



Changing Lives, One Child at a Time

More choruses than ever are pouring resources into education and outreach programs that have far-reaching impact

by Heidi Waleson

It was the last week of June 2009, and Gretchen Kuhrmann, artistic director of Choralis, a 100-voice auditioned adult choir in Falls Church, Virginia, was hard-pressed to find a few minutes to talk. The eighth annual week-long Choralis Summer Choral Festival was in full swing, with 28 high school-age singers attending back-to-back classes in choral literature and history, composition, orchestration, and conducting, all taught by area music teachers who donate their time. The students were also intensively rehearsing Bach's *B-minor Mass* with Choralis in preparation for a final concert with orchestra. The Festival was a natural outgrowth of Choralis's initial, ongoing outreach program, which provides scholarships for high school students to sing with the adult choir during the year. "The kids wanted to keep singing in the summer," Kuhrmann says. "There are not a lot of good choral camps around here, and nothing affordable. So we started the summer Festival, keeping the administrative costs and the tuition really low."

The program has been a huge hit with both parents and students. "Last year, a parent said to me after the concert—Haydn's *Creation*—'I thought this was going to be three kids with guitars!' He was so pleased and proud."

The students return year after year and come back to assist after they graduate; many of the students in the scholarship program go on to study music at such schools as Oberlin, Eastman, Juilliard, and Indiana. "Most of those kids made their decision to pursue music after singing with us," says Kuhrmann. Choralis has now launched a third component of its outreach program: an afterschool youth choir, divided into three different age groups, which will have about 100 participants.

Their work in education has also had an effect on the community. "We started drawing kids from George Mason High School, which is near where we rehearse," Kuhrmann says. "The school had no music, but the kids started talking it up and got the parents to do something about starting a choral program. Within two years they hired a choral director and now their choral program is booming."

Modest Budgets, Big Ambitions

Choralis is an example of a chorus with a modest budget but big ambitions in education outreach. It is part of a growing trend in the choral world. Mary Lyons, former chairman of the Pacific Chorale and a member of Chorus America's board of directors, estimates that 25-30 percent of North American choruses have "serious education programs and have invested some time and money in them." Another 10 percent put "a toe in the water," sending groups of singers to perform programs in schools, nursing homes, and other community venues. "Fifteen years ago, very few choruses had any outreach programs at all," Lyons says. "Any chorus that gets into the education business is really attempting to develop a more sophisticated mode of being." And choruses are becoming increasingly creative and resourceful with these programs. "Every time we review the applications for Chorus America's Education Outreach Award, we see something we didn't see before."

That range can be seen among the applicants for this year's award, all of which had budgets under \$200,000 (criterion for the 2009 award). The winner was Harmonium, a 90-voice adult chorus based in Morristown, New Jersey directed by Anne Matlack, for its New Jersey High School Student Choral

Composition Contest. The goal of the program, now 12 years old, is to support and encourage young composers: The winning work is performed and recorded live at Harmonium's spring concert. The idea fit in well with Harmonium's mission, which includes the performance of new and unusual work as well as community outreach. "Young composers don't get a lot of encouragement in the schools," says Matlack. "Some study privately, but they don't get to hear their works performed by a good chorus that has put time into learning it."

Harmonium's contest offers the first 10 registrants coaching by one of its members, a conservatory graduate in composition, who coordinates the contest, and all entering composers receive constructive narrative feedback on their pieces from each member of the panel of judges. "Seeing the face of the winner as he or she hears the piece performed gives tremendous gratification to the chorus," says Matlack. "The singers need it, since it's usually the most difficult piece on the program! They also feel inspired by it. Older people can complain about the young, but when you have a chance to perform something every year by a young person, you see how art goes on."

WomenSing, a San Francisco Bay Area women's chorus with a budget of about \$100,000, is in the second year of its three-year "Youth Inspiring Youth" project, a composition competition for young composers. The program grew out of WomenSing's work with composer Libby Larsen on a commission several years ago. "When Libby came to work with us," recalls artistic director Martin Benvenuto, "we had an impromptu masterclass with high school composers. One of our board members knew about River of Words, a California organization that runs an annual environmental poetry and art competition." The two organizations set up a collaboration: Composer applicants submit scores; two are chosen to write choral pieces based on texts selected from River of Words poems. Larsen offers the composers coaching and direction as they work on their pieces. In the spring, WomenSing holds a workshop in which the composers, poets, and chorus work together on the preparation of the performance. "With this program, the chorus is developing an avid thirst for being part of the creative process," Benvenuto says. "They are fascinated with trying things out at the workshop and seeing how these composers are thinking."

Both competitions are budgeted at about \$10,000, variously including the prize money, honoraria for the judges, and some of the costs of making a recording of the work, a copy of which is given to the composers. The Harmonium competition was funded by the Dodge Foundation for eight years, but when the Foundation's guidelines changed, Harmonium covered the costs through its regular fundraising. WomenSing is actively raising money for its contest. "It has helped us re-engage our supporters," Benvenuto says. "We had a pledge drive at our last fundraiser specifically for this program and we raised four or five thousand dollars for it. We're actively seeking grant support, and we received a Meet The Composer award that helped pay a fee to the composers for the workshop and premiere."

Another education outreach direction for choruses is forging connections with young singers, sometimes integrating them into the adult choir. When Woody McDonell started the Exsultate Chamber Chorus of Venice, Florida seven years ago, he was quick to incorporate high school students into the group. Each apprentice (an average of six each year), receives \$100 a month to spend on voice lessons or other music-related expenses, and also gets the benefit of a chorus of "built-in grandparents," since the group is composed principally of retirees. McDonell runs the program as a kind of unofficial partnership with the local high school's choir program: The young singers have the opportunity to sing different repertoire and work with adults (a number of apprentices have gone on to study music and choral conducting in college), and several of the adult chorus members attend the school's choir rehearsals and help out. The high school choirs are also invited to participate in Exsultate's concerts.

The program has been energizing for Exsultate's members. A chorus member usually takes responsibility for each apprentice: "They ride herd on them if necessary, and make sure the boys have coats for the concert," McDonell says. "One of the more emotional moments I had was last February: We were in a rehearsal, and in came one of my former tenor apprentices, back from his second deployment in Iraq. A lot of the adults in the chorus have been emailing him. We made a difference for him: His mama is a crack addict, and from the time he was 14, he's been living with different people for a week or two at a

time. But he always made it to rehearsal; he was one of our most dependable kids.” Having young people in the choir, McDonell says, is “the most interesting rehearsal dynamic I have ever been a part of. I think working with kids makes you stay younger. You’ve got to stay ahead of them.”

Exsultate decided to cap the apprentice budget at 10 percent of its annual budget of \$35,000, and McDonell was delighted to find that there was great interest in paying for it. “At the conclusion of our last Christmas concert, I was handed a \$3,500 check by a woman—specifically to pay next season’s apprentice bill. We decided to use it as a stimulus to start an endowment. At the conclusion of our last concert, someone handed me a promise to give \$10,000. We now have over \$14,000 for that fund, which pays for one apprenticeship in perpetuity. I was floored. We’ve had as many as three of the apprentices funded from within the group: One member has paid for two every year.”

Forging Partnerships with Public Schools

Choruses that choose to reach into the public schools, in ways that go beyond the occasional demonstration concert, must dedicate more resources. Several groups with larger budgets than this year’s Education Outreach Award applicants have established long-term residencies in public schools. Such efforts use paid staff and entail considerable ongoing negotiation and collaboration with the host schools.

Both Singing City in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Cantare Con Vivo of Oakland, California have created in-school programs providing an elementary school music curriculum in schools that would otherwise go without. Both view these programs as an essential part of their missions: the process of bringing people together through singing. Singing City, which won Chorus America’s Education Outreach Award in 2001 for its in-school workshops, has since expanded the program to two 12-week sessions for grades 2-5 in two North Philadelphia schools. “From the beginning, the purpose of Singing City was to bring people together of different colors and religions,” says music director Jeffrey Brillhart. Singing City’s budget is \$250,000; about a quarter of that is dedicated to education.

Singing City’s in-school residencies, which are three-year contracts, involve a music educator and a composer in residence who work with the students on basic music skills and writing poetry, which the composer in residence helps set to music, all with a multicultural focus. “Our hope is that after three years, a school, having seen the success of our program, will bring in a music teacher. So far, one school has.” Brillhart is also planning a new all-city youth choir for high school students in partnership with a community organization devoted to strengthening inner city families.

Cantare Con Vivo, which won the Education Outreach Award in 2005, is also very committed to education. Indeed, David Morales, its music director, who believes deeply that music is a vehicle for social change, does not differentiate between the adult choir’s work and that of its Cantare Children’s Choirs. “The kids and the adults are one program,” he says. “In Oakland, there’s the urban community and the suburban community, with the boundary delineated by a small hill that you access through a tunnel. My work has been to merge the two.” About half of the choir’s \$400,000 budget is devoted to education outreach.

Cantare gives weekly classes for grades K-2 in four Oakland elementary schools for the entire school year. Julie Haydon, a former elementary school music teacher, runs the program, which teaches children to read and write music in Kodaly-based curriculum in the classroom. In grades 3-5, the children participate in an afterschool choir program at their schools. “We’re making sure that they have no gaps, and we are really starting to see the effects of that, the strong musicians it builds,” she says. “It’s a comprehensive, well-rounded, in-depth music education that kids in a more affluent area would have had.”

Cantare also runs the All Star Singers, a choir for middle school students, and recently launched a new group for boys, grades 5-10, with unchanged voices. “When we first started the choir, kids would ask, ‘What’s a choir?’” says Haydon. “These were kids with phenomenal talent who had never had a musical experience in their lives. Now we have students who have been in our classroom programs, and they are

coming in knowing the fundamentals of music and how to read and sight-sing. They feel like solid musicians.” Morales has also invited two high school-age boys with changed voices to join Cantare’s adult chorus. “We’ll rent their tuxedos, mentor them through, and help get them into college,” he says.

Morales’s goal of bridging Oakland’s divide has resonated with the adult choir: About a third of its 125 members work actively with the youth program. Several adults help in rehearsals for each of the afterschool choirs, mentoring students and helping them learn their music, while others work behind the scenes on such activities as fundraising, driving on field trips, and providing snacks. “It brings people together who would never have a reason to be in the same room,” Haydon says. The student choirs perform on the concerts with the adult choirs, and sometimes in the same pieces. Indeed, Cantare has commissioned Lee Kesselman to write a work in honor of the 10th year of the program, in which “the adults will be the background while the kids shine,” says Morales. “The piece will be in Chinese and Spanish as well as English because those are the predominant languages of our kids. Music is a vehicle for bringing consciousness across the boundaries.”

For the San Francisco Girls Chorus, directed by Susan McMane, taking music and choral education into a school setting was a natural step. After all, the Chorus’s operation is based on education: Its four-level Chorus School, which trains girls from age 5-18, is a curricular sequence of increasingly challenging musical material. Creating Choral Music, now beginning its fourth year of operation, brings a version of that curriculum, taught by instructors from the Chorus School, to the four third-grade classes of a San Francisco elementary school. In weekly 45-minute instructional periods, the teachers present a Kodaly-based music program, linked thematically with classroom work. The songs taught reflect the multi-ethnic composition of the school—most of the students are Asian, Filipino, and Latino—and the third-graders perform as an ensemble twice a year. The Chorus School’s Level II chorus visits the school to perform for and with the third-graders.

Elizabeth Avakian, who heads the Chorus School, had long wanted to get out into the community more effectively. “We’ve had an outreach program since I’ve been here [27 years], sending the school choirs to nursing homes, hospitals, and schools,” she says. “But the girls can’t miss so much school, and the need is great, especially here where year after year money has been taken away from schools for music and arts programs.”

Melanie Smith, the executive director of SFGC, says that the key to success is finding “the right school partner.” The relationship took time to build. “The cooperation of classroom teachers is great now,” says Avakian. “Teachers have so many things to do, and they often don’t have the structural support, so to have us added to their day is complicated. But after the second year, they couldn’t wait to know when we would be coming. They now deeply respect the kind of possibilities there are for these kids and this music. Creating Choral Music has so many other dimensions than just singing. We can tell from September to January to May how these third-graders have grown—the difference in their focus and their attention, and how they trust and get along with each other.”

The program’s foundation-supported \$25,000 budget is a fairly small percentage of SFGC’s overall \$2.5 million. One practical benefit has been to provide additional employment for teachers in the Chorus School who might otherwise leave to take full-time jobs elsewhere. Smith sees Creating Choral Music as a growth area for SFGC, and is hoping to expand into a second school in the East Bay, where the Chorus has a second rehearsal location. And while the program was not designed as a feeder for the Chorus School, several alumnae of the program have auditioned and been accepted.

Life-Changing Possibilities

The range of possibilities for chorus education programs is great: Often, the choice seems dependent upon the interest of the music director, the resources (both money and time) that the organization is willing and able to commit, and the needs of the community. Joyce Garrett, a former high school music teacher who founded the Washington Youth Chorus and serves on Chorus America’s board, noted that enabling young people to participate in choral music can have a far-reaching impact. “In a more affluent environment, outreach can be aesthetic, showing young singers different genres of music, teaming

them up with professional singers, and encouraging composing,” she says. “In the youth choir population I worked with in Washington, DC, the main purpose was to use choral music as a vehicle to teach the value of high achievement, that the only way to success is through hard work. We give them challenging music and they learn to stick with something, to be loyal to the organization, and to discover the value of teamwork—it helps to show them a world they haven’t seen before.”

Recent research by Chorus America supports this. *The Chorus Impact Study* examined the effects choral singing has on childhood development. The results showed that children who sing in choruses have greater academic success and more advanced social skills than children who don’t sing. Both parents and educators surveyed for the study attribute a significant part of a child’s academic success to singing in a chorus.

And why not think big? A belief in the life-changing possibilities of choral music is behind a brand new project of Miami’s Seraphic Fire. With the stimulus of a \$685,000 matching grant from the Knight Foundation, the group is launching the Miami Choral Project, an afterschool, tuition-free choral program, grades 3-5, for disadvantaged communities that is modeled on Venezuela’s trailblazing El Sistema. Shawn Crouch, the project’s new director, envisions its launch in four Miami-Dade communities in 2010, and then a gradual expansion into a Little League-type national network in which choirs would come together in regional festivals. Choral singing, possibly coupled with the kind of academic support that has been a hallmark of El Sistema, would build teamwork, life skills, and community strength on a grand scale. In short, says Crouch, “bettering the world through music.”

Author Credit

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