



What LGBT Choruses Teach and What They are Learning

By Joan Lipkin

Imagine a place where you are encouraged to be your best, boldest LGBT or allied self. A place where strangers smile and ask where you are from, where every level of musical talent and performance is greeted with applause and frequent standing ovations because they represent commitment to music and the courage that it takes to be out and on stage.

There is such a place. And although the location varies, this year it was in Miami at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts as gay, lesbian and mixed choruses, including transgendered singers, met July 12-19 for a festival called GALA. It was sponsored by GALA Choruses, an advocacy organization for LGBT choruses whose membership includes more than 7,500 individuals from every major U.S. metropolitan area, as well as cities in Canada, Australia and Europe. The organization's 150-plus member choruses reach more than a million people annually through concerts, community appearances, Internet, radio and recorded music.

Ken Haller, a singer with St. Louis' Gateway Men's Chorus describes GALA as Brigadoon. "It appears every four years and then disappears into the mist. What I love is that everyone strives to do their very best and yet it doesn't feel competitive. It is one of the places I feel most alive."

*"We are a gentle, angry people. And we are singing, singing for our lives."
—Holly Near*

"I don't at all mind being one of the 'odd' ones," says James "Buck" Firth, one of four heterosexual singers in Kansas City's Heartland Men's Chorus. A minister with the United Church of Christ, Firth says he hopes to send a message that not all members of the clergy are judgmental and homophobic.

"I feel so honored to be a member of such an outstanding choir. I love to sing and I seek equality and justice for all."

Glenace Humphrey, a longtime sign language interpreter for Charis, a St. Louis women's chorus, and for the Gateway Men's Chorus, retired and moved to Kansas a year ago but came back for the week to volunteer.

Such dedication doesn't surprise Timothy Seelig, artistic director in residence for GALA Choruses and director emeritus of the Turtle Creek Chorale in Dallas.

"You will cry and you will laugh. Most importantly, you will come home a changed person," he promised the estimated 5,000 delegates.

As documented in Shawn Northcutt's outstanding documentary *A Song of Courage*, the LGBT choral movement has been gaining momentum for more than 30 years. The longest-running feminist choir in the country, called Anna Crusis, was founded in 1975 by Catherine Roma in Philadelphia. In 1978, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus first performed on the steps of City Hall at a vigil the night Mayor George Moscone and openly gay

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Supervisor Harvey Milk were assassinated.

Roma is now director of MUSE, Cincinnati's Women's Choir, and she also directs UMOJA Men's Chorus at Warren Correctional Institution.

"Every movement for social change has been accompanied by song, and we have now been around long enough to look back on our efforts," she said.



The men of HMC take the stage at GALA Festival in Miami.

Over the last 25 years, GALA choruses have been responsible for commissioning hundreds of pieces of music by composers, arrangers and songwriters such as Ned Rorem, John Corigliano, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Holly Near, Robert Seeley, David Maddux, Eric Lane Barnes and Steve Milloy to tell the stories of LGBT lives.

LGBT choruses continue to offer something special to their communities. Out Loud: The Colorado Springs Men's Chorus is just two years old, for example, and it has staked out a gay space in the city that is home to James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Amendment 2, military bases and an Air Force academy. Scary and impressive stuff.

And then there are the youth. While Seattle's Diverse Harmony was the only youth chorus at the 2004 GALA festival in Montreal, this year's festival presented several, including Mosaic Youth Chorus (Denver), Dreams of Hope (Pittsburgh), GLASS Youth Chorus (Vancouver) and Youth Pride Chorus (New York). Under the leadership of Sonelius Kendrick-Smith, a member of the New York City Gay Men's Chorus and president of GALA's board

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of directors, and GALA general manager Robin Godfrey, the festival generously underwrote the expenses for 75 young participants and their chaperones.

Carol Sirianni, the founder of GLASS, shook with emotion as she thanked the festival. “Some of these young people are here because they really love music and some because they also really, really need to be here,” she said.

In addition to performances by 134 groups from 28 states and four countries, GALA featured skills workshops and appearances by comedian Alec Mapa, singer songwriter Ann Hampton Callaway and artist activists Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon. And what other gathering but a gay choral festival would feature a No Talent Show, a sing-along with women’s music pioneer Cris Williamson or a morning disco cardio class?

The festival was also an opportunity to showcase new work, including “Through a Glass, Darkly,” a piece by Michael Shaieb about crystal meth addiction that was commissioned by Twin Cities Gay Men’s Chorus and “BraveSouls & Dreamers,” a dramatic cantata about the consequences of war by Robert Espindola and Robert Seeley, commissioned by the Portland Men’s Chorus.



The Arscht Center for the Performing Arts hosted more than 100 gay and lesbian choruses from around the world.

A time to look back is also a time to look forward. As aspects of LGBT identity become more integrated in many communities, the question arises: How can today’s choruses remain relevant, continue to develop audiences and attract funding in an increasingly competitive landscape? Continued pursuit of musical excellence is paramount, including exploring a wider range of styles. Racial and ethnic diversity remains a challenge for many choruses as elsewhere in the culture. And reflecting cultural issues of sexism, female composers and songwriters still receive a disproportionately lower number of commissions than their male counterparts.

While choruses remain steadfast in their LGBT identities, the time is ripe for them to also address broader political issues. Mixed choruses, those that welcome singers of all orientations like Jane Ramseyer Miller’s excellent One Voice in Minnesota, will hold increasing appeal, and youth choruses are key to the future.

There is much to celebrate and still much to be done. Let’s roll up our sleeves and sing.

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