



Choruses and Bands

by Paul Attinello

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Since they were first established in the 1970s, lesbian and gay musical organizations have grown remarkably in number, size, and sophistication. Their many concerts, recordings, and events are among the most striking examples of communal expression within the gay and lesbian subculture.

Most medium and large North American cities boast gay and lesbian choruses, as do many cities in Europe and Oceania. These organizations have evolved to become much more than musical institutions. As representatives of gay and lesbian communities, they generate powerful political and social expression both for and between those communities, through texts and symbolism as well as through the sheer emotional power of music.

As alternatives to a bar/club culture, they are catalysts for the creation of solidarity and commonality among individuals often marginalized by the larger society.

Early Lesbian and Gay Musical Groups

Lesbian musical organizations began appearing in the 1970s. The earliest of these was established by composer Roberta Kosse in 1971 in New York, and called Women Like Me. The ensemble mostly performed Kosse's own works. It disbanded in 1980.

Hester Brown started the Victoria Woodhull All-Women's Marching Band in 1973 in New York. She named the group for a nineteenth-century feminist presidential candidate. The band played for the first Susan B. Anthony Day celebration and for three of the New York Gay Liberation Day parades. Although the Woodhull Band was not exclusively lesbian, its theme song was "When the Dykes Go Marching In."

Catherine Roma founded the oldest chorus still in operation, the Anna Crusis Women's Choir, in 1975 in Philadelphia. This group has since joined the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), becoming its senior member.

On the West Coast, vocalist and conductor Sue Fink established the Los Angeles Community Women's Chorus in early 1976.

The Gotham Male Chorus was founded in New York in late 1977 by conductor Donald Rock, who wanted a chorus that would "dig music as well as each other." In 1980 this group added women to become the Stonewall Chorale, the first of the gay and lesbian mixed-voice ensembles.

The Legacy of Jon Sims

The San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band & Twirling Corps, the first such organization to declare a gay or lesbian identity by name, was founded in June 1978 by Jon Reed Sims (1947-1984). It made its first public appearance later that month at the city's Gay Pride Day parade.

After the establishment of the Band & Twirling Corps, Sims founded in rapid succession the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (November 1978, at the public memorial for slain City Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone), Golden Gate Performing Arts (an administrative organization, March 1979), the orchestra Lambda Pro Musica, and the San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Men's Community Chorus.

Sims's work inspired a network of gay and lesbian instrumental and choral ensembles that came into existence with remarkable speed.

Choruses were soon founded in Los Angeles (July 12, 1979), Seattle (September 1979), and Chicago (October 1979). A 1981 national tour by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus inspired the founding of choruses and bands in many other cities.

Sims directed the Band & Twirling Corps until January 1982. Under his leadership, the Corps presented concerts at such important San Francisco venues as the Louise Davies Symphony Hall, Grace Cathedral, and the famous disco Dreamland.

Sims died of AIDS in San Francisco on July 16, 1984. From the beginning, he intended to create a national network of gay and lesbian instrumental and choral ensembles. The success of that network, both during his lifetime and after, remains an astonishing legacy.

Sister Singers Network and GALA

In 1981, the Sister Singers Network was established among the women's and lesbian choruses. In 2002 it has forty-five choruses as members. It has produced a number of regional, national, and international women's choral festivals and encourages cooperation and sharing of resources among its members.

The first organizational meeting of what later became GALA (the Gay and Lesbian Association of choruses) occurred in June 1981 in Chicago. That meeting involved a number of directors and founders of ensembles, including Jerry Carlson (Chicago Gay Men's Chorus, later Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus); Dennis Coleman (Seattle Men's Chorus); Richard Garrin (Chicago's Windy City Gay Chorus); Dick Kramer (San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus); Gary Miller (New York City Gay Men's Chorus); and Susan Schleeef (Chicago's Artemis Singers).

In 1982, at the first Gay Games in San Francisco, fourteen of the choruses met for the First West Coast Choral Festival. This meeting led to the establishment of the GALA Choruses Network that same year, with Jay Davidson of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus as its first President.

In addition to the choruses that belong to GALA, at least seventy other gay and lesbian choruses are in existence, including the members of the Sister Singers Network and a number of independent groups.

GALA Festivals

The first national GALA Festival, held in New York in 1983, was called COAST ("Come Out and Sing Together") and attracted twelve choruses with some 1,200 members. This event was followed by festivals in Minneapolis (1986), Seattle (1989), Denver (1992), Tampa (1996), and San Jose (2000). Each festival has shown a steady increase both in attendance and GALA membership.

In 2004 the GALA Festival will be held in Montreal. This will be the first festival to be hosted by a Canadian city.

Since 1995 GALA events have also included Small Ensemble Festivals, which showcase the numerous chamber and popular ensembles that have emerged from the larger choruses.

In addition to officially sponsored GALA festivals, member choruses are often involved in regional festivals, as well as guest appearances in each other's cities. For example, the New Orleans Gay Men's Chorus, founded in 1982 by Jerry Zachary, has in recent years scheduled joint concerts with choruses from Houston, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Berlin.

In 2002 GALA included 170 choruses with a total of about 8,000 individual members. These gay male, lesbian, and mixed-voice groups are scattered throughout North America, Europe, and Oceania.

GALA Activities

One of the most important functions of the GALA choruses has been the commissioning of new work by significant, mainly gay or lesbian, composers. Composers commissioned by the GALA choruses have included Roger Bourland, David Conte, David Del Tredici, Janice Giteck, Libby Larsen, Holly Near, Ned Rorem, Robert Seeley, Conrad Susa, Gwyneth Walker, and Martin Wesley-Smith.

Many of these commissions have been subsequently published, some of them under the auspices of GALA. Often these works incorporate gay or lesbian issues and concerns, especially the creation of "family" within the community or, less often, specific political issues.

Performers who have appeared with GALA choruses include Maya Angelou, Natalie Cole, Michael Feinstein, Jerry Hadley, Marilyn Horne, Bobby McFerrin, Bette Midler, Liza Minnelli, Mark Morris, Holly Near, Bernadette Peters, Roberta Peters, Diane Schuur, and Frederica von Stade.

GALA choruses have received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and from numerous state and municipal sources, as well as from private supporters and ticket sales. More than 600,000 individuals purchase tickets to one or more GALA concerts per year. The combined audiences for GALA choruses--including community appearances and television and radio broadcasts--is said to be more than 5,000,000.

Repertoire

Although many of the choruses in the larger North American cities are large ensembles (30 or more singers), most of the European choruses are smaller groups, often oriented towards chamber or cabaret productions.

The repertoire for the lesbian and gay choruses includes the traditional popular and classical choral music for women's and men's, as well as mixed, voices, in addition to many new compositions written for the choruses, as well as new arrangements of popular and classical works.

Instrumental Ensembles

Although they have not resulted in quite so large a network, instrumental ensembles such as concert and marching bands and orchestras have appeared in many cities. Perhaps the most notable of these is the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic of San Francisco.

The Lesbian & Gay Bands of America (LGBA) held its first meeting in Chicago on October 3, 1982. In 2002, it comprised 25 ensembles, including bands in North America and Australia. LGBA celebrated its tenth anniversary at the Gay Games in San Francisco in 1992. An ensemble of LGBA members performed at the Clinton Inaugural in 1993. Another celebration is scheduled in Melbourne in 2002.

Programming

Programming concerts for lesbian and gay ensembles is a complex activity, since band and chorus music--especially that performed by same-sex choruses, with their limited pitch range--is not in itself a major attraction in the contemporary marketplace.

Gay and lesbian ensembles must target their communities carefully, presenting music that will appeal to a diverse audience and also further the communal and political aspirations of glbtq communities. This demands a great deal of flexibility in technique and repertoire, as many groups need to connect both with audiences interested in classical music, as well as audiences who listen to a variety of genres of popular music.

Many ensembles find it useful to create traditions, such as holiday concerts or yearly productions of stage shows, in order to keep their audiences. Choruses often form smaller ensembles that perform popular work in non-traditional venues, such as gay and lesbian bars or cabarets.

Most groups also become a kind of community resource. In addition to their scheduled concerts, they often appear at local community events such as gay pride celebrations, scholarship fundraisers, P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) receptions, and Human Rights Campaign dinners.

Organizational Structures

Organizational structure for the lesbian and gay ensembles varies widely from group to group. In the 1970s and early 1980s, many groups attempted to create structures that would avoid the formal hierarchy of a conductor directing the activities of the group, or the judgmental aspects of auditioning members.

In the long run, many groups found that a committee-based, partially democratic form of the traditional classical ensemble structure enabled them to achieve some continuity. The negotiations between organization and freedom remains an important aspect of the politics of each ensemble, as well as an aspect of relations among ensembles.

As a result of these tensions, there are sometimes conflicts between issues of musical presentation and sociopolitical status. Despite these conflicts, many groups frequently manage to achieve high levels of musical professionalism.

The gay and lesbian choral movement has had a large impact, not only on gay and lesbian communities and their public image, but also on the world of choral music, which has been greatly enlivened by its presence.

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Paul Attinello teaches in the Department of Music at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne; he formerly taught at the University of Hong Kong. He has published in a number of journals, anthologies, and encyclopedias, including *Queering the Pitch*, the first collection of gay and lesbian musicology. He established and edited the Newsletter of the Gay & Lesbian Study Group of the American Musicological Society, and was also co-founder of the Society of Gay & Lesbian Composers in San Francisco.