

Book Review

International Journal of Community Music Volume 2 Numbers 2&3 © 2009
Intellect Ltd

Book Review. English language. doi: 10.1386/ijcm.2.1.267/4

***Chorus and Community*, Karen Ahlquist (ed.), (2006), 1st edn.,
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 323 pp.,
ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03037-6 (hbk.: alk. paper), \$30.00
ISBN-10: 0-252-03037-0 (hbk.: alk. paper), \$30.00
ISBN-13: 978-0-252-07284-0 (pbk.: alk. paper), \$65.00
ISBN-10: 0-252-07284-7 (pbk.: alk. paper), \$65.00**

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During the research stage of my dissertation process, I stumbled upon a book of collected essays by Dr Karen Ahlquist, noted musicologist at George Washington University. Her book, entitled *Chorus and Community*, 'focuses on the chorus historically in the Western world since the decline of aristocratic patronage and at the present time worldwide' (p. 2). As my research dealt with a community chorus in New York City, I read the collection voraciously, hoping to take any number of exciting and pertinent facts and place them comfortably into the paradigm of my studies.

Research into the emerging academic field of community music is rare, and particularly one which focuses solely upon the chorus as a means of artistic expression. Choruses are a unique subject and bring out an entirely exclusive set of socio-dynamic principles that are not necessarily present within other musical settings. Social capital takes on a separate meaning in the chorus, as the interplay of individuals within the ensemble, as well as the ensemble's ability to relate to its audience, cannot be measured alongside other musical entities, such as a community band or orchestra. To this end, I was elated to find a work that separates the chorus from the realm of community music, in order to focus solely on this complex social phenomenon.

Professor Ahlquist does an exceptional job of assembling experts who represent a vast array of community music practitioners. From choral practitioners in Tanzania to a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) ensemble in Washington DC, the author takes careful steps to include essays that speak to many prominent aspects of the community choral scene. I found the collection thorough and well researched. I felt that the author's Introduction was among the most informative and relevant sections of the book. Ahlquist seems to favour Gregory Barz's definition of 'community' as being 'a group of people that gathers for a reason: whether to remember and recall, to share, or to create new experiences' (p. 3). I also find this definition to be more than adequate for the purpose

of this book; however, I would have liked to have seen Ahlquist work to illuminate this definition within the paradigms of each choral experience her authors would select. Maybe we are to feel that it [the definition of community] is self-defining, and thus needs no academic lens in which to revisit, via each essay. Had the author given this definition of community to each essayist prior to their penning of their particular work, the reader could have experienced something much more resonating.

Whereas two sections of the book would encapsulate the reader into the purpose of the essays (those being Part 3: 'Minorities Identified' and Part 4: 'The Activist Chorus'), the remaining sections had little through line and even less of a relevant point. Upon reading Melinda Russell's essay on choral music in Decatur, Illinois, I found myself feeling frustrated as the author seemed to ramble on with little academic concern; never truly reaching a point of interest. Rather, the essay read like an undergraduate report on conducting a choir than a scholarly essay. In addition, several of the essays could have been related to each other, which would have given the book a stronger sense of purpose by transcending stereotypes, rather than simply asking individuals within the activity to write about something that has to do with a choir in a community. I was disappointed that writings on GLBT choruses were listed only under 'Activist Choruses' and not under 'Minorities Identified'. By labelling the chorus in only the section of activism, the current state of the GLBT chorus is being defined as only someone outside of the activity may want to view it. Jill Strachan's essay is only one way to view the formation and function of GLBT choruses, and unfortunately, readers of this collection will only learn of active choral work, rather than those which function passively to help change stereotypes by the transmission of positive cultural information.

I found similar fault with Helen Metzelaar's essay on the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The focus was placed upon one specific outing of the chorus, that being the 1876–77 tour of Switzerland and Holland, rather than the passive work that was received upon the chorus's first appearance north of the Mason-Dixon line. The Jubilees became tireless cultural ambassadors of the newly freed Negro to those who would donate to the education of the freedmen. I appreciated the examination of the Jubilees, but believe that a reader would have gained greater resonance were the example set in the United States: possibly the group's first northern appearance in Cincinnati, 1871.

Whereas the essays are a welcome and much overdue addition to the scholarly writings addressing community music, I felt that an opportunity was missed by the editor. Had there been a clearly established through line in which to present each essayist, the collection could have hit the proverbial home run out of the ballpark. In its current form, *Chorus and Community* stands merely as a collection of random essays which, at best, spur future academics into action. Scholars have just begun to scratch the surface of community music research. Dr Ahlquist's collection illustrates just how many academic areas exist within a musical/communal structure so established as the chorus.