

transformative polyphony:

Choirs, Community Engagement, and Social Change

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introduction

The choral art form is uniquely suited to nurturing and sustaining community life and social change. Singers in both formal and informal choirs participate in the development of a community experience. This sense of community nourishes the people present, often supporting them as they participate in social change activities. For example, in the United States, participants in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s used singing to literally and metaphorically raise their voices in response to the conditions they faced in their daily lives. In societies around the world, song is one way to express sorrow, loss, and joy, as well as to envision a new reality for the individual and community.

This same idea of song in community is emerging among choral professionals in the United States. At Chorus America's national conference in June 2006, a panel discussion addressed issues of accessibility and cultural inclusion in the choral field.¹ The homogeneity of the field – most visibly in terms of race, class, and cultural background – raises a number of concerns about the future of choral music in the United States. As racial and cultural demographics continue to shift in significant ways nationally, it will be necessary to nurture a more diverse body of choral singers, conductors, composers, administrators, and audience members. Currently, the choral field supports new ensembles, commissions, and innovative programming. In the future, choral ensembles will not continue to thrive in this manner unless there is a concerted, nation-wide effort to increase the accessibility and diversity of the field.

One way to move toward diversification may be through a critical re-evaluation of community outreach programs. For many choral organizations, community outreach

¹ This issue was raised by Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, Francisco Nuñez, and Ray Suarez during a panel discussion entitled, "Our Choral Capital" during Chorus America's national conference held in Washington, D.C. on June 8, 2006.

programs are the one substantive way they are able to interact with people who might not otherwise attend concerts or audition for the chorus. These programs are an opportunity for choral ensembles to introduce themselves and what they have to offer to the wider community. However, these activities are often short-term, surface-level interactions that do not involve community participants in the organization's internal creative process.

Rather than simply "reaching out" to community members, choral organizations would be better served by working in partnership with community members. Inviting community members into the creative process as collaborators allows them to claim ownership of their own potential as artists. It also opens the choral ensemble to new people, ideas, and perspectives that can contribute to the successful growth of the organization. The shift from community outreach to community engagement reveals the potential not only for communities to impact choral organizations, but also for choral organizations to play a significant role in supporting healthy communities and positive social change.

This paper probes the possibilities for more meaningful community engagement in United States choral ensembles. I assert that choral organizations have the potential to play significant roles in society by working with, rather than reaching out to, communities around them. To support my assertion, I will first discuss the connection between art and its social functions. Next, I will attempt to articulate why the choral field is the ideal place for this conversation to occur. Finally, I will examine the work of the Minnesota Chorale, a professional symphonic chorus based in Minneapolis that, through its nationally-recognized *Bridges* program, wrestles with the issues relating to community, choral singing, and social change.

“between the institution and the street”:² Society and the Arts

To understand the potential for choral ensembles to function as agents of social change, it is helpful to consider theoretical perspectives on arts and social change. Artists, activists, and scholars have long recognized the powerful role the arts can play in the functioning of a society. These critical perspectives inform this paper, as they often reveal that the arts are integral parts of our daily lives. From the music on the radio and the design of our clothing, to the books we read and the architecture of the buildings we live in, the arts have a subtle yet substantial impact on our understanding of the world around us. The arts assist us in defining and constructing our cultural existence.

Artistic institutions are anywhere art happens – concert halls, theaters, museums, as well as churches, studios, graffiti-covered walls, and classrooms. These institutions offer space for the creation of art and thus the creation of ideas, reflections and critiques. Joost Smiers, a professor in the political science of the arts, refers to these as “cultural meanings.” He writes, “We may call the arts *repositories* of cultural meanings...At the same time, it is appropriate to describe the arts as being ‘workshops’ in which cultural meanings are crafted and created.”³ As Smiers explains, these cultural meanings are reflective of and contribute to the functioning of society: “Through the work of artists and the way their work is presented, social and cultural sentiments and convictions are produced, constructed, reproduced and reconstructed.”⁴

² Giroux, Henry, "Borderline Artists, Cultural Workers, and the Crisis of Democracy," in *The Artist in Society: Rights, Roles and Responsibilities*, ed. Carol Becker and Anne Weins (Chicago: New Art Examiner, 1995), 5.

³ Joost Smiers, *Arts Under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Zed Books, 2003), 81.

⁴ Ibid.

Artists provide a prophetic eye for their surrounding community. Through their work, artists can serve as creators of cultural legacy, as well as offer alternative visions for the future. Artists provide communities with a perspective that comes from both the inside – a participant’s response – as well as the outside – an observer’s synthesized reflection – as they navigate between multiple positions within society.

Artists are rooted in intellectual, creative, and pragmatic spaces. Henry Giroux, an interdisciplinary scholar recognized for his work in critical pedagogy, acknowledges that artists translate between these disparate spheres of experience. The borders between these spheres are “partial, fluid, and open to the incessant tensions and contradiction that inform one’s identity, struggles and relationship to the world.”⁵ Additionally, the borders are difficult but powerful locations to inhabit, as one takes on the responsibility of protecting, producing, and supporting the development of cultural knowledge and dialogic spaces. Giroux continues, “At stake here is not merely the opportunity to link art to practices that are transgressive and oppositional, but also to make visible a wider project of connecting forms of cultural production to the creation of multiple spheres.”⁶

Musicians, like other artists, operate from multiple locations. Two locations of cultural production familiar to musicians and their audiences are the rehearsal room and concert hall. These spaces, while used for learning, practicing, and performing music, are also potential centers for transformative dialogue. Whether it is a discussion about appropriate fingering or arts advocacy, musicians exchange important information with one another in these spaces. Musicians also share their vulnerabilities with one another and with the audience as they negotiate questions of interpretation, style, and technique verbally or while playing and singing. Musicians and audiences form an interdependent web in the

⁵ Giroux, 5.

⁶ Ibid.

surrounding space, establishing the potential for productive, clarifying conversation in both verbal and musical ways.

With the potential for supporting transformative dialogue, music operates as a vehicle for social change. Mark Mattern, a professor of political science, writes, “The potential political significance of music extends well beyond...explicit uses [such as political rap or benefit concerts] to include...its impact on human identity and capacity, its role in defining or destroying communities, and its part in cultural revitalization and self-determination.”⁷ The “political significance of music” as identified by Mattern has been recognized by activists and artists alike. As a result, music has been used in a variety of social, political, and economic contexts to support social change.

In order to understand the potential of the choral art to play a role in social change, it is important to examine the role song has played in supporting communities in the context of political and social upheaval. One of the most recognized uses of song in social change was in the southern United States. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was supported by communal singing activities. Movement participants used gospel songs, popular tunes, and African American spirituals to negotiate difficult decisions, nourish weary spirits, and inspire courageous action. As the Movement spread throughout African American communities, so did the songs, evolving as each community integrated them into local Movement activities and passed them on to others. The result was a communication tool that was culturally oriented and relevant to Movement participants. The songs functioned as a collective documentation of individual and communal experiences, and nourished and refreshed the spirits of those involved.

⁷ Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* (New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1998), 5.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, a prominent scholar of African American cultural history, was a song leader and member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee during the Civil Rights Movement. She has written and spoken extensively about the role song played in the Movement. Acknowledging the powerful sound of people singing together, Reagon believes, “When we sing, we announce our existence”⁸ in both individual and collective ways. She continues, “Song is a way you can extend the territory you affect...People can walk into you before they can get close to your body. Communal singing is a way for a group of people to announce that we’re here, this is real. The people who come into that space, as long as you are singing, cannot change the air in that space. The song will maintain the air as your territory.”⁹

In contrast to songs in the standard Western choral repertoire, which are not always directly linked to an immediate experience, Reagon says African American spirituals and other songs from the Movement “have a lot more to do with stating a worldview, of positioning yourself in the world.”¹⁰ One of the most important uses of song in the Civil Rights Movement was to allow participants to share in the envisioning and creation of a new existence. “I learned very early that I had to affect the space I sang in. The air that people breathed carried the sound of my voice as a songleader, joined by their own. I am now describing a feast of song, where that which is consumed is also created by the consumers, and what you take in is more than you can give out because when you put it out, it is enlarged by the sounds of others who commit themselves to participate in the creation.”¹¹ Due to the visionary, educational, and spiritual tradition of this repertoire – much of which

⁸ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “The Songs Are Free,” interview by Bill Moyers, Mystic Fire Video, 1991.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Nurturing Resistance,” in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Craig Little and Mark O’Brien (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 1-8.

has discernable roots in specific geographic regions of the African continent and has survived the devastating years of slavery in the United States – the preservation, sharing, and continued re-invention of these songs is linked to the survival of African American cultural history and community. Without these songs and the teachings within them, the strength of the community cannot be sustained.

Songs of the Civil Rights Movement are one example of how song and the activity of singing can support community development and social change. Transformative dialogue can also emerge within the rehearsal room or performance space. This dialogue may be messy, full of conflict or contradiction. At the same time, it can be affirming, nourishing, reflective, and productive. As with other artists, musicians have the necessary role of serving both as mediator and participant as they translate between institutions, ideologies, histories, and people. This awareness of the potential for music and musicians to aid in the transformation of their communities is missing from engagement programs today. Without the communal creative process identified by Reagon, outreach activities between choral organizations and communities establish only surface-level connections. True engagement for choral organizations in the United States should take into account historical examples of song used in the context of social change and the lessons they provide.

I do not intend to disparage the weighty tradition of music used in the context of revolutionary social resistance. Nor do I intend to suggest that the community outreach programs of choral organizations can be compared to the often life-threatening sacrifices of musicians engaged in resistance. Yet, I maintain that an acknowledgement of the potential power of communal singing will afford choral organizations the opportunity to re-examine the purpose of their work in the context of community needs.

“an evolving project”¹²: the Minnesota Chorale’s *Bridges* Program

A commitment to singing in service of a collective vision is emerging in some choral ensembles in the United States. However, despite active community outreach and education programs, many choral organizations find themselves struggling to establish lasting connections to the communities around them. Due in part to the popular perception of classical music as elitist and inaccessible, choral organizations find themselves constantly fighting to demonstrate the significance of their work to funding agencies, state and local governments, and to the general public. The Minnesota Chorale is one organization that is attempting to break down the barriers between classical music and broader community life. Since establishing its *Bridges* program in 1994, the Chorale has worked to redefine the nature of community outreach activities through innovative partnerships with individuals and organizations within the Twin Cities area and beyond.

The Minnesota Chorale is a 285-voice professional symphonic chorus based in Minneapolis. Established in 1972, the Chorale has gained wide recognition for its consistently high quality performances with the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Under the direction of current artistic director Kathy Saltzman Romey, the Chorale has recently become the primary chorus of the Minnesota Orchestra. The Chorale has performed with such internationally-renown conductors as Roberto Abbado, Bobby McFerrin, Nicholas McGegan, Sir Roger Norrington, Helmuth Rilling, Robert Shaw, Leonard Slatkin, and Osmo Vänskä.¹³

¹² Kathy Saltzman Romey, interview by author, 16 June 2006, tape recording, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

¹³ *Minnesota Chorale*. www.mnchorale.org (accessed 16 July 2006).

Unique to the Minnesota Chorale is its active connection to the broader community through its education and outreach programs. These programs, encompassing a wide variety of activities and populations, provide the Chorale with ever-deepening connections to the surrounding communities. The *Full Voice* program, now in its 13th year, connects the Chorale with inner-city high schools in the Twin Cities area through music instruction and performances. At a more advanced level, the *Emerging Conductor* program provides the opportunity for promising young conductors from Minnesota to work with the Chorale under the mentorship of Kathy Saltzman Romey. The *InChoir* program invites students and adults from within the larger community to participate in lecture-rehearsals on choral-orchestral masterpieces performed throughout the concert season.¹⁴

In addition to these educational programs, the Minnesota Chorale has gained national recognition for its *Bridges* program, an innovative community outreach initiative that connects the Chorale with ever-changing artistic partners and organizations throughout the Twin Cities area.¹⁵ The *Bridges* program is unique both in its approach to and intent behind outreach. While not a definitive model, the *Bridges* program demonstrates the potential for choral ensembles to respond to community issues and operate as agents of social change.

With the stated mission of “seeking to build lasting social and individual connections in our community through artistic collaboration,”¹⁶ the *Bridges* program was established in 1994 for both practical and ideological reasons. As a symphonic chorus, the Minnesota Chorale needed a project separate from the orchestras to create its own organizational identity. Camille Kolles, executive director of the Chorale, recalls thinking, “To be the chorus behind the orchestra was not a substantial enough thing to do as an independent

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Minnesota Chorale, *National Endowment for the Arts* grant proposal for the *Sing Me a Home* project.

¹⁶ *Minnesota Chorale*. www.mnchorale.org (accessed 7/16/2006).

organization.”¹⁷ On a practical level, the founding of *Bridges*, along with the Chorale’s other outreach and education programs, has allowed the organization to grow beyond the orchestra’s stage.

More importantly, the impetus behind the *Bridges* program was recognition of the vast chasm between classical music and the broader community. The desire to participate in the development of a more diverse and culturally relevant choral field is an extension of the Chorale’s larger mission to “celebrate the human voice and its power to educate, enrich, unite and inspire.”¹⁸ The Chorale’s *Bridges* program rests on the idea that choral organizations can – and should – be a part of the development of healthy and vibrant local, national, and international communities.

Conversation with Kolles reveals an approach to community outreach that is also reflective of and responsive to the growth of the Chorale as an organization. “Through the years we’ve begun to craft this notion of chorus as community, chorus in community. With 285 singers plus [their families], we are like a small town with a thousand people. I think a symphonic chorus could be the perfect model of a well-functioning community.”¹⁹ While Kolles admits there is not enough cultural and economic diversity within the Chorale, there is diversity in terms of age and occupation. With its sizable membership and the understanding of the larger network of relationships between singers and their communities, the Chorale recognizes it can potentially contribute to positive change in the Twin Cities area. Additionally, the *Bridges* program has the potential to serve as a model for redefining the role of choral organizations in their communities.

¹⁷ Camille Kolles, interview by author, 23 June 2006, tape recording, Minnesota Chorale, Minneapolis, MN.

¹⁸ www.mnchorale.org

¹⁹ Kolles, 2006.

The Chorale's success as a professional symphonic chorus could mean community outreach is superfluous to the organization's overall functioning. Artistic director Kathy Saltzman Romey says it is quite the opposite. On an artistic level, Romey asserts that *Bridges* programs provide "an opportunity for us to bring the chorus out of the concert hall, to collaborate in new ways and to explore music beyond the symphonic repertoire."²⁰ The Chorale is committed to doing outreach to benefit the community, and also to contribute to the growth of the organization. "*Bridges* is not just about pursuing outreach," Romey continues, "but is also an important vehicle for 'inreach.' It challenges our organization to assess, stretch, and push traditional boundaries. I think this is where the most growth will happen. Through *Bridges*, we are a healthier choral community."²¹

Pushing boundaries within the organization occurs as the Chorale challenges boundaries outside of the organization. The divide between classical music audiences and the wider community is of major concern to the Chorale. According to Kolles, *Bridges* "is exceedingly important because we're missing major pockets of the community by doing this [classical] music they don't know anything about...I felt like we were leaving so many people behind."²² While not dismissive of the notion of "art for art's sake," Kolles feels art is especially significant when it has a purpose behind it. In observing the disconnect between classical music and wider community life, Kolles felt, "We've got to do something about this. Music is for the masses, and we're not doing anything"²³ to support a more inclusive musical culture. Kolles and other members of the Minnesota Chorale staff continue to ask questions that not all classical music organizations concern themselves with. "How do you make

²⁰ Romey, 2006.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kolles, 2006.

²³ Ibid.

classical music relevant today? You can't just put it in a bubble," Kolles says, "You have to make it real for people now. That's where *Bridges* began to change everything."²⁴

A brief overview of past *Bridges* programs demonstrates the flexible and constantly evolving structure of the program. The first program took place in November of 1994. Entitled *A Russian Night*, the concert program included two Russian pianists and the Chorale's performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*. In addition to the music, concert attendees were invited to mingle in a marketplace with Russian food and crafts vendors. The most significant thing about the concert was the audience. After learning that the Twin Cities metropolitan area is home to a large Russian population, the Chorale partnered with Russian radio, newspapers, and other community leaders to ensure members of that community could attend the concert. As a result, approximately half of the concert attendees were from the Russian community, and the other half consisted of regular Chorale patrons. Kolles considers *A Russian Night* one of the most successful *Bridges* programs. "We had all our eyes open," she remembers, "and we [thought], how do we do this right?... [Audience members were] mingling, with the languages overlapping. It was exactly as we hoped it would be."²⁵

A Russian Night was the first of many *Bridges* programs to reach out to other communities that go unrecognized by classical music organizations and the broader society. For the 1997 *Bridges* program, the Chorale initiated an 18-month social and artistic collaboration with the Leigh Morris Chorale, musical leaders from the Twin Cities African American community, and four urban African American church choirs. The project included a community sing-along, joint rehearsals, and two culminating concert performances in 1997 and 1998. The experience provided opportunities for teaching and learning for all the choirs

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

involved in the project. Art Sidner, a singer from one of the church choirs, reflected on this learning and teaching in the program notes for the 1998 *God's Trombones* concert:

“As African Americans, it’s not often that we have gotten to sing certain kinds of music that aren’t in the popular media, and to share that with non-African American singers. Lots of times we perform for white audiences, but haven’t had a chance to sing with white people. [In this project,] we were reaching out to each other in a way that we normally don’t. One of the facts about being a minority in a majority culture is that you know more about the majority culture than they know about you. This was a rare opportunity to focus on something that is not, and probably wouldn’t be, well known by the majority culture unless they had an opportunity like this.”²⁶

Acknowledging that people who are part of a “minority culture” often “know more about the majority culture” than the majority culture knows about them, Sidner reveals an important element of the *Bridges* experience. While it can be exhausting for members of the minority culture to constantly be placed in the position of educating members of the majority culture, partnerships such as this *Bridges* collaboration place all participants – regardless of cultural background – in the positions of learning and teaching. While the challenge of negotiating cultural differences cannot be underestimated, the creation of a more level playing field between members offered the potential for constructive dialogue and creative exchange.

In a different form of creative exchange, the 1996-1997 *Bridges* program established connections with the rural community of Winona, Minnesota. The Chorale partnered with two university and four high school choirs in a festival that included teaching workshops and a final performance with the combined choirs. Other *Bridges* programs have consisted of partnerships with local women in the visual and performing arts, social service agencies, faith communities, school groups, and even a local museum. Through the *Bridges* program, the Chorale has also explored connections between Eastern healing traditions and Western

²⁶ Art Sidner, *God's Trombones* concert program notes, November 8, 1998, Minneapolis, MN.

classical music, as well as traveled to and hosted musicians from Venezuela.²⁷ The exploratory nature of the *Bridges* program allows for a wide variety of partnerships that develop as a result of individual connections and in response to community issues.

²⁷www.mnchorale.org

“our voices, our tools:”²⁸

the *Sing Me a Home* Project

Continuing the Chorale’s commitment to exploring community issues, the 2007 *Bridges* concert program, *Sing Me a Home*, provides a case study for examining how the Minnesota Chorale is attempting to redefine the concept of outreach. The project also aims to redefine the role the organization plays in the lives of those who live in the broader Twin Cities area. Through *Sing Me a Home*, the Chorale will demonstrate how choirs can carry and share elements of community life with a large group of people. The Chorale will also endeavor to make classical music more accessible to wider audiences by demonstrating the relevance of choral singing to our contemporary experiences. The Chorale’s *Sing Me a Home* project hopes to provide a public forum for members of the Twin Cities community to examine the issues related to home, safety, and affordable housing. The project also aims to inspire individual and collective action relating to the issue of affordable housing, as well as a grassroots effort to promote singing as a tool for community unification, celebration, and dialogue.

The Minnesota Chorale has had a relationship with Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity (TCHFH) for three years. In 2003, the Chorale performed a benefit concert for TCHFH. In addition, singers from the Minnesota Chorale have assisted in building Habitat homes and have sung at the dedication ceremonies of new homes. The Chorale did not feel this was a substantial enough contribution to Habitat’s cause. Kolles hoped for a “deeper, more integrated”²⁹ relationship with TCHFH.

²⁸ Minnesota Chorale, *National Endowment for the Arts* grant proposal.

²⁹ Kolles, 2006.

TCHFH has a wide variety of printed materials that inform the larger public about the organization's objectives. As an international organization, Habitat for Humanity has locations in all 50 United States and over 92 countries around the world. Their logo is as familiar in some communities as that of Starbucks or Fed-Ex.³⁰ Understanding this, Kolles observed, "They do not need our help to promote who they are and what they're about." As a choral organization, however, the Chorale understood their capacity as artists to bring experiences to life in a way that printed materials are not able to. "This idea of taking [a] story and then bringing it into this sublime music ... adds this whole other dimension to the story," Kolles said, "It just seemed to make a lot of sense."³¹ In addition, the concept of home and community well-being reflects the Chorale's continuing dialogue about the significance of choral singing in community.

In that vein, the *Sing Me a Home* concert program in May 2007 will raise awareness about the issues surrounding affordable housing by exploring the concept of home through song. The Chorale staff is envisioning two levels of experience for participants and attendees of this concert. Pointing to both individual and collective levels of experience, artistic director Kathy Saltzman Romey explains the idea behind the concert: "This program is somewhat elusive in that we're trying to tap into those deeply rooted feelings that people have but may not express regarding home, sanctuary, safety, family, and community."³² On a broader level, she says the Chorale will participate in a dialogue that poses such questions as, "What common feelings do we share about home? What do we share as a diverse community, and how can we express these ideas through music?"³³ This novel approach to

³⁰ Habitat for Humanity, 2005.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Romey, 2006.

³³ Ibid.

concert programming includes an intent to engage the audience in reflective conversation about elements of community life.

Particularly unique to *Sing Me a Home* is the repertoire that will be featured on the program. In addition to including music from around the world, which reflects the diversity of people served by Habitat for Humanity, the program will also feature five newly commissioned works with texts derived from interviews with Twin Cities Habitat homeowners. After the interviews are complete, four high school students will work with a master librettist to compile the interviews into prose format. The prose will then be sent to local composers who will set the texts to music. Finally, four of the pieces will be premiered on the May 2007 concert by inner-city high schools, while the fifth, with text set by the master librettist, will be premiered by the combined high school choirs and the Minnesota Chorale. The performance will be recorded as part of an effort to produce a compact disc that could be presented to families at the dedication of their new Habitat homes.

The project does not end there. While developing the program, Romey recalls asking, “In doing this type of project, where does the outreach stop? What happens next?”³⁴ Beyond the thematic content of the concert program, Kolles said the Chorale is considering “the mission of the concert itself. We have a mission for what we’re doing, but what is really the mission for the final outcome--which is the concert?”³⁵ One goal is to extend the conversation about home, community, and affordable housing beyond the concert program. The Chorale hopes the stories – by way of the commissioned songs – will continue to be told in the broader community.

To do this, the Chorale will place the five new songs in the public domain so they can be accessible to anyone who wishes to sing them. The songs will be easy to sing, either

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kolles, 2006.

as a single melody line or in simple four-part harmony, similar to a congregational hymn. Recognizing the extended network of its 285 members, the Chorale hopes their singers will sing the songs with their own families, schools, and churches, thereby continuing to bring the conversation to the larger Twin Cities community. The singers of the Chorale will bring the songs into their own spheres of influence, thus functioning as what the Chorale calls “singer advocates.”³⁶

While the Chorale is continuing to discern exactly what form singer advocacy will take within the organization, Kolles asks, “What does it mean to have singers embedded in the community?... [We have] singers to advocate for what singing can do.”³⁷ The concept of singer advocates can be extended further, beyond musical pursuits. As stated earlier, singers in the Civil Rights Movement used songs to advocate for political change. The Chorale will continue to explore the concept of singer advocacy in the context of the current political and social moment, as well as within its own development as a professional choral organization.

Closely linked to the concept of singer advocacy is the decision to place the songs from this project in the public domain. This decision echoes conversation surrounding copyright issues that is occurring in other arts disciplines. Joost Smiers is an outspoken opponent of the copyright system. Smiers believes the copyright system separates the community from the process of art-making. He writes, “Essentially, copyrighting a work of art, as we do now, fails to acknowledge two things: the historical, cultural...mix of ideas and influences of those people the artist draws upon, and also the community of people who...receive and respond to the art work. Copyright comes down to ownership,” Smiers

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

continues, “if it’s in the public domain, then each and every member of the public ‘owns’ it.”³⁸

By placing songs in the public domain, the Chorale returns the stories and the music they inspire to the larger Twin Cities community for wider dissemination. The overall process of the project means that the foundation – the interview texts – comes from members of the community outside the organization. The results of the project – the new songs – are returned to the community to continue to be sung, altered, and shared. This links members of the community to part of the creative process. In a sense, the Chorale and its artistic staff are functioning only as translators. Rather than providing a completed artistic package, as traditional performances would, the Chorale merely provides a vehicle to transmit the stories through music into a sphere of influence that is different, and possibly wider, than the original location.

The sharing of stories on a larger level is significant. Through the re-telling of experiences, connections between people become more apparent. Singing is one way to solidify these connections. Ultimately, the Chorale hopes *Sing Me a Home* will inspire what Romey calls “a grassroots movement [of] sharing choral music.”³⁹ The spread of choral singing throughout the wider community increases its access. Making choral singing more accessible is an essential step in enriching the choral field with a wider diversity of voices.

Kolles and Romey acknowledge that *Bridges* is only the beginning of a long process to increase the accessibility of classical music. Each new partnership brings up new issues and unexpected challenges. Each *Bridges* program is a risk – both financially and organizationally. It will be difficult to assess the effect of a project such as *Sing Me a Home*, because the

³⁸ Smiers, 72.

³⁹ Romey, 2006.

Chorale may not receive reports of every performance of the songs, or what impact the stories will have on those who hear and sing them.

This element of uncertainty is linked to the “organic process”⁴⁰ of *Bridges* development. Kolles says, “We’re learning along the way...tinkering and going, ‘what about this?’...Our intellectual interests combined with our hearts seem to steer this. Kathy [Romey] and I both have a heartfelt and intellectual fascination with what is possible.”⁴¹ Both Kolles and Romey cite a commitment to the community as deep motivation for this non-traditional programming. Romey asks, “Why are we doing *Bridges*? Why do we do any program? To touch the spirit, and to link to our humanity.”⁴² She continues, “You don’t know when you will touch an individual, what they will do with that experience, and how they will share this further. Ultimately, that’s what our lives and music are all about.”⁴³

The Minnesota Chorale’s *Bridges* program is unique in its commitment to partnering with, rather than reaching out to the wider community. Through involving community members in the creative process, the Chorale invites the community into the organization’s structure in a more integral way than traditional outreach programs. By placing the songs in public domain, the Chorale acknowledges the agency of community members to carry, alter, and perform the stories of other community members. Through a project such as *Sing Me a Home*, the Minnesota Chorale initiates movement from outreach to engagement.

⁴⁰ Romey, 2006.

⁴¹ Kolles, 2006.

⁴² Romey, 2006.

⁴³ Ibid.

intent does not always equal impact: the Enterprise of Community Engagement

The process of redefining community engagement activities comes with great risks. In our daily lives, we operate within comfort zones that may not include economic, cultural, social, or political diversity. We must move beyond brief encounters with people outside our comfort zones and into long-term relationships based on trust, open communication, and commitment to a goal that is meaningful to all who engage in the project. This is easier said than done. The establishment of productive relationships is often impeded by histories of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, stereotypes, and the misinterpretation of deeply embedded cultural symbols, gestures, and language. No doubt these kinds of obstacles have hindered or completely thwarted efforts at collaboration in all areas of the arts, and in other disciplines as well.

One observation that approaches the root of these obstacles is the adage, “Intent does not equal impact.” One person’s intent to be of assistance to another may not be truly helpful. The same concept applies to community engagement. In outreach programs, too often the organization doing the outreach is approaching the community partner from a perspective that does not fit the partner’s needs. Engagement requires honest conversation among all parties involved in order to minimize confusion and maximize productivity. For choral ensembles in the United States, a movement toward community engagement may include the following:

1. Understanding cultural modes of communication and operating with a deeper level of cultural sensitivity. This will require more time for background research, and may require going to where community members are – places such as churches, schools, community centers, and homes. It is

also necessary to acknowledge historical legacies of oppression, injustice, and to recognize the structures that support them, as these issues may continue to effect working relationships.

2. Finding ways to work closely *with* community members, and not *for* them. This may mean going so far as to invite community members into the planning process from the very beginning, including them in every step of the project's development, and making sure they have as much control over the outcome of the project as the organization.
3. Removing barriers to access. This may include making the concert experience more inclusive through creative programming that evokes the cultural world of the concert repertoire. Organizations should also explore utilizing media from other arts disciplines, performing in a variety of venues, hosting pre-concert workshops or open rehearsals, subsidizing tickets or offering free performances, and employing innovative marketing strategies.
4. Extending relationships and the goal of the partnership beyond the concert experience. For example, the Minnesota Chorale has a group of singers that volunteer to build Habitat homes and then sing at dedication ceremonies, deepening the relationship between the two organizations.
5. Creating a more inclusive organization, from the inside out. This could mean inviting community members to serve on the board of directors, or hiring community members to be a part of the staff. This could also take the

form of more accessible auditions, or the implementation of a “starter choir” that would perform a diversity of repertoire while also assisting singers in gaining the skills necessary for auditioning at a more advanced level.

Given the wide variety of choral organizations in the United States, and the specific needs of the communities that surround them, it is difficult to suggest definitive models for community engagement. Indeed, the assertion that traditional methods of community outreach are not adequately serving community needs is a relatively new one. The difference between outreach and engagement will vary with each choral organization and the communities it hopes to partner with. This paper serves only as an attempt at initiating the conversation about the relevance of choral organizations to community life.

The diversity of opinions, experiences, challenges, and successes in the area of community outreach and engagement are too numerous to be documented here. It is my hope that others may be inspired to contribute to this conversation. In so doing, we may begin to discern the common threads of practice, and gain a deeper understanding of the changes that will yield more meaningful community engagement activities. In the future, this will result in a more informed, connected, and culturally relevant choral art in the United States. Most significantly, choral ensembles can stand as models of collaborative effort in the face of increasingly fragmented communities in this country. It is vitally important that members of the choral field engage with their communities not only to impart their knowledge, but also to open the choral art to the knowledge of people whose voices are often unrecognized or completely eliminated in the larger society. At stake is the strength and safety of our local, national, and global communities.

transformative polyphony: from Outreach to Engagement

A redefinition of community outreach programs, as explored by the Minnesota Chorale, is an important step for the advancement of the choral art in the United States. In the process of reflecting on community outreach programs, an organization must discern the quality of relationships it aims to have with the surrounding communities. The organization must also identify how to develop and sustain those relationships. On a national level, a discussion about moving from outreach to engagement will spark significant dialogue about the role of choirs in communities. Possible questions for further discussion include: What do healthy choral organizations owe communities? How can choral ensembles work to support the health of the surrounding communities? What can we do to ensure the future existence of a thriving and innovative choral field, one that is home to a wide diversity of singers, conductors, composers, audiences, organizations, and resources?

In the daily pursuit of innovative programming, fundraising, marketing, audience development, and all the other activities that sustain choral organizations, it is easy to lose sight of why musicians and administrators work so passionately in service to the choral art. We are drawn to choral music because of its ability to renew and inspire. On a deeper level, we commit our lives to the development of the choral art because we care about the condition of humanity. A life in choral music is a life rich with a network of human experiences. We offer music to our audiences with this understanding. We need to extend this same generosity of spirit and concern for humanity into our interaction with community members. Moving from outreach to engagement means asking tough questions about social conditions, organizational identity, and access to resources. It requires a steadfast commitment to what is possible, even while indications of progress are faint or non-existent.

Finally, it requires a presence of mind that is visionary, coupled with the presence of spirit that is oriented toward the care and support of individual people, as well as whole communities.

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