

GAY & LESBIAN CHORUSES —

THEN & NOW

BY JOHN D. SPARKS

What began 30 years ago in anger and isolation has given way to musical excellence and collaborations promoting tolerance and inclusion

A political assassination, a deadly virus, an identity long suppressed, and a fear perhaps as old as history – given a list like this, a powerful social upheaval was inevitable. And it would be accompanied by a need for many of those involved to express their anger, sorrow, and hope in music.

When a bitter San Francisco city councilmember walked into City Hall in November 1978 and shot dead both the Mayor and openly gay Councilman Harvey Milk, the nation was shocked and the gay and lesbian community was stunned. Milk was a beloved leader in the early days of the gay rights movement, and immediately after his assassination, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was born. With a spontaneous gathering at a candlelight vigil on the steps of City Hall, the Chorus began in mourning and anger and soon moved on to hope, joy, and more mourning in the 1980s – the decade when AIDS became widespread.

Though not the first chorus with mostly gay members, SFGMC is acknowledged as the first to have used the word “gay” in its name, and it grew quickly in size and reputation, embarking on its first national tour in 1981. ►



Top to bottom:
Seattle Women's
Chorus by
www.markweekspography.com, Gay Men's
Chorus of Washington by
Scott Henrichsen, Seattle
Women's Chorus by
www.markweekspography.com, and
the Turtle Creek
Chorale

No retrospective on the history of choral music in America would be accurate if it did not acknowledge the startling growth of gay and lesbian choruses over the past three decades. Their numbers have grown to at least 200 today, according to GALA Choruses, the national association of gay and lesbian choruses. The largest choral festival in the world to date may well have been the GALA Festival VII in Montreal in July 2004, with 6,000 participants. And the Seattle Men's Chorus, founded in 1979, may now be the largest community chorus in North America.



Seattle Men's Chorus

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It Took Guts To Sing

While the growth in North American choruses of all kinds has been phenomenal, consider this about the growth of gay and lesbian choruses: All this happened not in a climate of welcome but in one of hostility – a climate so frightening at times that hundreds of adult men and women refused to allow their names to be used in a concert program. Social opprobrium, outright discrimination, fears of being found out by one's co-workers and family, and even threats of violence – these were the dominant, seemingly immutable realities of gay life. In spite of it all, thousands of gay men and women created, joined, and sustained a new kind of performing arts institution.

Whatever one's personal views about sexuality, it cannot be denied that not so many years ago (and still today, in some parts of the country), to join a gay chorus – to sing onstage with other gay men and women – was an act of courage.

"I was a pastor at a university church," recalls Jack Reiffer, now board chair of the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington (DC) and

director of meetings and projects at Chorus America. "I was closeted at the time... I had gone to gay chorus performances as an audience member."

The thought of actually joining such a chorus terrified Reiffer. Friends, knowing of his love of singing, urged him to consider joining, but the idea of standing onstage with a gay, or even "gay-affirming" chorus, was a non-starter. "I thought, if I sing with them, people will think I am gay," says Reiffer.

Obviously, he changed his mind, and his life. The choral connection to coming out is a common thread for thousands of gay men and women. For some, it was the love of music that compelled them to face up to the part of themselves that wanted to sing in a chorus that specifically allowed them to be gay, affirming that long hidden part of their lives. For others, already open with their gay identity, singing became another way to manifest that side of their lives more fully and to combine a singing talent with social or political agendas.

The three major motivations for joining gay and lesbian choruses, according to Kenneth T. Cole, who was executive director of GALA Choruses from 1994 to 2001, boil down to community, politics, and artistic quality.

"Singing in a gay choir is essentially a political act," says Cole, because society has made it so. Still, not all choristers are thinking primarily about the politics, especially now that society is more accepting of gays.

"They come because of the music, of course, and to socialize," says Cole, "but also for the sense of community and friendship," which is the same as for their non-gay choral colleagues. "But in the gay community, the chorus plays a major community role. There is a very, very strong support network within the chorus," he notes.

From AIDS To Other Agendas

"Many of the GLBT [gay lesbian bisexual transgendered] choruses started in response to the AIDS crisis," says interim GALA Choruses executive director Dudley Hogue. "They felt they were singing for their lives. Many of the older choruses lost nearly as many members to AIDS as they have in their choruses now."

The website for the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus includes a long list of members who have died (more than 200), many of them while in their 30s and 40s. As ►

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public health officials and gay organizations strive to remind us, the AIDS crisis in the U.S. (let alone the rest of the world, where it is getting worse) is far from over.

But new treatments and a decline in the rate of new U.S. cases in the 1990s combined to make the AIDS crisis seem less imminent, and it has become less front-and-center for

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As artistic quality has grown – and it is clear that the level of singing has dramatically improved as gay and lesbian choruses have grown in size and professionalism – the music has emerged as a more powerful motivator. “Some are less comfortable now with the political aspect,” says Cole.

In some areas, the GLBT chorus is the only really significant gay or lesbian organization in its community. “Some gay choruses now have huge followings,” says Hogue, “and are incredibly prominent in the city’s performing arts community.” The Seattle Men’s Chorus, the Turtle Creek Chorale in Dallas, SFGMC, the Heartland Men’s Chorus in Kansas City, the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus, and the Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington (DC) are prime examples.

But perhaps even for the apolitical, that backdrop is never far away. Cole recalls a performance of the Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington at the 2002 Kennedy Center Honors, with President George W. Bush in attendance. One of the singers had just joined, and this was the first time he had ever done anything so openly gay – standing on the stage at the Kennedy Center, part of a gay chorus, before the President of the United

States. When they sang “God Bless America,” he had tears rolling down his face.

Certainly the emotion one often gets when singing, especially a patriotic song, is not unusual. But for someone who has been told over the years that he or she can never really belong no matter how much they love and serve their country, it can be an extraordinarily vivid, intense moment, especially when shared with others who instinctively know what it means.

This is the common story of the men and women who forged the gay choral movement for three decades. The issue of acceptance is at the core of their relationship with their country, as well as with their own families – it’s not surprising that such stories are the basis of a rapidly growing repertoire of music composed by gays, drawn from their own life experiences. GMCW commissioned a work by Alan Shorter, “Changing Hearts,” based on several such stories. Their CD of the work is being released this summer.



Extending the Message of Tolerance

Education is a growing part of the mission of gay and lesbian choruses. To a degree, it has been there from the start, but recent years have seen more and more alliances with schools, churches, and other community groups, affording choruses a big opportunity to extend the message of tolerance to a broader public.

Commissioning new music is a major activity for gay and lesbian choruses, and more of this repertoire is finding its way into performances by other choruses.

“Oliver Button is a Sissy,” composed by Alan Shorter and commissioned by the Twin Cities Gay Men’s Choir and other choruses, became the subject of a Public Broadcasting Service documentary and has been performed around the country. Dealing with the difficult topic of the bullying of gay youth, it can help teachers and parents understand the reality of bullying of sexual minorities. The GMCW, for example, joined with student singing groups to perform the work.

Smaller groups are also carrying out education programs in creative ways. Dreams of Hope, a Pittsburgh area group of seven student performers aged 14 to 21, has performed at in-service meetings for teachers in the area. Susan Haugh, one of the directors of Renaissance City Choirs (one male choir, one female choir, both with GLBT and straight members), founded Dreams of Hope and encouraged the students to write their own songs based on their experiences as gay youth in a sometimes hostile school setting. At the teachers’ in-service, they performed for about an hour and then answered questions from the teachers and administrators.

“It was amazing,” says Haugh. “They were pretty stunned that the youth are so aware of themselves and can speak eloquently about their situation.” The response was so positive that Haugh has been asked if a video can be made for use in training resident assistants in university housing.

“The point is to help teachers to help their students deal with these issues in the classroom,” she says, noting that dealing with bullying is really hard, and many adults (teachers) are uncomfortable speaking about gay and lesbian issues. “A big problem is that many kids won’t come forward about the bullying when it happens.” ►



GALA Choruses *continued*

The message of tolerance extends to seniors as well. After GMCW performed before a group of senior citizens, they got an email from one woman saying it had changed the way she views gays and lesbians, and would “help her deal with the situation if one of her grandchildren comes out to her,” says David Bielenberg, executive director of GMCW.

One Size Fits One

Gay and lesbian choruses handle issues of identity in different ways. Some identify themselves as gay in their names while others do not; some require that chorus members be gay/lesbian/transgendered while others accept singers of any sexual orientation; some audition their singers while others do not.

And some have become so well known over the years as musical treasures in their communities that often the general population doesn’t know the group is gay. One example of this is the famed Turtle Creek Chorale of Dallas, which charted a slightly different course than other GALA choruses over its 25 years.

“In the 1980s, for most of the choruses, it was about gay activism,” says David Mitchell, TCC managing director. Turtle Creek lost 145 members, mostly from AIDS. “But TCC began as a music organization that happened to be gay. In fact, it was closeted as an organization.”

Still, with AIDS taking such a toll on the Chorale, it couldn’t avoid the issue. TCC sang about AIDS, and most Dallas music lovers who were “in the know” recognized the chorus as gay, but the music is what brought them notoriety.

“When Rock Hudson came out with AIDS, that made it acceptable for people to support gay groups,” notes Mitchell, and public acceptance of the Chorale, even in conservative Texas, grew. “We do try to appeal to the masses,” he adds. TCC adapts a lot of music for broader audiences, adding “entertainment value” to much of the repertoire through scripting, staging, and choreography.

Now that they are well-known as a gay chorus, TCC’s outreach efforts have more impact. “We represent the gay community,” says Mitchell, “and go before a lot of people who otherwise have no real contact with the gay community.”

Through ticket donation programs for public school students, TCC’s primary goal is to provide a great *choral* experience

to young people. Showing gay people in a positive light is an important by-product of that program, Mitchell notes.

“Today, I see a pure love of music and being challenged by their art” as the main motivator for TCC’s 190 singers, he adds. TCC has produced 31 commercial CDs, perhaps more than any other men’s chorus, and has an ambitious touring program.

“But also, the singers want to be part of something bigger in terms of social change. And they join for the sense of community – all of these are part of the motivation.”

But even TCC has had its difficulties, being occasionally rejected by others, as nearly all gay and lesbian choruses have experienced at some point in their histories. The stories of invitations withdrawn, boycotts threatened, and other hue and cry (especially if there was any connection to youth or schools) are legion in the gay choral world.

In one such experience, TCC was part of a benefit program at a synagogue in nearby Plano, and on the program were three singing groups from the Plano public schools. On a radio call-in show, someone asked one of the school’s administrators if he knew that his students would be performing with homosexuals. That led to the school groups being withdrawn from the program, but not before it got a lot of publicity.

“The publicity was great,” says Mitchell, “and the synagogue sold out the event.” As for the students, half the members of one of the withdrawn choirs came anyway and performed with TCC to great acclaim.

Women’s Choruses – Forging A New Repertoire

Even though there are more men’s than women’s choruses in the gay choral movement, the women’s choruses were there from the start, serving as a kind of incubator for the entire movement.

Catherine Roma, founder and artistic director of MUSE Cincinnati’s Women’s Choir and director of other choruses (mixed, men’s, gay, and straight), started the women’s chorus Anna Crusis in Philadelphia in 1975, listed today by GALA Choruses as the oldest continuing gay chorus.

“In the early 80s, [gay choruses] were mostly men’s, a few mixed, with hardly any women’s choruses,” says Roma. Looking for music that focused on women’s experience, or composed by women for choruses, ►



Roma found that “there just wasn’t much literature. My *raison d’être* became to commission work by female composers.”

“In the choral hierarchy 30 years ago,” says Roma, “it was, ‘Oh, you direct a women’s chorus? Sorry for you!’ That has changed.”

Over the past 25 years, the women’s music movement (not just choral, and not just lesbian), closely allied with folk music, helped to feed and develop a new literature for female choruses, which today are often, but not exclusively, lesbian, or lesbian-welcoming with open membership.

“MUSE is dedicated to musical excellence and social change, in that order,” says Roma. “Our philosophy is that we are heterosexual, bi, and lesbian, united in song.”

If women’s choruses stimulated the creation of a largely new choral repertoire, gay men’s choruses may have rescued another part of the repertoire from near extinction. “Gay choruses have revitalized the repertoire,” says Jeffrey Maynard, conductor of the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus.

Sue Coffee directs three choruses in Colorado: Sound Circle, a 20-voice women’s *cappella* group that she founded 10 years ago; the Denver Gay Men’s Chorus; and the Women’s Chorus of Boulder, a mixed straight and lesbian chorus she has just started.

Coffee is one of a handful of women who direct men’s choirs. “The energy of different genders is very interesting,” she says. “I enjoy the challenge.” She echoes the assessment of many others when she notes that, “The quality of performance and level of musical proficiency in gay and lesbian choruses has been rising steadily, and in recent years, very dramatically. It’s the maturing of the choruses.”

She feels that the activist component of gay and lesbian choruses informs them musically. “We’re becoming more sophisticated about working with messages in an effective way. The thrill of directing a gay or lesbian choruses is that you can make some strong statements.”

As one example, in 2004 the Denver GMC created “Banned: A Celebration of the First Amendment,” a collection of new and existing songs and readings about the expression of ideas in many ways, not just politically. “It is something to contribute to

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the national dialogue that is not simply about gay issues,” she says. “Gay people know a lot about this topic – about censorship, having to work through layers of repression of expression in lots of ways.”

“Singing about harmony, acceptance, and inclusion,” says Coffee. “These completely embody the message of the whole choral movement.”

The same powerful motivators cited by GLBT choristers are virtually the same as those voiced by other singers: the music itself, the challenge of performance, and the chance to interact with others and to learn about yourself. Choral singing celebrates the single human voice and the collective voice of humanity, all at the same time. It’s not a gay or straight lesson; it’s a choral lesson, and universal in its appeal. ■

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