

40 YEARS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Chorus America's founders were, in a way, the original choral entrepreneurs—trying to think about positioning and helping the field meet the challenges of their time. What were they concerned about as they were founding Chorus America 40 years ago? And what are choral entrepreneurs and thinkers concerned about today?

BY DON LEE

We remember Gregg Smith for nurturing and championing American choral music. We do not remember him for “bellyaching.” But perhaps we should. The complaints this beloved conductor and a handful of colleagues took to an NEA official more than four decades ago became a catalyst for the creation of Chorus America.

Smith related the story to Barbara Tagg (*pictured*), founder and director *emerita* of the Syracuse Children's Chorus, in a 2005 video interview. Smith recalled that in the late 1970s, Martin Josman, director of New York's National Chorale, brought together several choral leaders for a meeting with Ralph Rizzolo, then assistant director of the Music Program at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), to ask how the funding pipeline, already open to orchestras and opera companies, might also flow to choral music. Smith and his choral colleagues felt frustrated that they didn't have a place at the table. “We were complaining about, ‘What was the matter with the choruses?’” said Smith. “And [Rizzolo] got up and he said, ‘You people have been bellyaching a lot but you're not doing very much about it yourself ... You don't have an advocacy organization.’ He put it squarely to us. And I felt very moved by that.”

The Field and the Founders

At the time, American choral music was synonymous with just a handful of names. Along with Smith, there were Robert Shaw, Roger



Gregg Smith conducting

Wagner, St. Olaf, Westminster. Led by the example of Margaret Hillis and the Chicago Symphony, a few major American orchestras were establishing professional symphonic choruses. Shaw and Wagner's touring groups, in particular, fostered a “national sense” that provided “a vision of what choruses can be,” according to Shaw's longtime associate Alice Parker, speaking in a 2015 Chorus America video interview.



Smith protégé Malcolm Merriweather (*pictured*), who wrote his dissertation on Smith and leads the Dessoff Choirs in New York, “really got the sense from working with Gregg that the success of another professional chorus was the success of everyone.” He believed a professional choral association could be “a vehicle to share in those successes.” Among the colleagues Smith ►

phoned first were Michael Korn of the Philadelphia Singers, Richard Westenburg of New York's Musica Sacra, and another Shaw associate, publisher Walter Gould.

This group, and perhaps a few others (Smith couldn't remember precisely), met at Smith's



home. "I cooked them dinner," recalled Smith's wife, soprano Rosalind Rees (pictured). "I was kind of a young bride and not a great cook, and I made them

something and they sat and they talked and they had ideas. And it was Michael who went home and called people like Paul Hill [founder of Washington DC's Paul Hill Chorale, now called the Master Chorale] and the two Margarets [Hillis and Margaret Hawkins, founder of the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus]. Then, lo and behold, something really began to cook."

Although they may not have thought of themselves this way, these individuals were American choral music's earliest entrepreneurs. Tagg describes them as "hardworking exemplars with a passion for choral music and the development of the America choral tradition." They'd created businesses, they possessed ambition and vision, and they stood for excellence. What they lacked was infrastructure, to some extent in their own organizations, and certainly on an interconnected, national scale.

Among this group, "the one person who reacted very wonderfully," Smith said, "was Michael Korn. It was Michael's sheer force of personality that really was a key factor" in the collaboration that soon became the Association of Professional Vocal Ensembles (APVE) and later, Chorus America.

In an early 1977 planning meeting, 17 American choral leaders gathered in Philadelphia to discuss common goals and needs. Korn, who became APVE's acting chief executive, had founded the Philadelphia Singers in 1971, and led the group till his death 20 years later. Associates remember him for his musicianship, intelligence, and vision. You can add "very crabby" to that



list, according to Doralene Davis (pictured), who says she stood up for her fellow sopranos when Korn asked for high C's too early in rehearsal. She

became close to Korn while singing for him starting in the early '70s, after previous stints with both Shaw and Wagner. To her, Korn's seemingly boundless ambition is the quality that stood out. He took responsibility for three fledgling groups at once, the Philadelphia Singers, the Chestnut Hill Bach Festival, and APVE, she points out. "He didn't have the sense to know this can't be done. He went ahead and did it anyhow. Most people don't have that kind of vision or strength of purpose."

At its first meeting, in New York on September 23, 1977, the APVE board elected Korn executive director. Other board members present were Gould, Hillis, Smith, Wagner, and Hugh Ross, director of the Schola Cantorum of New York. They agreed the organization's primary purposes would be "to promote the growth and expansion of professional vocal ensembles" and "to encourage greater appreciation and enjoyment of vocal music by all segments of American society." Consistent with that first aim, only professional members would be allowed to vote. "Individuals and/or organizations with professional aspirations" could be admitted as non-voting "associate

members. The organization started small. At the first annual meeting the following June, Korn reported 16 voting members and 29 associates.

Early Priorities: Advocacy and Professionalism

Initially, notes Davis, "the board spent a lot of time saying, 'Hey, there's an organization for choirs.' It was all about advocacy in the early days." With the APVE in operation, it was time to find a place at the NEA table. At the second board meeting, in January 1978, Smith relayed concerns from the Endowment that its Choral Program might be discontinued; it had been in a pilot stage for eight years and, as Davis put it, "there were no choral standards." Smith reported receiving "an indirect request" for help establishing funding guidelines. Before the end of the year, in consultation with APVE, the NEA had formed its Choral Panel and had drafted guidelines.



"We had to show that there indeed was a difference in artistic result," says Dale Warland (pictured), whose Twin Cities-based professional

ensemble was active from 1972 to 2004. "With proof, we could then begin to seek financial resources to support those early efforts to become professional and to build on them." Warland got involved with APVE in time to attend the 1979 conference in Chicago, where all present fit around a single table. He remembers sitting next to Roger Wagner, who was puffing on a cigar, and feeling "totally inspired by Wagner's unwavering passion for promoting professional choral music in the U.S." The mark of professionalism, Warland says, is a "yes" answer to this question: "Do the vocal and musical qualities of the choir at hand match the overall instrumental sound and musical performance skill of the best of the professional orchestras?"



"By the early '80s, applying for a grant became the Holy Grail," says Tom Hall (pictured), who in 1982 became music director of the Baltimore

Choral Arts Society and served on the Chorus America board from 1993 to 2002, including three years as chair. "It was very important to all of us. The grants were peer-reviewed; there was an emphasis on



(L-R) Walter Gould, Robert Page, Jeffrey Compton, Alfred Mann, and Margaret Hillis at an early Chorus America gathering.



Michael Korn (inset) conducts the Philadelphia Singers in 1982.

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excellence. People realized it was good to be able to point to success at the NEA.” Chorus America president and CEO Catherine Dehoney (pictured) credits the founders with “waking up the NEA to treat choruses like other art forms. Their advocacy for professionalism in the field has had immeasurable impact.”

The NEA’s emphasis on excellence may have helped to justify APVE’s decision to focus on professional vocal ensembles, but more fundamentally, Korn and his colleagues felt paying choral singers was the right thing to do. “Michael was such a champion of that,” recalled Alan Harler in a 2015 Chorus America video interview. Harler first met Korn as APVE was forming, and became his close friend after moving to Philadelphia to teach at Temple University. Organized advocacy for paying singers was important, he said, “because choral music

was not being taken seriously as a professional endeavor” in the United States—unlike, say, the Soviet Union, where Davis toured with Robert Shaw in the 1960s. Russian counterparts would ask her how long the group had been together. When Davis deadpanned, “Since September,” they were shocked. “Singers had it all set up there.” According to Davis, Korn was “adamant” that American singers who had invested years in serious training deserved the respect enjoyed by professionals in European choruses.

In those early years, Harler said, the message from APVE to its constituents was “you must expand your professional core.” Harler led the mostly volunteer Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia starting in 1988, and joined the Chorus America board in 1995. Not everyone agreed with the push for professionalism, most notably Robert Shaw. According to Harler, Shaw

viewed the emphasis as “some sort of professional elitism, I think, because his choruses had been largely volunteer choruses, and of course he made them [sound] like professional choruses.” As the first singer on the APVE board (1985–98), Davis felt an authentic obligation to her fellow professionals: “I joined because I really believe in paying singers.” She says some board members threatened to quit if the mission were changed.

The debate went on into the early 1990s, and by several accounts tempers continued to flare, but gradually consensus shifted. Faced with the reality that the health of the organization was at stake, even skeptics like Davis conceded that expansion made sense: “If we wanted to grow and do new things, we had to have more members.” Still, the shift involved “difficult conversations,” says Hall, “because APVE was founded to promote professionalism. But the argument that prevailed was that in order to expand our advocacy for choral music, we had to expand membership.”

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A Wider Embrace

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(L-R) Gregg Smith, Rosalind Rees Smith, Paul Hill, and Chip Brienza at a 1996 event honoring Paul Hill at the French Embassy.

40 Years of Entrepreneurial Spirit

members. By then, the organization had already been known as Chorus America for six years, but the board retained Association of Professional Vocal Ensembles as a “subtitle.” The subtitle was not officially dropped till 2003, when Chorus America reincorporated in Washington DC, five years after moving there from Philadelphia.

By Tagg’s count, Chorus America membership grew from 320 in 1987, the year of the name change, to 1,083 in 1997. Growth was evolutionary, said Harler: “There were many years of transition, accepting other types of choruses into the organization and years and years of trying to find the right balance” in order to maintain fair representation of professional choruses’ interests.

For Parker, the biggest step was the addition of children’s choruses, driven by “the realization that a beautifully trained children’s choir is exactly the same.” There were some “patronizing attitudes” to contend with, Parker said, but Tagg remembers APVE founders Smith and Hillis as early champions of youth choruses. Tagg’s 2013 book *Before the Singing: Structuring Children’s Choirs for Success* points to a dramatic increase in the number of children’s choruses in the U.S. during the 1980s and ‘90s. At the time, Tagg argued they were important for Chorus America “because children are the future of choral

singing in America, either as participants or as consumers.” At the same time, she says, Chorus America’s guidance for youth chorus leaders was “critical for sustaining these organizations.” Including them was a boon for all concerned, as Parker described it: From the moment the children’s choruses joined, “it was a huge infusion of enthusiasm and money into the whole group ... because they just flourished.”

More broadly, Parker had no fear that the change would significantly compromise standards of professionalism: “It was very clear to me always that it’s perfectly possible to have a magnificent chorus of



amateurs that had a thoroughly professional sound.” Anne Heider (pictured), artistic director emerita of the Chicago-based professional chamber choir *Bella Voce* (founded as *His Majestie’s Clerkes*), got involved with Chorus America in 1994. Soon, she found, “it became so apparent that by opening membership to volunteer choruses, we had opened Chorus America to a much bigger pool of help, not only dues-paying members, but people eager to help Chorus America do what it wanted to do.” Since 1993, Harler has noticed a couple of significant changes. He’s found that choruses like his, the largely volunteer Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, “have become much more professionalized because [Chorus

America] has told them how to do that.” And his graduate students began talking about choral conducting as a career path, something he’d never heard before. Professional choruses have grown in this new environment too, notes Dehoney, citing an informal survey (reported in the *Voice*, Spring 2017) indicating a rise in the number of American ensembles providing steady employment for professional choral singers.

Advocacy in the New Era

From the standpoint of the choral field’s relationship with the NEA, the work of Chorus America’s founders remained as valuable and applicable in 1993 as it had been in 1978. As Dehoney points out, the standards of professionalism they drafted could be used as a solid standard for both professional and non-professional groups. Elsewhere in the nonprofit arts world, Hall was pleased to be at the table for the first time with the League of American Orchestras, Opera America, and Americans for the Arts, planning advocacy and joint projects.

In this environment, choral leaders began to consider additional ways to measure success and define their missions. The changes at Chorus America “started the ball rolling to look at other forms of choral music, not just in terms of artistic excellence, but also in terms of community impact,” says Dehoney. “Often choruses can achieve big community impact because they involve lots of people in making excellent art.” Trouble was, when Dehoney joined Chorus America as director of development in 2000, they had little research to demonstrate choral music’s impact. Under the leadership of then-president Ann Meier Baker, the organization undertook the ►

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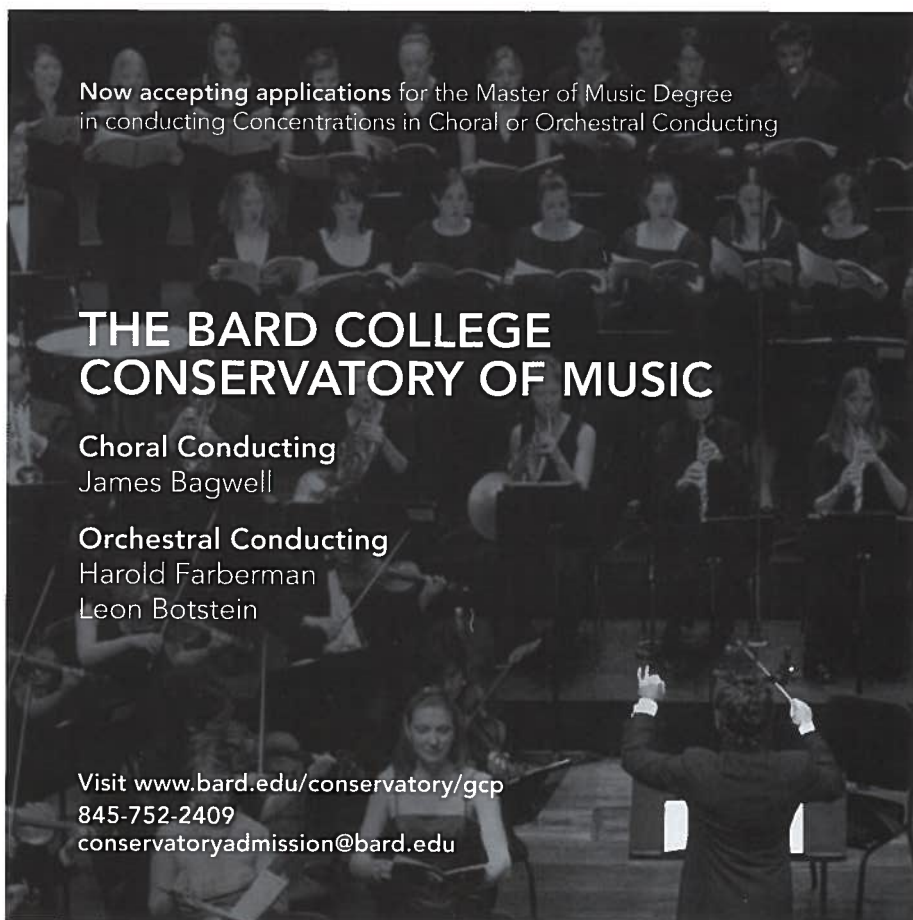


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Chorus Impact Study, first published in 2003 and repeated in 2009. The study found that an estimated 42.6 million Americans regularly sing in choruses today, proof that choral singing is one of the most popular forms of participation in the performing arts. Dehoney also points to the finding that “healthy choruses contribute to healthy communities.” Heider, who served on the Chorus America board from 1999 to 2008, believes that this and other studies have made “a huge difference.” When she writes grant proposals she “can actually have numbers to back up intuitive feelings that choruses are important. They have a civic function as well as an artistic function.”

A New Generation of Choral Entrepreneurs with New Ideas about Choral Music Appreciation

Since its inception, Chorus America has provided tools, training, and other resources for choral leaders, since conductors typically have little experience putting together a board, hiring staff, developing grant proposals, creating a marketing and communications strategy. Paul Caldwell, artistic director of Flying House Productions (the umbrella for the Seattle Men’s and Women’s Choruses), found help with all of those things when he became a member in the early ‘90s. “Chorus America taught me how to be a successful businessman in choral music. It felt like a think tank: forward-looking, with an entrepreneurial spirit around the art form.” At the time, Caldwell was artistic director of Chicago’s Windy City Performing Arts, and from 2007 to 2016, he served on the Chorus America board.

“We have a new community of these professional choruses doing that work for the field and also giving young folks a picture of a career they can pursue. I feel we’re at a point where this art form will absolutely flourish. I feel lucky to do what I’m doing now.”

—Beth Willer



(L-R) Arlene Williams, chair of the Chorus America board from 1987 to 1990, with Margaret Hillis

Today’s aspiring choral entrepreneurs need the same services, but what’s changing, says Dehoney, is “how that information is being delivered.” Because they’re too busy or lack a big travel budget, “they need it to be more accessible,” she explains. “The world has sped up. We’re trying to help choruses keep up with the pace of change. And we need to broaden Chorus America because our membership has broadened.”

Indeed, agrees Caldwell, “our expectation of what a chorus is and should be has changed. It used to be about performing masterworks in a concert hall. Now we have to go out into the world.” That will require “choral empathy,” says Brandon Elliott (pictured), founder of the Choral Arts Initiative in Orange County, California. “We as choral musicians know why we love it, breathe it, and live it, but no one else really does.” Still, communicating empathy should be relatively easy for choral people, believes Jeremiah Selvey (pictured), co-artistic



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director of Chorosynthesis Singers, a professional ensemble with a focus on social justice issues. Because choral music communicates partly through language, “it can and should be immediately and universally relevant,” he says. “Topics that are important to humanity are abundant.”



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The other Chorosynthesis co-director, Wendy Moy (pictured), has conducted research about building community relationships. While performing strong work remains important to audiences, she’s learned “programming that engages them by telling stories, sharing personal anecdotes, and trying to connect with them person to person” makes a noticeable difference in breaking down barriers. Chorus America’s 2016 Intrinsic Interest Audience Project supports that thinking, noting that thematic programming focused on social issues and diverse traditions generates higher levels of social bonding among audience members. In response to findings like these, Moy says, there’s been a rise in the number of community-driven choruses that are social justice- or mission-oriented. In Boston, New York, and elsewhere, Tagg has “seen lives changed by what’s going on” in children’s choruses that use music as a bridge between diverse cultures. “It’s not always about the singing, but about teaching them valuable lessons about life and support for their skills and what they want to do in the world.”

Beth Willer, artistic director of the Boston-based women's ensemble Lorelei, sees this shift as an imperative. "That is the definition of a nonprofit organization," she argues: "to have an impact that goes beyond our field. That's our challenge—to do that and also do work that's going to elevate the art form."

At the same time, technology is shifting the way audiences experience choral music. Music is available instantly via YouTube, Spotify, and an array of other online and mobile delivery systems. "That makes our jobs as performers of live music more challenging," says Elliott. "How do we fold our choral tradition into an ever-changing musical landscape?" He thinks new music may be one answer. The only place you can hear it—at least until it's recorded—is in concert. "But you can listen to Beethoven's 9th online anytime," he says.

To Moy, promoting greater appreciation in 2017 "means trying to create experiences even before audience members step into the hall by engaging them in online discussions, by giving historical background via videos, or by connecting them to the artists in behind-the-scenes footage during rehearsal."

In a way, she says, these efforts have created two audiences for Chorosynthesis—along with the people who attend their concerts (the group is based in Seattle), they have fans around the world who may never see them in person.

Willer supports these and other efforts to promote progressiveness and flexibility in the choral field. She also encourages flexible attitudes about the meaning of choral sound and choral ensemble, a tradition being stretched by Lorelei and groups like Roomful of Teeth and the Bang on a Can All-Stars. That, together with the growth she's seen in the professional choral world over the last ten to fifteen years, makes her optimistic. "We have a new community of these professional choruses doing that work for the field and also giving young folks a picture of a career they can pursue." It's an exciting time, she says. "I feel we're at a point where this art form will absolutely flourish. I feel lucky to do what I'm doing now."

If APVE's founders were with us today, Dale Warland believes they'd still be arguing for more professional choruses and better pay for singers. But he says they would agree that American choral music has come a

long way in the past 40 years. Beginning in the 1990s, he says, "a significant number of choral ensembles reached that magic professional level in terms of repertoire and artistic performance." For the future of the field as a whole, and for Chorus America, Parker expressed "enormous hope" in her 2015 interview: "I think that choral music is such an intrinsic part of the human experience that it's much more important than any of us realize." Her optimism springs from the notion that chorus people "don't tend to go off at crazy angles ... fighting against everything." There may sometimes be bellyaching, and who knows where we would be without that. But what prevails, she has found, is a "generosity of spirit and the realization that if we work together we can create something absolutely marvelous that none of us can do by ourselves." ■

Don Lee is the managing editor of the Voice, as well as a media producer, editor, writer, and amateur choral singer who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. At NPR in Washington DC, he was the executive producer of Performance Today.



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