COMMUNITY IN THE PROFESSIONAL CHORUS

Members of the Los Angeles Master Chorale, one of the country's largest and oldest professional vocal ensembles
Last fall, Indiana University music professor, conductor, and composer Dominick DiOrio took a sabbatical to travel across the United States to observe a wide spectrum of professional vocal ensembles, from small to large and from nascent to established. After attending rehearsals and performances and meeting with artistic directors, executives, and singers, he was left with the sense that, at their core, these professional choruses have more in common with their community counterparts than he imagined.

BY DOMINICK DIORIO

I clearly remember the first time I heard a professional chorus. It was striking. I admired the glorious, unified sound, the poised and polished look, and the very highest level of musicianship displayed by the singers. I came away from that concert with a new appreciation for what excellence in choral music could be.

That was 2007, and since that time I’ve become an educator at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where I am tasked with training the next generation of singers and conductors, many of whom have aspirations to enter the professional choral world. So I wondered: Did my earlier observations still apply today? What is the current state of our professional choral field? How can I better prepare my students for these emerging career opportunities?

I spent my sabbatical examining these questions, and I was struck by one particular takeaway that rises above all the others. While I expected all of the professional choruses I visited to have high standards of music-making, I was surprised to see how every one of these professional choruses emphasizes community-building just as much as its artistic goals.

I found this to be true at the chorus level, as it pertains to developing community in the ensemble among the singers. (Who are we?) It is also true for those who come to hear the choirs, as it pertains to creating a shared sense of community among and beyond its core audience. (Who are we reaching?) And it is true at the visioning level, as it pertains to expanding our concept of who the professional choral community includes. (Who do we want to be?)

Who Are We?

Creating Community in the Professional Chorus

Founded in 1982, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale is one of New Mexico’s longest-running professional music organizations. The ensemble’s activity is organized around intense periods focused on particular musical projects, which include its famous summer festival, a winter festival, a spring tour program, conference invitations, and recording projects.

Among its 24 singers, only one was a resident of Santa Fe at the time of my visit. This is part of a trend toward “fly-in” professional choirs, where the artistic director is able to audition singers from a much wider pool than would be possible in a more local network. When I spoke with artistic director Joshua Habermann, I wanted to know more about his process for auditioning this pool of singers. “I always call the references,” Habermann says. “At this level, you can expect that most of the singers you hear will be able to do what you need musically, but I am looking for the singer who can come to the rehearsal with flexibility, with positivity, and with...”

Artistic director Joshua Habermann leads the Santa Fe Desert Chorale during a 2017 performance at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.

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The Crossing, an ensemble unified in its commitment to new music, pictured on the streets of Philadelphia with conductor Donald Nally (front row, center)

Community in the Professional Chorus

an open spirit. I want to know if they are looking to just sing and collect the paycheck, or if they intend to join us and be a part of who we are.”

In short: Who wants to be a part of the community we are building together? I observed this intention-made-reality in the rehearsals, where there was a palpable sense of commitment among the singers. It’s more and more expected that professional singers seeking to work for these ensembles be active members of the community, even if they’re flying in for only a week or two at a time. For example, on some Sundays during the summer season, a quartet of singers from the Desert Chorale will sing for the morning service at the Church of the Holy Faith in downtown Santa Fe. This is just one of the Desert Chorale’s many community engagement initiatives. Although Habermann has led the group for a decade, he feels these efforts have only recently begun to pay off. “I truly feel that the groundwork laid since my start has led to a new sense of who we are as the Desert Chorale,” he says. “Community-building takes time.”

In contrast, the Houston Chamber Choir is committed to its community in the tried-and-true way of many musical organizations: by drawing its talent directly from its home. With weekly rehearsals in the heart of the city and a season that spans the early autumn through late spring, the 20 to 24 professional singers are all Houston-based. “We are fortunate to be part of the Houston metro area, one of the most exciting arts hubs in the world,” says founder and artistic director Robert Simpson. “Our philosophy is analogous to the farm-to-table movement in the restaurant world. Our singers live here and are rooted in the diversity and vitality of this place. Being local is part of who we are.”

One of the ways this is made manifest is through the choir’s “Hear the Future” program, a joint concert and educational outreach opportunity where local K-12 school ensembles are invited to participate in a concert with the Houston Chamber Choir. Ensemble soprano and public school educator Kammi Estelle was invited one year to have her middle school choir on this concert. “While it was inspiring for my students to sing with the Houston Chamber Choir, it was so much more moving for me to have my professional singer peers hear the work of my young students. To see my two worlds combine was breathtaking, and something that wouldn’t be possible without a deep connection to the community.”

The Los Angeles Master Chorale is both one of the largest and one of the longest-running professional choruses in the country. Unlike many other professional choruses, the ensemble often changes its
size, with as many as 100 singers for large collaborations with the LA Philharmonic, or as few as 21 singers for its widely acclaimed <em>L'Arche di San Pietro</em> project, which toured this year to London, Paris, Melbourne, and Mexico City. All of these singers are paid, but until a few years ago, they were not always paid the same wage. "We recently wrapped up a years-long process of moving to a fully professional model, establishing pay equity for all of our singers," says artistic director Grant Gershon. "This was a crucial step for us in maintaining a sense of community among our singers and our entire LAMC team. To open our hearts together in song, we must first feel we are all treated equally."

During my time observing the LAMC, I was also struck by the way associate conductor Jenny Wong described the community-driven process in place for evaluating chorus members. "Our singers generally re-audition every second year, and occasionally there will be a singer who may have developed issues that are of concern," says Wong. "In these situations, there are multiple layers of review in place for the singer, including coaching with the artistic director. We communicate our expectations clearly at each stage, giving them multiple opportunities to demonstrate that they can meet the demands of the position. It's a very caring process that gives the singer agency in what can be a difficult situation," she says. "This is who we are: a community of LA professionals looking out for each other. We all want to belong to an organization that brings us pride."

The Crossing is unique among professional chamber choirs, as its community of singers and supporters is uniquely centered on a singular mission to champion the music of living composers through the commissioning, performance, and recording of new works. The ensemble is living this mission with acclaim, with two consecutive GRAMMY awards for best choral performance in the last two years (and a third nomination the year before that). But for conductor and founder Donald Nally, it's never about the recognition. "I do this for the music, and I do it for my friends who write it and sing it," he says. For Nally, this is his community: a group of singers and composers who share in the excitement and adventure of bringing new works to life.

The Crossing is deeply committed to this vision. When long-time singer and co-founder Jeffrey Dinsmore died suddenly in 2014, Nally and the ensemble responded in the way they knew best: with song. "This was part of our way of grappling with our loss. I asked some of my friends who compose to write. They___
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gave us these 15 short pieces, the Jeff Quartets, which together create a concert-length journey in memory of Jeff. This couldn’t diminish our sorrow, but singing in his honor allowed us the chance to offer our gratitude to him. He was a part of each of us.

Who Are We Reaching?

Building Community Support

While building community among the singers is important, these organizations also have many strategies for connecting with listeners in their communities. The Thirteen and founder and artistic director Matthew Robertson experienced this more acutely than most six years ago when he and the organization began relocating from Philadelphia to Washington DC. “This relocation resulted in less artistic turnover than one might expect, as our singers have always been primarily based throughout the eastern U.S.,” says Robertson. “But it did involve cultivating new leadership in our board of trustees and an audience here in the DC area.” Robertson accomplished this through a variety of means, including collaborations with established local organizations and artists. In my time with The Thirteen, I had the chance to hear them sing a performance of the Duruflé Requiem with Jeremy Filsell, organist and then artist-in-residence at the Washington National Cathedral.

For Resonance Ensemble in Portland, Oregon, community response to its work was lit ablaze in the summer of 2017 by an online concert review in Oregon ArtsWatch. Many readers charged that the review was biased toward the European choral repertoire and dismissive of music and texts from the African American tradition. ArtsWatch editors later apologized for “the attitude toward artistic diversity displayed in the review, and particularly the language in which that attitude was expressed.”

Rather than avoiding a potentially volatile subject, Resonance founder and artistic director Kathy FitzGibbon doubled down on artistic programming that she felt was sorely needed in her community. “We have to be leaders in bringing awareness to issues of inclusion, diversity, and—yes—racism in our communities. As artists, that’s our responsibility.” She notes that the group’s current season features programs that “amplify the voices of composers of color, highlight audacious new music by female composers, and bring to life yet another former historic Black church.”
Who Do We Want to Be?
Expanding the Community of Professional Singers

"As conductors, we need to consider how we are investing in our profession and helping it to grow," says Patrick Dupré Quigley, founder and artistic director of the Miami-based ensemble Seraphic Fire. "We want talented, aspiring singers to realize that the professional choral world is a healthy and exciting way to start their careers." The organization made one such investment this past summer when Quigley took the GRAMMY-nominated Professional Choral Institute to the acclaimed Aspen Music Festival and School. The purpose was to create a pre-professional experience that would help to establish a pipeline for young singers from the academic environment to the professional choral world. In my experience, this program fills a strong need, as many singers receive exceptional ensemble training in music conservatories and universities, but they don't always know how to start on the path to professional choral singing.

"As an alumnus of Aspen myself, I knew the quality of the festival and it has been my dream to create an association between Aspen and Seraphic Fire," says Rhett Del Campo, executive director of Seraphic Fire. "We were absolutely thrilled with how the first year worked out," adds Quigley. "In fact, one of our PCI program alumni sang their first professional gig with Josh [Habermann] and the Desert Chorale this past December. This is exactly what we hope the program will do for our participants."

Creating a pathway for students is only the first step. To truly allow our profession to grow, we also have to make sure all singers first feel welcome to participate.

whose early days of parenthood are different than envisioned because of babies born early, babies born sick, and babies lost. This is what our audiences want to hear, and it’s what we all need to examine. We have to respond—with our music—to relevant issues in our community.

When choruses take on issues of universal significance, they create opportunities for their community to grow in a geographical sense as well. Conspirare expanded its circle this year with an unprecedented tour across the United States, singing artistic director Craig Hella Johnson’s concert-length work, Considering Matthew Shepard. The piece responds to the 1998 murder of a young gay man. Conspirare was asked to sing at the interment of Matthew Shepard’s ashes at the Washington National Cathedral on October 26, 2018. “To be invited to be a part of this event of healing and reconciliation is deeply humbling,” says Johnson. The community Conspirare has created in its Austin, Texas, home made the tour possible by coming forward with generous contributions. “Thanks to their love, outpouring of support, and presence over many years, Matthew’s story can sing,” says Johnson.

The Boston-based ensemble Lorelei, with artistic director Beth Willer (center)
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For Beth Willer, founder and artistic director of Lorelei Ensemble, the future of choral music is made brighter by a focus on repertoire and programming for the professional women’s vocal ensemble. This is unique, as nearly all professional choruses are either mixed ensembles like those mentioned above or traditionally male ensembles, like Chanticleer or Cantus. “Lorelei has set out to change not only the repertoire, but also the conversation about women singing—between performers and composers, audience members, and most importantly, young people,” Willer says. This mission has led to more than 50 world premieres and four albums, collaborations with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, numerous educational residencies, and conference invitations. “Lorelei’s artists are highly capable, professional musicians dedicated to bridging the gap between solo and ensemble singing,” Willer adds. “And in doing that work, we believe we can change expectations—yes, for women, but perhaps more importantly for the vocal art, as we imagine and work toward a new normal for women in music.”

Where Lorelei envisions an expanded role for women in the arts, EXIGENCE is the first professional vocal ensemble to deliberately highlight the artistry of singers within the Black and Latinx communities. “The meaning of our name, EXIGENCE, is ‘an urgent need or demand,’” says founding director Eugene Rogers. “I know that there are incredible artists from a diverse array of backgrounds that are often not represented in the rosters of professional choruses in our country. EXIGENCE exists to help change that dynamic by creating a platform specifically for solo artists and composers of color to share their voices and their songs.” Founded just over a year ago, EXIGENCE is an initiative of the Sphinx Organization, whose mission and vision is to transform lives through the power of diversity in the arts.

Unlike many of the other organizations described here, EXIGENCE doesn’t have a

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3:00 May 26

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Mykola Hobdych, Conductor

Formed in 2018 by the Sphinx Organization, the ensemble EXIGENCE appeared in a plenary session at last year’s Chorus America Conference in Chicago.
WHAT I LEARNED
(FOR ASPIRING PROFESSIONAL SINGERS)

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s I write now at the conclusion of my sabbatical, I am inspired by the music I heard and the people I met. I am also ready to share with my students the three major takeaways I learned to better prepare young singers for the profession:

1. Be a choral chameleon: In addition to the musical and vocal abilities necessary for the job, professional singers are more and more expected to be active members of the community in which they sing. Learn about each chorus as a community, and become one with the organization and its people.

2. Prepare for hard work: It takes time to build a career and earn a living wage, and many singers patch together work from multiple sources to make ends meet (solo singing, private studio teaching, adjunct faculty work, etc.). Many of the most successful singers spend more than half of the year on the road.

3. Bring your heart to your work: Nearly all of the professional singers I met feel genuinely at home in these choral communities, making music at the highest levels with peers and colleagues they respect.

While I started my sabbatical looking for ways to help my aspiring student singers, I have come away from my sabbatical time with a larger and more fundamental lesson. Whether the chorus is professional or civic, religious or educational, there is no chorus without community. These professional ensembles and their people are concerned not just with excellence in performance, but with the dimensions of community-building that are possible with their music-making. They want to make the world a better place by bridging divides, healing rifts, and connecting people through song. I, for one, can’t wait to see what’s to come.

Dominick DiOrio is an innovative composer and conductor who has won widespread acclaim for his contributions to American music. He currently serves as associate professor of music in the choral conducting department at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

Editor’s note: During his sabbatical, the author had the opportunity to visit seven of these ten choruses. Because of time and scheduling constraints, he was not able to observe Lorelei, Resonance, or EXIGENCE in person.

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