



COMMUNITY MUSIC AND THE GLBT CHORUS

Casey J. Hayes

New York City Gay Men's Chorus and The Hewitt School

© Casey J Hayes, 2005. All rights reserved.

This article discusses the rise and evolution of Gay/Lesbian/Bi-Sexual/Transgendered (GLBT) choruses in the USA with special attention to the author's outreach efforts with the *Ambassador Chorus*.

The term “community music” finds no more resonating tone than within minority groups working toward social acceptance and assimilation. Look at both words separately and ask: “What community?” “Whose community?” “Where did this community come from?” In turn, ask: “What music?” “Whose music?” “Where did this music come from?”

I ask these questions to make several points. Often, we examine issues of community music as they pertain to illuminating intrinsic values and cultural norms of an established group of people. And in the vast majority of cases, we examine music as a by-product of a specific culture: something that is created *by* the group as a reflection of common ideology. Music is, for the most part, a specific outgrowth of a cultural community, whether it be written and/or performed as reflections of past historical practices within the

community, or written and/or performed to reflect the cultural identity of a specific racial, religious, geographic, idealistic, or linguistic group.

However, this viewpoint depends on a major assumption: that a “community” has been established prior to the formation of that community’s music. In other words (and to me at least), it seems fair to suggest that particular communities (e.g., the Lesbian community and its subgroups) emerge (consciously and unconsciously), evolve, transform and establish sociological and ideological principles as part of the process of creating a unified “voice.” The point of my paper is to suggest that the Gay/Lesbian/Bi-Sexual/Transgendered (GLBT) community developed in another way: it was *music* that brought this community together; music unified this group of socially disenfranchised individuals who lacked a unified voice within society.

Indeed, the idea of a GLBT “community” was largely unheard of until the early 1970s when large numbers of primarily gay men began occupying neighborhoods in large, culturally diverse cities like San Francisco and New York. By settling in “unlikely” areas, such as the Castro District in San Francisco, and Greenwich Village in New York – neighborhoods known to be free of conservative ideologies – these pioneers felt reasonably secure in planting the seeds for living communities with stores, entertainment, and people who would not judge them as societal outcasts. Although a few local tabloids existed for this new and growing group of individuals, their “voices” did not emerge until November 1978. It was then that an embittered San Francisco city councilman walked into City Hall and murdered the Mayor and an openly gay councilmember, Harvey Milk. Milk was an emerging political voice for gay rights and the first public official to

openly declare that he was a homosexual. Beloved by the San Francisco gay population for his emerging views on gay rights issues, a group of men gathered on the steps of City Hall and began to sing during a candlelight vigil. At this moment, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was born, and their long elusive "voice" began to spread its wings in song, thereby contributing to unifying their culture.

As news of the Milk assassination reached the larger urban areas of the country, so did the news of the formation of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. Almost immediately, Los Angeles and Seattle, west coast cities with large gay populations, formed choruses in response to the Milk assassination. In July, 1979, Edward Weaver, a former SFGMC member, moved from San Francisco to New York City to create the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. This chorus was the fourth in the USA to identify itself as "gay." This development helped to spread the gay choral movement across the continent. In 1981, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) was formed in Washington, D.C. to aid the growth of Gay and Lesbian Choruses within their respective communities. GALA helped to create national mission statements, by-laws, governance rules, and financial strategies to assist fledgling choruses, thereby adding credibility and organization to this new voice of the GLBT community. By 1983, the First National Gay Choral Festival took place at Lincoln Center in New York. Entitled *Come Out And Sing Together* (COAST), 650 singers and 11 choruses sang in both Alice Tully Hall and Avery Fisher Hall that weekend. Thousands packed the halls to hear musical works that spoke of peace, tolerance, acceptance and freedom. Commissioned works by such noted gay

composers as Libby Larsen and Ned Rorem were performed to critical acclaim. It seems fair to say that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered individuals were beginning to join together to form a “community” through song.

Singers across the country, unified by their music, began to spread the emerging values of this new community. GLBT choruses sprang up throughout North America. Although the major urban areas were the first to produce choruses, it was not long before mid-sized, isolated urban areas witnessed communal growth through their own GLBT groups.

At present there are over 200 community choruses worldwide that associate themselves with the GLBT community, incorporating over 10,000 singers. GALA Festival VII, which was held in Montreal, Canada in July of 2004, may have been the largest choral festival to date, with 200 choruses representing 6,000 participants. The Seattle Men’s Chorus, founded in 1979, is now considered to be the largest community chorus in North America. Although participation has increased dramatically since that first candlelight vigil in San Francisco, GLBT choruses still sing the same message of love, peace, and tolerance to anyone who will listen. According to Kenneth Cole, former executive director of GALA Choruses from 1994 to 2001, the three major motivational factors for joining a GALA chorus are community, politics, and artistic quality. In a 2005 article written by John D. Sparks for *Voice*, a publication of *Chorus America*, Cole is quoted as saying:

Singing in a gay choir is essentially a political act 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, but also for the sense of community and friendship . . . Although this can also be said for their non-gay counterparts in other choruses, in the gay community, the chorus plays a major community role. There is a very, very strong support network within the chorus. (p. 29)

Whereas many of the same motivational factors have remained throughout the development and growth of the GLBT choral movement, the audiences have changed drastically within the past twenty-seven years. Why? Perhaps a growing awareness (if not recognition and acceptance) of the GLBT movement in general has diminished the novelty of attending a GLBT choral performance. Accordingly, GLBT choirs are seeking funds from the same sources as their non-gay counterparts and non-for-profit organizations in general. Accordingly, GLBT choirs must match the artistic quality of their communal counterparts while addressing different needs within their communities.

The GLBT Youth Choir movement has developed in the context of many larger choruses within the GALA network. For example, New York, Seattle, Vancouver, and San Francisco have well-established choirs that have created links to community social services organizations to aid GLBT youth with self-identity issues. GLBT Youth Choruses provide a safe, nurturing, and closely monitored organization in which members and their families can come to grips with issues previously left for the child alone to deal with. Original works, such as Alan Shorter's mini-musical based on the Tomie DePaola book "*Oliver Button is a Sissy*, are being written to address issues

that confront GLBT youth from early in their social careers. As the need to address social issues within GLBT youth grows, so will ways in which to build bridges between these youth and their non-gay counterparts. One way in which bridges are being built is through educational outreach programs that place members of GLBT choruses in non-GLBT educational settings. Another way to achieve GLBT goals is through the formation of smaller, outreach choruses that focus on issues directly relating to educational outreach. One such group is *The Ambassador Chorus* of the New York City Gay Men's Chorus.

Formed in 2002, the 30 members of the *Ambassador Chorus* serve as educational representatives of the much larger and less mobile *New York City Gay Men's Chorus*. *The Ambassador Chorus* performs throughout the New York and New Jersey areas. They sing to promote tolerance and acceptance, not just for the GLBT community, but for all peoples. Their performances have taken them from New York Public Library branches, where they sang for groups of children under the age of 10, to Bergen Community College, where they sang in support of the school's GLBT Pride Week. In addition, the chorus travels extensively throughout the USA, having recently performed at Georgia Tech University's First Center for the Arts in a concert promoting the efforts of GLBT Broadway composers and performers. The chorus's "Our Voices Win Freedom" concert addressed broader issues related to peoples' struggles for freedom. The concert's centerpiece was its location, Brooklyn Height's Plymouth Church of the Pilgrim, which was the "Grand Central Station" of the Underground Railroad during the American Civil War. Along with their guests, *Panache*, from the *Atlanta Gay*



The Ambassador Chorus under the direction of Casey J. Hayes (far left)

Men's Chorus, The Ambassador Chorus sang on the same sacristy platform where Henry Ward Beecher's congregation would buy slaves in order to set them free. Many members of the church's congregation were in attendance to hear music that may very well have been sung in the tunnels which wind their way under the church's foundation. It is through performances such as these that a GALA Choruses' educational outreach program will be able to succeed in reaching a new audience and in furthering the GLBT community's hopes for acceptance, tolerance, and equal rights.

As with many volunteer, community-based organizations, funding is one of the primary concerns, if not *the* primary non-artistic concern, facing *The Ambassador Chorus*. As is the case of the *New York City Gay Men's Chorus*, *The Ambassador Chorus* is a performing ensemble under the 501c umbrella of *Big Apple Performing Arts of New York* (BAPA)ⁱ. This organization and its Board of Directors are responsible for the day-to-day financial operations of *The Ambassador Chorus*. All *Ambassador* members, as well as each of the additional ensembles under the auspices of BAPA, pay a yearly fee (of \$200) to participate. In addition, individual members absorb all extra performance costs, such as uniforms, travel, and food. Membership dues, in addition to corporate sponsorships (e.g., *American Airlines* and *Absolute Vodka*), aid in building a strong financial basis for the costs of support staff and programming expenses. Yearly budgets are formulated to reflect future needs, including staff travel and the costs of commissioning new works by new GLBT composers.

Additional funding for the ensemble may also be secured from private donors who believe strongly in our musical mission of educational outreach. For example, in our 2003-2004-performance season our individual donors contributed approximately 32% of the budget line for *The Ambassador Chorus*. However, *The "Ambassadors"* also act as a fundraising ensemble for BAPA¹ because our monetary contributions to BAPA far exceed their yearly expenses. In fact, since its existence, *The Ambassador Chorus'* unique ability to travel and perform outreach performances on a day's notice have enabled us to triple the amount of funds we bring in each year (as compared to the amount spent on the chorus' operations and special projects). Not only does the ensemble do unprecedented work at reaching

populations in serious need of outreach pertaining to issues of GLBT tolerance, it also acts as a financial windfall for its umbrella organization. Truly, ensembles like *The Ambassador Chorus* are a win/win situation for non-profit choral ensembles seeking to advance their musical and social-educational missions and maintain funding for these missions.

As they find new and innovative ways to reach an ever-changing audience, Gay/Lesbian/Bi-sexual/Transgendered Choruses will continue to be a strong voice within the greater GLBT community and beyond. A prominent theme within the GALA Choruses is “Building Bridges through Song.” It truly was “song” that helped to create and bind our community together during times of immense turmoil – the same song that continues to affect all who will listen with an open mind and an open heart.

Notes

1. BAPA (Big Apple Performing Arts) is the business entity governing the New York City Gay Men's Chorus and its chamber choir *The Ambassador*.

References

Sparkes, J. D. (2005). Gay and lesbian choruses then and now. *Voice* (summer), 28-31

Casey J. Hayes is co-music director of the New York City Gay Men's Chorus and Chairman of the Creative Arts Department at The Hewitt School, New York City. He is a PhD candidate in music education at New York University. For further information about his work with *The Ambassador Chorus*, see: <http://www.glbtorchoutreach.com/>

Email cjh254@nyu.edu

