A Queerly Joyful Noise
Choral Musicking for Social Justice

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“Listen up, people!” Our director is clearly irritated. The chorus has been missing cues, off time, and even occasionally out of tune. My lower back is speaking to me, causing my attention to wander. I came in early on that last entrance, jumping the director’s cue and garnering his glare. He warns us, “We have to let our instrumentalists go at nine o’clock, but the chorus can stay till we get the rest of the show worked out. We can stay in this theater till midnight.” I can feel the collective groan that no one dares express. Material realities focus us: the chorus pays the professionals (the director and instrumentalists) to be there out of singers’ dues, ticket sales, and donations. He turns his attention to the musicians seated in front of us. It’s eight o’clock in the evening.

We have been standing on metal risers for almost two hours, most of us after a full day at work. The risers are creaky and wobble more than any of us like. We are packed tightly—more than eighty of us—and have to place ourselves at slight angles so that we all fit. Each step is only about eighteen inches deep. Those standing on the front row must keep their feet to the front of the riser. Those in the middle row must keep centered. And those in the back row must stand toward the back of the riser step—a rather precarious position at best, but especially without a safety bar behind them. I am glad this time not to be on the top row, though I am cramped. Half a step one way or another affects someone else. There is much negotiation for space: “I can’t see the director. Can you move a bit that way?” “Don’t lock your knees—it can make you pass out,” we remind ourselves. Breathe

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and bend, but not so that anyone can notice. Singers whisper needs and complaints:

“Your folder is hitting me on the side of the head!”

“I don’t know why we don’t just memorize this. Then we wouldn’t have to hold these bulky folders.”

“I’m glad he didn’t make us memorize this one. I get nervous when we don’t have our music in front of us.”

The tenor next to me leans in to snark, “So what’s her excuse now?” I could answer that she rarely solidly knows her part, but at least she’s pretty reliable at just mouthing the words during concerts when she doesn’t, unlike some people we know. Or I could counter that his pitch on the high notes is often slightly flat. I just raise my eyebrows and smile.

Why would anyone subject themselves to this? The baton goes up and we breathe, mostly together this time. The desire to sing well begins to overcome the distractions of discomfort. We breathe into the music, breathing together in time and space. Our months of practice finally evident, we exhale an exhilaration of song into moments of beauty that none of us could have without the others. Experiencing the choral is not the wild Dionysiac dancing and cavorting together or the carnival that turns the tables of power for which Barbara Ehrenreich grieves in Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy. But choral musicking is a form of collective joy that queer choruses engage to particular effect.

This opening story is likely to be recognizable to anyone who has sung in choruses—straight or queer. Dress and tech rehearsals are times that most try our abilities to come together for our shared purpose. Like many of the stories in this book, it is a composite of experiences: mine directly, those I have witnessed, and those I have heard through formal interviews and many years of participating in and studying choral conferences and festivals. They are stories told in conference workshops and coffee shops, backstage and front of house in North America and Europe. Variations of many of the stories I tell in this book can be found in YouTube videos, films, promotional materials, programs, chorus websites, and listservs. Much of my life I have sung, often in choruses. And as is true for many singers, my early experience was in church choirs. I have sung professionally in opera choruses as well as in coffeehouses and at weddings and funerals. I have even performed singing telegrams. But choral singing took a whole
new turn for me when a queer chorus started up in my town. At the time, I joined to find respite while I was finishing my dissertation. Little did I know I was one of many thousands around the world doing the same thing.

About seven years later, in 1996, I attended my very first GALA (Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses) Festival in Tampa, Florida. Only a bit over five feet tall, I found myself standing in a crowd of almost five thousand choral concertgoers, probably about two-thirds of them gay men. The rest included lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and a few straight people, with a smattering of out and proud queers from around the world, all waiting to attend the opening ceremonies. That sweaty summer evening, as people were teasing, flirting, and calling out to each other, mostly over my head, it struck me just how big this movement is. Here I was standing with thousands of people from around the world who were eager to share their joy in and through queer choral performance.

This was the fifth of GALA's quadrennial festivals, and I attended everything I could. We stood packed in an enormous hall for opening ceremonies, enchanted by Dr. Maya Angelou's keynote address. And when she performed (as only she can) her poem “Still I Rise,” we roared our pleasure at her taunting:

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Her audacity had us daring to imagine the power of our own voices. Harvey Fierstein, Ann Hampton Callaway, BETTY, Romanovsky and Phillips, and Holly Near performed, making those opening ceremonies like none before. As the GALA Choruses website notes, there were “eighty-six choruses in attendance [out of the 155 registered member choruses at the time], 23 small ensembles, and more than 4,700 delegates” who participated. The festival “rank[ed] among the largest conventions ever hosted in Tampa.” As is true for most choral festivals, participants had a choice of workshops on singing of all types, on organizing choruses, on fundraising, and on many other related topics. We could sing with the festival chorus that practiced and performed the festival anthem, “We Sing the Dream,” commissioned for the occasion. There were eight full days of concerts put on by groups
ranging in size from ten to more than two hundred, some performing commissioned works such as Robert Seeley’s “Naked Man,” Peter Winkler and Winston Clark’s “Out,” and Jay Kawarsky’s “Prayers for Bobby.” It was possible—though truly overwhelming—to experience every single chorus performing. Unlike most choral festivals, there was no competition, only celebration of each other—all of us singing together.

The whole experience was exhilarating, though our performances were certainly a personal high point, as I am sure was true for most singers there. My chorus (almost thirty people out of a total chorus of more than fifty were able to make the trip) performed two consecutive concerts: first in a large hall seating more than 2,500 and the next in a hall about half that size—both nearly full. This remains the largest group in front of whom I have performed solo so far. (OK, it was just a series of “yeah, yeahs” on our commissioned “Hot” medley—but it was hot!) The audience roared their approval for every chorus’s performance, large and small. Even with the catty remarks from a couple of diva queens I chanced to overhear during another chorus’s performance, singers could not ask for a more enthusiastic audience.

Queer choral festivals around the world are noncompetitive. They celebrate the joy of singing in the company of those who recognize each other more fully—inevitably imperfectly, but definitely more clearly in some important ways—than the rest of the culture is generally willing or able to do. As one gay men’s chorus leader, Ben, noted, “We’re working on creating something together that celebrates our lives, not just our sexuality, but, you know, ourselves as human beings, as artistic beings, and the uniqueness that we have, and present that to the public. Gay men are also this. We may be some of that other stuff too, but we are also this.” And his cochorister, Geo, echoed, “For our gay audience we consistently affirm who we are, who they are, by doing what we do.” The process of affirming a right to communal joy—internally and externally—rings throughout the stories of the social change work done by queer choral movement.

As the GALA Festival progressed, you could almost tell who had already performed and who had yet to. The overall tensions of pre-show jitters steadily lowered. The exhilaration and joy mounted. The mutually empathic appreciation for singers daring to share their voices expanded with each performance. This seemed to me to be a social
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practice and cultural art form that held promise for healing the damage
done by parents and schools, by the likes of Anita Bryant (whose antigay
“Save Our Children” campaign fueled backlash against gay rights), by
religious fundamentalism, and by the AIDS crisis—the damage done to
nonconforming individuals but also to the larger society—in a way that
I had not yet explored. How could I resist? Barely sleeping for nine days, I
returned home fevered in more ways than one. I have been studying
the nature of this communal joy making and its value for social justice
work ever since.

Chorus America, the largest umbrella choral organization in the
United States, estimates that “42.6 million people in the U.S. sing in more
than 270,000 choruses today.” The organization goes on to claim in a 2011
article, “There are bigger spectator sports, but none with more participants
than choral singing. Surprising but true: more Americans sing in choruses,
chorales, choirs, glee clubs and other vocal groups—both professional and
amateur—than engage in football, baseball, tennis, even Greco-Roman
wrestling. (Fantasy Football has an impressive figure, with an estimated
27 million participants.” Although the solo artist receives the majority
of the public spotlight (at least in more capitalist countries) both in
terms of recording artists and through shows like The Voice, people around
the world share their voices with each other and with their communities
every day. We come together in groups large and small, religious and not,
in community solidarity and across differences, for pleasure and possibly
for social change. But queer choruses use this social form of communing in
particularly interesting ways.

In a dressing room, a baritone fidgets with buttons on a shirt rarely
worn and now tighter than is comfortable. Sweat already forming on his
freshly scrubbed brow, he turns to the soprano dressing next to him. “Help,
please?” Cooing, “Ohhh, baby! I’ll get that for you,” the soprano finishes
buckling zir belt. In a single gesture, ze fluffs the baritone’s hair and wipes
his brow, then tugs his shirt across his rounding form and fastens the but-
tons, patting his belly as ze finishes. “All good!” Decidedly masculine, with
grey hair in a marine-issue cut and a muscled form, the soprano’s actions
are motherly. Zir attentions are queerly reassuring to this much younger
baritone, whose family, the one he ran away from ten years ago, is waiting
in the audience for the show to start.
By now his family must certainly know that the chorus is a queer one. He peeks into the audience again to see his father thumbing through the program and returns, rubbing his sweaty palms on the sides of his tuxedo pants. “They’re still there!” The soprano has seen this story play out many times in twenty years with the chorus. It always amazes zir that people would choose this as a way to come out to their loved ones. “Not my style,” ze tells me later. But it has always worked out well. In fact, it has worked out remarkably well.

The chorus gathers in the greenroom, forming their traditional preshow circle, linking hands. They invite me to join. Some hands are hot, some sweaty, some clammy, some cold. All singers have varying degrees of butterflies in their bellies. One has already performed the preshow bow to the porcelain to settle his stomach. The circle is only vaguely round, snaking between chairs and instruments. We look at each other and breathe together. The chorus has grown and can barely fit in the room. In unison they take deep breaths evenly into the lungs to the count of eight, then slowly hiss the breath out to the count of eight. It’s part of their ritual. Most every chorus, straight or queer, has a preshow ritual to calm the nerves, bring the group together, and focus on their shared purpose. The artistic director asks who has friends or family in the audience. The baritone blurts out his story, his amazement that his mother was still in her seat last he checked, and his nervousness. The group listens and breathes with him. Then an alto shares that her father is in the audience for the first time now that her mother, who refused to see her since she came out, has passed away. There are tears in her eyes and a sad smile on her face. The group breathes, some tearing up, with her. The basses holding her hands squeeze them a bit more attentively. Others name coworkers and special friends in the audience, the people they hope have shown up.

The artistic director waits for the stories to settle and then reminds the group,

With every concert, your voices change hearts and minds. The joy you share in making beautiful music together melts away their doubts or fears. We heal ourselves and those who come to hear us of the damage from the hatred that some still preach. This is why you all spend the time and energy that you do pounding out timing,
memorizing music, refining your sound, listening to each other, so that we can create something beautiful together that even the haters have a hard time resisting. I am proud to be your artistic director. You have all worked very hard, and now is the moment to share your love of the music, of each other, and for our audience members. Have fun with it!

The group raises their hands together over their heads, intoning in a glissando from lowest note to highest, “Let’s siiiiiiiiiiiing!” With that, the group empties into the hallway leading to the stage, and it’s a merriment of anxiousness as they find their places in the line to go on stage. “Were you in front of me?” “Wait, someone’s missing here. Jena, you belong up here. Remember, we changed the order.” When they all get on stage, the body memory of all their practice kicks in, and they sing their hearts out beautifully. I watch the baritone meet with his family after the show—all hugs and smiles.

This group is by no means alone in their stories, their practice, or their purpose. At last count (November 2016), nearly four hundred cho-ruses from around the world were listed on the GALA website, ranging in size from about four to almost four hundred singers who perform an average of two to three concerts per year in a full range of venues from school auditoriums to Carnegie Hall and the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for U.S. presidential inaugurations. Groups also do community performances and singing workshops with kids and seniors. While the early majority of choruses developed in Australian, European, and North American contexts, there are a growing number in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In addition, two other major umbrella organizations—Legato in Europe and Sister Singers Network in the United States—have additional member choruses. There are also a number of queer community choruses not affiliated with any of these larger network organizations.

The demographics of the choruses have changed somewhat over the years, with the most notable change being the increase in mixed choruses and the addition of trans and youth choruses. Unlike straight choruses, which are primarily mixed choruses, queer choruses remain primarily women’s or men’s. When I assessed the types of choruses listed on the GALA website in 2001, there were a little more than 200 groups: about
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50 percent men’s, 30 percent women’s, and 20 percent mixed. Of the 393 choruses listed on the GALA website in late 2015, 173 were men’s (44 percent), 130 mixed (33 percent), 76 women’s (19 percent), 12 youth (3 percent), and 2 trans-identified (0.05 percent). When we note that both youth and trans choruses are mixed, then the mixed category has grown to encompass 33 percent of queer choral musicking. This is a difference from straight choruses that we will explore in later chapters.

It’s quite possible for singers and even board members of choruses to be only peripherally aware, if at all, that while we gather to practice each week, around the world there are hundreds of such choruses with thousands of singers also working to learn lyrics and notes, phrasing, and how to hold their parts in the sonic company of others. And while each choruses’ board members might worry about how many tickets they will sell this year or how many ads in their programs they need to pay the bills, they may not know just how many others around the world worry with them. Nor are we necessarily aware of the scope of the movement, even as we sing for and with audiences that range in size from very few to several thousand. As a singer in (and at the time of my first GALA Festival, a board member of) a medium-sized, mostly white, mostly middle-class mixed chorus from a southwestern city, I had been only vaguely aware of the larger movement. Even now, when I tell people about this research project, no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation, the most common response is some variation of “Yeah, we have a chorus; do you know them?” This is followed by their surprise that so many people are engaged in the same enterprise of singing for queer social justice around the world. To experience the scope of it, to feel its international pulse as I did in 1996 and have repeatedly at subsequent festivals in Europe and North America, inspires me. Mixing in the crowds at festivals, I have been not just personally rocked by the experience but intellectually curious. Why choruses? Considering all the ways that people might organize for greater sex/gender freedom, why are choruses one of the more compelling for so many people? Thus began my odyssey.

Getting at the link between music and social change is no easy task. Most of us intuitively assume there is a connection. As evidence, social institutions from the Catholic church to political parties to militaries throughout history have certainly made effective use of music to further
their ends. Songs that may even go against our own strongly held values still have the power to stir deep feelings in us. We have only begun to scratch the surface of explaining how music, especially singing together, might work for social justice ends.

In *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*, sociologists and active musickers Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks explain the challenges of nailing down how musicking for social justice works: “Researching the [music-movement] link runs into serious methodological problems.” Because musicking is always an embedded social practice, there is no clear way to tease out the specific role it plays. They argue that “vagueness, mystification, and confusion” characterize “much of what has been written about the music-movement link,” because of music’s social embeddedness. “The mere presence of music in a movement” does not “prove its effectiveness.” Lyrics alone do not explain how they are received or used by listeners. Nor do they account for the effect of the musicking experience. The intent of a composer or performer “is not the same thing as audience reception.” And audience reception is affected by a great many complex factors. Even the method Rosenthal and Flacks chose of getting “inside the head of each musicker” through extensive interviews has its problems. Noting the limitations of their own method, they write, “People may not realize how they use music or its effect on their thinking or behavior. They may romanticize it, or dismiss it, or in any number of ways distort its actual effect. . . . Further, they (and we) may easily conflate the effect of the music with other factors since music is typically experienced as one part of complex packages that may include romantic attractions, political allegiances, café discussions, and so on.” Because “there is no scientific or consensual way to measure such matters,” Rosenthal and Flacks adopted “investigative methods” that they hope offer some “ways to make useful conjectures.” In the process, they develop some very useful mappings of what they learned from their interviews, which I build on here.

Attempting to write about what exactly any musicking does for us makes clear that there is at least one reason we create music—it expresses so much that feels impossible to adequately express in words. Arguably because of this, many research pieces focus on quantifying what music does for us through brainwaves or testing for everything from serotonin
to cortisol levels or through self-assessment surveys to get at perceptions of relaxation or stress. Those who do attempt description often turn to poetry, as I arguably do in places here, to fill in where more common word usage fails. My interviewees (as well as many more participants in workshops and conversations) got tongue-tied and teared up, often trying again and again, but always unsatisfactorily by their own accounts, to say exactly what queer choral musicking does for them. Even so, they gave me a great deal of material, which I both quote and synthesize here. Despite the challenge of articulating the effect that such musicking practices have, attempt it we do because it seems important to at least draw the outlines of how and why choral musicking affects so many of us so powerfully.

My intention with this book is not so much to tell individual stories, though I certainly do that. Rather, these stories help me sketch a larger picture of queer choral musicking as a social practice with a purpose. By comparing this form of choral musicking for social justice with musicking by labor and civil rights activists, as I do in Chapter 1, the relationship among the particular forms of musicking related to resisting particular types of oppression begins to emerge. And by comparing this form of cultural organizing for queer social justice with other related forms of such organizing, as I do in Chapter 3, the particularities that the practice of choral musicking offers to the larger movement become clearer. Though the individual stories shared here are definitely an important part of this picture, my goal is to assess our stories in the aggregate to explore what draws so many to this particular practice for the purpose of social change and thereby to offer some insights into both the role that such cultural practices play in social change work and the challenges to making change that lasts.
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