years old (founded in 1833) successfully cultivate such a thing as a choir made of men and women students, faculty members, and townfolk? The answer seems to have been threefold: coeducation, religion, and organizational structure.



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As the world's first coeducational college, "co-education furnished the womanpower as well as the manpower."<sup>13</sup> Abundant melody and brilliant harmony were assured through four-part singing, something that simply wasn't allowed at other schools.

"A strong religious atmosphere gave seriousness and purpose to singing."<sup>14</sup> In fact, it was not unusual for the choir to be prayed for publicly. Charles Grandison Finney, President of the College, thought it so important that the text of the songs be clearly articulated that he once prayed "O Lord, we trust that thou hast understood the song which we have been trying to sing, but

thou knowest that we could not understand a word of it."<sup>15</sup>

The Musical Union was far from a haphazard organization. From its founding, officers were elected and weekly rehearsals scheduled. At one point fines of twenty-five cents were levied for rehearsals missed.

By late nineteenth century other schools like DePauw, Pomona, and the University of Michigan had similar choruses. The University of Michigan's Choral Union started as a small community singing group "set up as one of the few excuses for men and women to enjoy together, under proper chaperonage."<sup>16</sup> Quickly it grew into an ensemble

interested in performing choral literature well. By 1892 Northwestern University had also established a Choral Union.

In June of 1912 an independent committee compared choral groups the size and calibre of the Oberlin Choral Union. This chart shows the committee's findings:<sup>17</sup>

In a country only sixty-one years old at the time, the establishment of Oberlin's Musical Union was important to the aesthetic growth of the young country. By bringing quality music to a small farm community and by involving students from all over the nation, Oberlin helped build a choral tradition in America.

Society	No. of Members	No. of Concerts	Hrs. of Rehearsal (per week)
Handel and Haydn Society	431	4	2
Worcester County Musical Association	350	1	2
Oratorio Society of New York City	276	4-5	2
Cincinnati Musical Festival Association	420	6	2
University Choral Union, Ann Arbor	300	2	1
Chicago Mendelssohn Club (male voices)	77	3	1.5
Singers' Club, Cleveland (male voices)	115	3	2.5
Mendelssohn Club, Toronto	237	9	two-three times per week
Choral Union, Oberlin	187	2-3	1.5

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1954), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Henry C. Lahee, *Annals of Music in America* (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1922), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University* (Providence: Brown University, 1914), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup>George Henry Nettleton, ed., *The Book of the Yale Pageant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), p. 225.

<sup>6</sup>John King Lord, *A History of Dartmouth College, 1815-1809* (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1913), p. 552.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Samuel Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1943), p. 791.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 785.

<sup>9</sup>Ernest Barret Chamberlain, *The Music of Oberlin and Some Who Made It* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin Historical and Development Organization, 1968), p. 85.

<sup>10</sup>Fletcher, p. 797.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Dean Skyrn, "Oberlin Conservatory: A Century of Musical Growth and Influence," Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1962, p. 362.

<sup>12</sup>Archives Collection of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Organizations: Musical Union.

<sup>13</sup>Chamberlain, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup>Rev. L. Leonard, D.D., *The Story of Oberlin* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1898), p. 371.

<sup>16</sup>Kent Sagendorp, *Michigan. The Story of the University* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1948), p. 162.

<sup>17</sup>Archives Collection of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Organizations: Musical Union. Letter by R. P. Jameson, Chairman.

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