

# Repertoire & Resources

## Community Choirs



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### Community Chorus Values: Artistry, Education, and Family

by William Southerland

Community choruses around the world provide tremendous musical, educational, and social benefits to their members. Although the term “community chorus” is difficult to define, these organizations provide lasting benefits in the musical and social cultures of the communities they serve. For over a hundred years, prominent music scholars from Dykema to Elliott have argued the educational merits of community choruses as one of the few lifelong music opportunities for adults. Today, socially identified community choruses expand these capabilities, using music as an instrument for social change. Community music making requires a different mind-set and values, however, than performance quality alone. In this essay, I consider the historical and contemporary views of the community

chorus, the educational benefits of choruses to individuals, and the potential for choral music to produce positive social change. I believe that community-based choral singing has the ability to change the world, but only if we provide opportunities for everyone of all ages to sing.

### Defining the “Community Chorus”

The community chorus as a discrete object of study has consistently eluded a proper definition. David J. Elliott recognized two possible characteristics of community music generally: either (a) community music making happens outside of schools, universities, and conservatories; or (b) community music making exists as a partnership between school and professional organizations and the wider community.<sup>1</sup> According to ACDA, a community choir is any adult singing group outside of a university setting. This may include semi-professional and institutional groups.<sup>2</sup> Community choruses have also been distinguished from church choirs because they may serve different social functions.<sup>3</sup>

The community chorus, and community-based group singing, is an incredibly popular activity in America, despite the pressures many

directors feel in recruiting. A survey by Chorus America found that one in six adults participates in a community chorus, and some participate in more than one. Singers in these choruses come from all walks of life and all socio-economic strata. Overall, women outnumber men in community choruses almost two to one. Two-thirds of singers are over forty, and participants are generally well educated.<sup>4</sup> Most community choruses are mixed voice SATB, although there are also plenty of adult treble and tenor-bass choruses.

Choirs can be as small as four (like with barbershop quartets) or community choruses may have hundreds of members. Currently, the largest community chorus organization in North America is the Seattle Men’s and Women’s Choruses with over 550 singing members and an annual audience of 30,000.<sup>5</sup> Nationally, the average community chorus appears to range from twenty to forty members, but there can be no definitive number because there is currently no definitive list of all community choruses.

### Historical Perspective

Group music making has always been in our communities—in our homes, houses of worship, dance

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halls, and civic organizations. “Community music,” and community choruses, first became recognized as an important facet of American culture at the start of the twentieth century. Peter Dykema (1873-1951) was an early advocate of community music making. Dykema was a music educator and served as president of the Music Education Research Council and the journal editor and chair of the Music Educators National Conference (MENC, now the National Association of Music Educators, NAfME).

In 1916, Dykema was possibly the first to write about the importance of adult group music making.

Dykema declared unequivocally that community music has value as music education, allowing people “free and frequent” participation in music. He also noted that community music has two distinct and parallel goals. First, community music should provide an opportunity for all people to develop a “natural love of music.” Second, it should “necessitate serious choral study.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Dykema’s vision for community music closely aligned with ACDA’s own ideals to foster and develop choral singers while achieving the highest excellence in musicianship.

## Values of the Community Chorus

Choral music is inherently a music-making activity grounded in social context. As such, choral music creates rich opportunities for teaching and learning music working together with others toward a common goal and sharing common values.<sup>7</sup> Singers have cited many reasons for participating in community choruses. The most obvious reason people join a chorus is for a musical outlet. For many, though, the community chorus satisfies a personal desire for community, for developing deeper relationships with neighbors and friends.<sup>8</sup> The chorus becomes an “unexpected family,” and a source of friendship and support for the participants. By working toward a common goal through community interaction and collective participation, members of community choruses feel more trust, equality, connection, and caring toward themselves and others.<sup>9</sup>

Community choruses today provide individuals and communities with high-quality performances, important social outlets, religious experiences, and even measurable improvements in mental and physical health. Choirs also have demonstrated healing capabilities. For others, the community chorus becomes an instrument for promoting social justice. In this way, the community chorus still stands as an ideal expression of our shared democratic values.

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## Community Chorus as Adult Education

As music directors and music educators, we have a duty to improve the cultural lives of our communities. Thus, as Bliss so aptly stated, “if we are to make a lasting impression upon the cultural life of our communities, we must teach the parents as well as the children.”<sup>10</sup> Yet despite ubiquitous (albeit, often underfunded) music programs for children, opportunities for adults to receive music education are less common. We must actively engage adults in music making if we wish to achieve our goals of life-long music education.

For many adults, the community chorus is the only freely available music education resource. Volunteer choruses can be pivotal in encouraging adults to voluntarily remain engaged in lifelong formal music learning.<sup>11</sup> Music learning has abundant mental and psychosocial benefits, delaying the onset of age-related cognitive decline by almost ten years. Music literacy, however, much like any language, requires constant training and practice, which community choruses provide at very low-cost or for even for free.

Music education must be continuous from childhood through adulthood. Furthermore, community choruses should challenge members’ music interests, should provide music literacy instruction, and allow singers to express themselves.<sup>12</sup> In this way, community choruses should be considered real and valid adult education, as valuable as any continuing education or professional training.

## Community Chorus as Social Change

For some community choruses, the purposes of singing are specifically inclusion and activism.<sup>13</sup> For a person who experiences social iso-

lation, singing in a group can be a life-changing and life-saving experience. There are many examples of socially identified, social justice-oriented community choirs around the world.



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Some socially identified choirs are based around a shared ethnic or racial identity. For example, the Akoma African American Women's Gospel Choir and the Rochester Jewish Chorale, both in Rochester, NY, sing and perform with the expressed purpose to connect their singers with the wider community.<sup>14</sup> In North Carolina, the Triangle Jewish Chorale and Voices of God's Children, a gospel choir based in Winston-Salem, are two examples of community choruses with similar missions. Through singing, these choruses affirm the culture and dignity of their members and provide opportunities for singers and audience members to not just learn about but to experience the cultures of these historically marginalized groups.

Other socially identified community choruses work toward social justice for sexual minority people.

Since the 1970s, LGBTQ-identity choruses have swelled in number and size. Today, there are LGBTQ choruses in nearly every major metropolitan area in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. The largest choruses, the Seattle Men's and Women's Choruses, are both LGBTQ-identity ensembles. Every four years, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and ally singers from all over the world meet for a week to sing and socialize at an international festival hosted by GALA Choruses, first organized in 1982.

LGBTQ-identity choruses, like other community choruses, serve many functions. For some, the chorus may be a surrogate family after their biological family rejects them. For others, public performance with an LGBTQ-identity chorus provides a platform for reshaping misconceptions about LGBTQ people and an

opportunity to educate people about social justice, civil rights, and tolerance.<sup>15</sup> Of course, these choruses also provide outstanding adult music education.

## The Future of the Community Chorus

Community chorus organizations provide individuals and communities with myriad unique benefits. Yet, despite the general popularity of community choruses, the reality is the population of singers is gradually aging, suggesting that our choral traditions may be at risk.<sup>16</sup> Choral directors of all types must work relentlessly to "spread the gospel" of adult music education so that more people can reap the benefits of group singing.

As choral musicians, we may always feel a tension between striving for choral excellence and a desire for inclusion. At the heart of this tension, though, is a question: what is the value of singing? Is the value of singing found in perfect performance, or in the experience of making music? The community chorus director must balance these priorities so that everyone can contribute according to their own abilities. By redefining excellence to include the emotional, social, and educational value of singing, we can expand the reach and impact of choral music in our communities and around the world.

As Dykema stated over a hundred years ago: "While man must be fed, clothed and housed, while his body must be properly cared for, these measures alone will make but well-



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groomed animals. It maintains that man's glory lies in his intellectual and spiritual attributes and that music aids in satisfying these longings which make life here worthwhile."<sup>17</sup> Singing makes everyone's lives better. Let's make sure everyone has a chance to sing. ■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Elliott, Lee Higgins, and Kari

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<sup>2</sup> Cindy L Bell, "Toward a Definition of a Community Choir," *International Journal of Community Music* 1, no. 2 (2008): 229–41.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Susan Avery, Casey Hayes, and Cindy Bell, "Community Choirs: Expressions of Identity through Vocal Performance," in *Community Music Today*, ed. Kari K.

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<sup>5</sup> "Seattle Choruses FAQ," Frequently Asked Questions, 2018, <https://www.seattlechoruses.org/about/faq/>.

<sup>6</sup> Peter W. Dykema, "The Spread of the Community Music Idea," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67 (1916): 222, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1013509>.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Beale, "A Different Kind of Goosebump: Notes Toward an LGBTQ Choral Pedagogy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, ed. Frank Abrahams and Paul Head (New York: Oxford

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<sup>8</sup> Wendy K. Moy, “Come Together: An Ethnography of the Seattle Men’s Chorus Family” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Sharonne Specker, “Communities of Song: Collective Musical Participation and Group Singing Experiences in Victoria, BC,” *The Arbutus Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 62–90, <https://doi.org/10.18357/ar.speckersk.512014>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert E. Bliss, “Take Music into the Community,” *Music Educators Journal* 58, no. 2 (1971): 34.

<sup>11</sup> Verna Barbara Green, “Enhanced

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<sup>12</sup> Apostolos Anastasios Aliapoulios, “A Study of Adult Amateur Choral Organization in the United States and the Implication for Adult Education” (Doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Avery, Hayes, and Bell, “Community Choirs: Expressions of Identity through Vocal Performance.”

<sup>14</sup> Allison Thorp, “A Phenomenological Investigation of Urban, Socially

Identified Community Choirs” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Avery, Hayes, and Bell, “Community Choirs: Expressions of Identity through Vocal Performance.”

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Rensink-Hoff, “Adult Community Choirs: Toward a Balance between Leisure Participation and Musical Achievement.” (Doctoral dissertation, Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Dykema, “The Spread of the Community Music Idea,” 223.

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