



## Update on Community Choirs and Singing in the United States

Cindy L. Bell

Aaron Copland School of Music  
Queens College, City University of New York

### Abstract

*This article reviews and responds to recent reports by professional music and arts associations, most prominently the 2003 Chorus America study, announcing that over 23 million American adults sing weekly in community-based choirs. By considering this recent research in combination with studies of community choirs spanning the past 40 years, this article presents an updated literature review of the research on adult amateur singers. These studies produce a consistent demographic and musical profile of today's adult amateur singer and point to collective universal issues facing community choirs, such as diversity, gender, and developing communication systems. In focusing on the significance of community music in the lives of adult amateur musicians, the author proposes research agendas and models for addressing emergent issues. Additionally, this article advocates that community choirs are valuable resources by which to construct research studies that examine the long-term effects of public school music education and extend our knowledge of lifelong musical learning.*

A 2003 study by Chorus America finds that 23.5 million American adults sing weekly in choral organizations in the United States. Chorus America (2003) proclaims there are approximately 250,000 choruses nationwide, and that "more Americans engage in the public performance of choral singing than in any other art form. In fact, no other public form of artistic expression even comes close" (p. 6).

Such data substantiate the finding of a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study in 1997 that the most popular public arts activity in the U.S. is singing in a choir (NEA, 1998a). This survey of public participation in the arts indicated that over 10% of the respondents "sing in public with a chorale, choir, glee club or other vocal group" (NEA, 1998a, p. 33). Choral singing far outshines other arts activities such as drama, dance, painting or drawing.

Both surveys offer good news for choral conductors and choral music teachers. This article considers these studies in context with related research on community choral singing in the U.S. and proposes a current picture of the adult amateur singer active in community-based choirs. It suggests that the adult singer profile imparts information that is relevant to conductors and researchers interested in recruitment and retention of adult singers.

## COMMUNITY CHOIR SINGING

### *Initiatives Within the Choral Community*

In the past decade, interest in community choirs and singing has been accompanied by initiatives within the established music education community and professional music and arts organizations. In 1995, the Music Educators National Conference (now MENC: the National Association for Music Education) under the leadership of Will Schmid, initiated a meeting with other choral organizations active in the United States to discuss the state of singing in America. Representatives from the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, Inc. (SPEBSQSA, Inc.), Sweet Adelines International (SAI), American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), and Chorus America were present (MENC, 1996).

One result of this discussion was the publication of *Get America Singing...Again!*, a new songbook of common song repertoire that “Americans, of all ages, know and can sing” (MENC, 1996, p. 6). Another objective was to promote community singing, including “encouraging audience singing at concerts and recitals, opening or closing public gatherings with a song, and encouraging singing at clubs, private meetings, and in homes” (MENC, 1996, p. 2). These were not new objectives for MENC, which has always supported and encouraged public singing since the 1917 publication of *55 Community Songs*, a song book which initially sold one and a half million copies (Mark and Gary, 1992).

In 1997, as part of an ongoing effort to “document the cultural consumption patterns of the American adult population,” the NEA conducted a *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (NEA, 1998a, p. 1). NEA reported that the most popular public arts activity for Americans is singing in a choir, and concluded that more than 20 million adult Americans performed in public with singing groups.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NEA has conducted five surveys of arts participation in the past 20 years, including a study in 2002. Only surveys since 1992 have ascertained if participants “sing in public performance with a chorale, choir or glee club or other type of vocal group” (NEA, 1993, p.48). The full report for 2002 study is not yet available, but the Research Division Note #81 offers preliminary results of vastly different statistics and wide fluctuations in choral participation from the 1997 report. In fact, NEA cautions making comparisons between the 1997 and 2002 studies, due to differences in data collection. See the on-line note at

Chorus America, a Washington, D.C.-based national service organization for choruses in North America, conducted its own study on “the scope and presence of choruses in American society” (Chorus America, 2003, p. 3). This report reached conclusions similar to the NEA’s 1997 study, and recorded even higher percentages of choral participation: in over 15% of households surveyed, one or more of the adult occupants performed publicly with a chorus in the last year. From this statistic, Chorus America (2003) estimates the U.S. adult chorus population at 23.5 million adults, and when including children in their figure, moves the total number to 28.5 million singing Americans. The report also examines attitudes and motivations of choral singers, and establishes general characteristics and influences of these singers in their communities. Of particular interest to music educators are the project findings that “interest in choral singing develops early in life and is influenced by school and family experiences” (Chorus America, 2003, p. 7).

### *Results and Limitations of Existing Research*

Inspired by these national survey results, this investigation explores available research findings describing who these adult singers are, and why they sing. There is substantial research in the area of choral singing and choral music education,<sup>2</sup> but most research is conducted at the K-12 through collegiate level. Despite increasing scholarly interest in adult education and lifetime learning, only a few studies conducted between 1962 and 2000 investigate the vast population of adult singers, their music education, musical abilities and participation. Results gleaned from these studies of adult singers are discussed here in combination with the results from the national surveys by NEA (1998a) and Chorus America (2003).

Although these studies of adult singers vary widely in purpose, methodology and real time, special note of their limitations is in order. Most community choir studies are tied to particular states or geographical regions. An early study by Simmons (1962) utilized the Detroit, Michigan area. Studies of

<http://www.nea.gov/pub/Notes/81.pdf>. Regardless, singing in a choir, chorale or other vocal group remains the most popular form of personal performance in 2002 (NEA, 2003, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> Gonzo, 1973; Hylton, 1983; and Grant and Norris, 1998, furnish comprehensive overviews of scholarly work in this area.

Southern community choirs include Spell (1989) with Georgia choirs, Tipps (1992) expanding to the Southeastern states of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia, and Vincent (1997) working in Kentucky. Two studies involved the Northwest: Bunes (1979) in Montana, and Holmquist (1995) in Oregon. Green (1998) and Bell (2000) examined community choirs in the New York metropolitan area.

Only the Aliapoulios (1969), NEA (1998a) and Chorus America (2003) surveys attempt to present a more national picture of community choir singers. The NEA document *The Geography of Participation in the Arts and Culture* (1998b) discusses specific state and regional statistics about Americans' overall arts participation. Generally, the NEA found the highest rates of arts participation in the New England region, the Middle Atlantic region, and the Pacific region. The full report provides more in depth analysis of observed geographic variations in arts participation (see NEA, 1998b).

Chorus America (2003) collected available lists of choruses from different regions of the country, including 31 states and the Canadian province of British Columbia. Respondents' geographical locations were as follows: Northeast, 41%; South, 9%; Central region, 20%; Mountain West region, 17%; and Pacific region, 13% (p. 24). The Chorus America 2003 report states:

The lists, however, were not representative of the whole universe of choral singers in the United States. Such lists are nearly impossible to find. For that reason, the conclusions reached in the national telephone survey, as well as in the over-sampled cities, are useful in making descriptive statements about choral singers, but they do not represent a statistically valid random sample of all chorus singers in the nation. (p. 24)

A second note providing a brief overview of the methodology of the studies is helpful in weighing the evidence presented here. All of the dissertation studies utilize written surveys, often distributed by mail. Spell (1989) mailed surveys to 12 randomly selected community choruses; eight choruses responded, with a singer response rate of 36% (N=208). Vincent's survey (1997) was also by mail; 21 of 25 choruses responded (N=631 singers). Based on enrollment figures provided by choir directors, Aliapoulios (1969) mailed 2789 singer survey forms to 40 community choirs. Thirty-two choruses completed the exercise, for a return rate of 35% (N=981). Tipps (1992) had a contact person

within each of 10 choruses administer the survey at a rehearsal, and return the collected surveys by mail for a response rate of 80% (N=435).

Other researchers used a combination of mailing with a personal visit to the choirs during the rehearsal hour. Greene (1998) distributed questionnaires to 12 choruses by mail and at choral rehearsals, with a return rate of 41% (N=221). Bunes' distributed the survey at rehearsal to seven community choirs; respondents (N=206; 62% return rate) returned the survey by mail. Simmons visited rehearsals of 15 community choirs, and choir members returned the survey by mail (N=495; 50% return rate).

Response rate was higher for those who administered and collected the survey during the rehearsal hour, as is the case of Bell (2000) with an 87% return rate (N=457) from 10 choruses, Holmquist (1995) surveyed three community choirs: Choir 1, at rehearsal (response rate: 94%); Choir 2, at rehearsal with a follow-up mailing (response rate: 86%); Choir 3, mailing only (response rate: 67%). Subjects were selected for post-survey interviews based on demographic variables.

The Chorus America study (2003) coordinated several research components: two national random phone surveys of the general public (N=1000 per poll); six focus groups with choral singers (N=71) from three regions; and in-depth telephone interview of randomly selected professional and volunteer choral singers (N=623). The NEA study (1998a) utilized a random telephone survey for 12,349 complete interviews (response rate: 55%).

A final note regarding the sociological phenomenon of choral singing is also due. Even as the act of "singing...appears to be a common phenomenon across cultures of the world" (Durrant, 2003, p. 40)<sup>3</sup> the subjective nature of human motivation creates limitations on the evaluation of research. As an example, Chorus America (2003) utilized focus groups of 71 chorus members from Los Angeles, California, and Washington, DC, to "measure the emotional and behavioral dispositions of a select, targeted audience" (p. 27) of choral singers. While interviews with the focus group singers "reveal the sentiment of a group of individuals and may uncover *how* and *why* people hold a certain belief (about the benefits of choral singing)," Chorus America (2003) concedes "they

<sup>3</sup> Durrant (2003) offers an international perspective into the art of choral singing.

can never reveal *how many* people feel the same way” (p. 27).

Despite these limitations, existing research provides illuminating descriptive information on *who* the adult singer is and *why* they sing in community choirs.

**Profile of the Adult Amateur Singer**

*Demographic Information*

Based on the existing research, the following generalizations can be made about the adult amateur singer. All studies show that women singers significantly outnumber the men singers, some by as much as a 2:1 ratio in community-based choirs (Table 1). This finding is consistent with Gates’ (1989) suggestion of the gradual shift from predominately male singers to predominately female participation during the 250 years of choral singing activity by Americans.

**Table 1**

*Gender in the Community Choir*

Study	Female	Male
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	61%	39%
Aliapoulios (1969)	62%	38%
Buness (1979) [Montana]	57%	40%
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	67%	33%
Tipps (1992)	67%	33%
Holmquist (1995) [Oregon]	64%	36%
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	65%	35%
NEA (1998a)	60%	40%
Bell (2000) [New York]	71%	29%
Chorus America (2003)	62.5%	37.5%

Vincent’s (1997) research illustrates that men and women currently singing in community choirs participate at fairly equal rates in the elementary general music class (men, 61%; women, 65%) and elementary school choir (men, 36%; women, 38%). At the middle school level, women vastly increase their singing involvement to 55%, while men remained at 37%. Both men (59%) and women

(77%) increase their choral participation in high school, and remain very active in collegiate choral singing (men, 61%; women, 69%). However, as these percentages are based on *active community chorus singers*, where women outnumber the men by a 2:1 ratio, “the disparity of numbers between men and women as these singers grow older grows wider,” states Vincent (1997, p. 143).

A majority of community singers are over 40 years of age (Table 2) and in some cases, two-thirds or more of the singers are over 40 years old. A closer examination of the community chorus studies in chronological order (see Table 2) reveals a general shift over the past four decades in the age of singers from under age 40 to over age 40. NEA (1998c) discusses similar trends of aging arts audiences in its research report *Age and Arts Participation, 1982-1997*.

**Table 2**

*Age Level of the Community Choir Singer*

Study	Under 40 years	Over 40 years
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	66%	34%
Aliapoulios (1969)	66%	34%
Buness (1979) [Montana]	63%	37%
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	44%	56%
Tipps (1992)	30%	70%
Holmquist (1995) [Oregon]	37%	63%
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	32%	68%
NEA (1998a) <sup>1</sup>	54% (18-44 years)	46% (45 years +)
Bell (2000) [New York]	18%	82%
Chorus America (2003) <sup>2</sup>	42% (up to 45 years)	58% (46 years +)

1 NEA percentages on age are categorized from ages 18-44, and age 45 and over. The subcategory of ages 35-44 is 20% of the total respondents. A re-categorization could result in a shifting of the percentages to the “over 40 years” category.

2. Chorus America percentages of age are categorized from ages 14-45, and age 46 and over. The subcategory of 31-45 years is 30% of the respondents; the subcategory of 46-64 years is 46% of the respondents.

The amateur singer is a well-educated adult (Table 3), with most of the recent studies reporting a 96-99% high school graduation rate. Higher education statistics ranged from two-thirds completing a four-year college education, to one-

third or more having a graduate-level education. Nearly half (49%) in Bell's (2000) study earned graduate degrees, and 45% of the Chorus America (2003) participants earned graduate degrees. The NEA (1998a) study reports the lowest percentages for educational participation: 81% are high school graduates, 28% earning a college degree, and 10% completing a graduate degree.

**Table 3**

*Educational Level of the Community Choir Singer*

<i>Study</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>College Graduate</i>	<i>Graduate School</i>
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	86%	43%	-
Aliapoulios (1969)	93%	46%	16%
Buness (1979) [Montana]	98%	60%	-
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	99%	67%	37%
Tipps (1992)	99%	41%	32%
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	96%	30%	39%
NEA (1998a)	81%	28%	10%
Bell (2000) [New York]	99%	72%	49%
Chorus America (2003)	99%	85%	45%

Few studies of adult choral singers have investigated race or ethnicity (Table 4). Where investigated, minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in community singing with sources revealing 85-96% of the adult singers to be White. Again, the NEA (1998a) study presented different results: 61% White; 30% African American. An interesting finding by the NEA (1998a) is that African Americans' as a demographic group demonstrated the highest rate of personal participation in choral singing (26%) when compared to other races and

other available arts activities. Whites, as a demographic group, registered only an 8.4% personal participation in choral singing (NEA, 1998a, p. 35). However, the results reported here are inconclusive. In a country as populated and ethnically diverse as the United States, people of all races and nationalities sing in choirs. Thus far, community choir studies have not tapped or accessed the available pools of racially and ethnically diverse groups of singers. A view of community singing through the lens of different races and cultures will increase our understanding of the manifold nature of community choral singing.

**Table 4**

*Race of the Community Choir Singer*

<i>Study</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Other</i>
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	85%	14%	1.5%
Tipps (1992)	95%	3.5%	1.5%
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	96%	1.7%	2.3%
NEA (1998a)	61%	30%	9%
Chorus America (2003)	93%	2%	5%

Many studies (Simmons, 1962; Aliapoulios, 1969; Buness, 1979; Holmquist, 1995; Bell, 2000) do not examine race.

Several dissertation studies report income levels of community choir singers (Simmons, 1962; Spell, 1989; Vincent, 1997), but it is difficult to draw conclusions from this information, as incomes evolve over time and geography. Because the NEA (1998a) and Chorus America (2003) studies present a national portrayal of the community chorus singer, their results are presented in Table 5. But even these two recent reports defy comparisons: NEA (1998a) places 54% of singers with incomes up to \$50,000, and 29% of the singers with incomes over \$50,000. Chorus America (2003) reports a near inverse proportion of percentages: 24% of the singers with incomes up to \$50,000, and 63% of the singers with incomes over \$50,000. The incongruity of these two reports on singer income may be attributed to, among other things, inflation, difference

in random sample selection and the specific targeted populations for extensive analysis.

Table 5

*Income of the Community Choir Singer*

Study	Under \$20,000	\$20- \$50,000	\$50- 75,000	\$75,000 +
NEA (1998a)	22%	32%	10%	19%
Chorus America (2003)	3%	21%	22%	41%

Chorus America (2003) depicts a national socio-demographic profile of the current adult choral singer by exploring political contributions and voting behaviors, membership in religious institutions and cultural preferences and participation. Some of the project findings by Chorus America (2003) are:

- a. 76% of choral singers are involved in charity work as volunteers and donors (p. 4)
- b. Choral singers are more than twice as likely as non-participants to be aware of current events: 71% read a daily newspaper (p. 13)
- c. Choral singers are “major consumers of culture” (p. 17), visiting museums and attending music and theatre performances (p. 14)
- d. Choral singers are involved in the political process; 93% vote regularly in both local and national elections, and 42% make contributions to political parties or candidates (p. 11-13)
- e. 73% of choral singers attend religious services at least once a week (p. 14)

*Musical Experience*

Many studies demonstrate that adult amateur singers were active in their public school musical programs as young students. For instance, previous participation in a high school choral ensemble (Table 6) is specified by more than 50%, and in some cases, 75% of the adult singers. In some surveys, more than 50% of the adult singers reported performing in a middle school or junior high school chorus, and 40% or more sang in an elementary school chorus. Nearly 69% of Chorus America’s

(2003) participants had their first choral experience in elementary or middle school; NEA (1998a) does not ascertain information on public school performance. Several studies reveal patterns of increasing musical involvement by singers as they progressed through their public school years.

Table 6

*Public School Choral Experience of the Community Choir Singer*

Study	Elementary	Middle or Junior	High School
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	48%	60%	59%
Aliapoulios (1969)	-	-	79%
Buness (1979) [Montana]	60%	43%	82%
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	-	-	76%
Tipps (1992)	51%	55%	72%
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	40%	53%	73%
Greene (1998) [New York]	53%	-	-
Bell (2000) [New York]	-	-	68%

Individual musical instruction in piano, voice or other musical instrument was reported by vast majorities of adult singers (Table 7), with several studies reporting that piano instruction was common for over 50% of the singers. However, all studies found that more community choir singers studied the piano than the voice or other instruments. Private voice study ranged from 25% to 52% of the participants, with the exception of Chorus America’s (2003) poll of choral singers, which reports 80% having voice lessons. Study of other musical instruments, such as band or orchestra instruments, ranged from 21% to a high of 92% reported by Chorus America’s (2003) respondents (musical instruments not specified). Outside of the Chorus America (2003) report, the Aliapoulios study of 1969 reports the highest rates for voice study (52%),

piano study (82%) and other musical study (67%) by adult singers. NEA (1998a) confirms that nearly 50% of the respondents in the random arts participation survey took “music lessons” at one time (no specific instruments identified), with the bulk of those lessons occurring before the age of 17.

Green (1998) discovered that 57% of community chorus singers indicated that “their interest in the formal study of music had been aroused through participation in the amateur/volunteer chorus” (p. 65). Furthermore, Green (1998) stated that for those who were studying (music) at the time of her survey, the study of voice was the most popular area (p. 159).

**Table 7**

*Community Choir Singer Musical Study*

<i>Study</i>	<i>Piano Study</i>	<i>Voice Study</i>	<i>Other Musical Study</i>
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	57%	41%	33%
Aliapoulios (1969)	82%	52%	67%
Buness (1979) [Montana]	73%	51%	49%
Spell (1989) [Georgia]	46%	41%	21%
Tipps (1992) <sup>1</sup>	76%	48%	46%
Vincent (1997) <sup>2</sup> [Kentucky]	63%	25%	50%
NEA (1998a)	-	-	49%
Bell (2000) [New York]	65%	43%	51%
Chorus America (2003)	-	80%	92%

Many studies ascertained the number of community choir singers who majored in music in college (Table 8). In several cases, at least 20% of the singers are music majors; Chorus America (2003) reports 37% as music or music education majors. Tipps (1992) and Vincent (1997) also describe 14-15% of the singers as “incomplete” music majors; i.e., did not finish the music major requirements.

**Table 8**

*College Major of Community Choir Singer*

<i>Study</i>	<i>Music Major</i>	<i>Other Major</i>	<i>Other</i>
Simmons (1962) [Detroit]	15%	85%	-
Buness (1979) [Montana]	23%	77%	-
Tipps (1992)	21%	66%	14% incomplete
Vincent (1997) [Kentucky]	19%	67%	15% incomplete
Bell (2000) [New York]	20%	80%	-
Chorus America (2003)	37%	63%	-

Simmons (1962) and Buness (1979) include “music minor” in the “music major” percentages

Several studies elicited information from adult choral singers on other forms of music instruction. For example, participation in general music class at the elementary level is frequently cited as part of the formative musical training for many community choral singers (Tipps; 1992; Vincent, 1997; Green, 1998). Bell (2000) discovered that 23% of the community choir singers in her study engaged in self-motivated discovery and informal music training via “self-teaching of an instrument” (p. 55).

Green (1998) pursued the issue of perceived levels of enhanced musical literacy attained by singers in choruses. After surveying 221 singers in 12 adult choirs (four church choirs; eight community choirs), Green proposes that adult amateur choruses are vehicles that transmit to their memberships musical knowledge comparable to knowledge gained through the formal study of a musical instrument. Participation in amateur/volunteer chorus has succeeded in (a) arousing participants' interest in the formal study of music; (b) facilitating the acquisition of information leading to increased understanding of the music symbols in a musical score; and (c) encouraging concert attendance and increased music listening (Green, 1998, p. 166). But, Green (1998) cautions, the need exists for the music educator (conductor) to make deliberate and systematic efforts in encouraging the acquisition of musical knowledge by chorus participants (p. 170).

Community choir singers also exhibit a high rate of commitment to choral singing. Chorus America (2003) found that 34% of respondents belong to two choruses, and 10% belong to three or more choruses. Vincent (1997) determined that in the three years prior to her study, 65% of the singers sang with another chorus, and 76% participated in a church choir. More than 77% of Vincent's (1997) singers participated in church choirs for over 11 years. Holmquist (1995) also discovered a 64% rate of involvement with church choirs. Choral conductors responding to Green's 1998 survey claimed that 70% of the singers in their community choirs participated for an average of 15 years.

Similarly, Bell's (2000) study of 457 adult singers in ten community choirs uncovers a depth of choral experience by participants that, in many cases, exceeds a decade of singing in choral organizations. Participants in Bell's study indicate an average of over nine years of singing in the present community chorus, nearly 11 years of singing in church choirs, and almost four years of singing in other community choruses. Additionally, previous choral singing experiences include 65% in a religious choir, and 42% in other community choirs (Bell, 2000). Bell (2000) also found that 37% of the community choral singers to be presently performing with a second choral group, and 24% singing in a religious choir. Lastly, 80% of the singers surveyed by Bell (2000) revealed singing experience with more than four different choral conductors.

The studies reviewed here consolidate the current profile of the adult amateur singer: twice as many women than men, primarily White, over 40

years of age with a college education, and with detailed personal histories of previous musical and choral experiences. Even as these studies determine who sings in adult choirs, it is important to also know why they sing.

#### *Why Adult Amateur Singers Perform in Community Choirs*

Choral conductor and arranger Harry Robert Wilson (1959) offered insight into reasons for which people join singing groups:

The person who joins a chorus is seeking, primarily, to satisfy through the medium of singing a longing for something beautiful and spiritual in his life. There may be social motives but the musical motive is invariably stronger. The most natural and at the same time the most universal medium for experiencing music is that of singing. The total physical and emotional responses in the act of singing make it the most personal musical activity. Singing also affects the entire body more directly and more intimately than any other musical experience. (p. v)

Robert Shaw, conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, stated that:

The wonderful thing about the amateur chorus is that nobody can buy its attendance at rehearsals, or the sweat, eyestrain and fatigue that go along with the glow; and nobody but the most purposive and creative of music minds—from Bach in both directions—can invite and sustain its devotion. (Mussulman, 1979, p. 124)

These opinions, by American choral conductors of the 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> century, may be compared with the opinions of adult singers themselves. Adult amateur singers, participating in various studies of community choirs over the years, articulate their own reasons as to why they sing in choirs. An initial investigation by Simmons (1962) presents influences and motivations explaining adult participation in community choirs in the Detroit area. Simmons divides the most important reasons into two categories: musical reasons and social needs. Singers attribute their adulthood singing to an enjoyment of musical participation and public performance, a desire to increase musical skills, and a perspective of choral singing "as recreation."

Furthermore, a “major motivating factor in musical participation is a firm command (by the singer) of the necessary skills and a depth of understanding sufficient to bring musical meaning to the experience” (Simmons, 1962, p. 83).

Singers also value individuals such as parents, music teachers and church choir directors as favorable influences on their musical participation. Another finding is that “the experiences resulting from elementary and junior high school musical activities are extremely important factors in determining adult as well as later-adolescent attitudes and interest in musical participation” (Simmons, 1962, p. 82). Simmons argues that such musical reasons implies a strong need for community choruses to challenge the musical interests of their memberships.

Aliapoulos' 1969 study of the “adult amateur choral organization” in the United States established the importance of the community chorus in adult music education. His extensive research involved over 900 singers in amateur choirs in 23 different states. Adult singers ranked their most important reasons for participating in the community choir: (a) “to participate in a choral activity for the sheer pleasure of singing;” (b) “to enjoy the pleasure of performance;” (c) “to enjoy the satisfaction that comes from learning;” and (c) “to develop a greater understanding of choral music” (Aliapoulos, 1969, p. 235).

More recent studies have continued to explore motivational reasons for adult participation in community singing in specific geographical locations. Spell's (1989) study of 208 singers in eight Georgia community choruses finds that singers rank performance, challenge, enjoyment and skill as their priority “music-related motivational factors” for involvement in community choirs. Spell states that this ranking reflects “a primary interest in public performance and the opportunity to utilize one's musical talents as compared to the secondary interest of striving for musical excellence or being challenged by singing difficult music” (p. 45).

Holmquist's (1995) study of 244 adult singers in Oregon is based on both surveys and personal interviews with 40 singers. She states that adult community choir members share certain characteristics, such as an “insider language,” a sense of musical community, memory of a peak musical moment, and a recognition and desire for effective (music) teachers. Furthermore, these singers also showed a past involvement in high school performing ensembles and a pattern of

increasing musical involvement. According to Holmquist:

In the report of these findings, there is one overarching premise that has yet to be stated. This premise is implicit in the data from each survey and in the transcripts of all the interviews, yet it is so obvious, so taken for granted, that it is rarely stated directly. The premise is this: These subjects love music. If they didn't, they would not be actively participating now.

They learned to love music a long time ago, in a variety of ways. Most had good experiences with music, which they remember well enough to recount in considerable detail, and through the years they came to associate music-making with pleasure and positive experience. In school, they learned to discriminate between good and poor teaching, and between repertoire of substance and that which they called trite. They reported actually enjoying the hard work that brings excellence; no subject boasted of a mediocre choir or band. Their references to their place in a musical community, using the language of that community, were signs that, in their youth, they were voluntarily acquiring the role of musician, regardless of their career plans (p. 149).

Another regional study by Vincent (1997) analyzed responses from 631 singers in 21 community choirs in Kentucky. Respondents, in rank ordering their primary motivation for continued singing, identified “love of singing,” “to enjoy beauty of music,” and “personal enjoyment” as their top three reasons (Vincent, 1997, p. 163). Vincent states “It appears, as has been claimed for hundreds of years, that music and the re-creation thereof has intrinsic appeal that draws people to itself” (p. 163). In addition, singers explain they come from families where music was valued and where musical experiences were made available, and parents or guardians were most influential in developing their interest in music.

The 2003 Chorus America survey cited “the music” as the primary reason for adults joining a chorus. The report states: “It is the choral repertoire, the scale of choral singing, and the grandness of the sound that provide choristers with the satisfaction and exhilaration that keep (the singers) committed” (Chorus America, 2003, p. 15).

Choral performance motivates adult singers “to hone and expand their skills and repertoire” and participants describe singing as “intellectually stimulating, something that is spiritually elevating and demonstrates to them the beauty of life” (Chorus America, 2003, p. 15). Beyond personal fulfillment, adult singers are motivated by enriching their communities, and “thrive on the effect that a beautiful, well-crafted performance has on (the) audiences” (Chorus America, 2003, p. 15). Another conclusion by Chorus America (2003) is that “early exposure to choral singing is an enormous influence on the choices adults make later in life” (p. 3).

These studies help elucidate why amateur singers perform in community-based choirs into adulthood. Motivational reasons such as early positive choral experiences in public school, the desire to increase musical skills and knowledge, the sense of a social community within a choir, and the exhilarating experience of performing great choral music are repeatedly cited by singers as key to their participation. As Durrant (2003) comments, “for those people who do so, singing in community choirs is an important, even central part of their lives. Many people who sing cannot imagine doing without it” (p. 52).

### **Preserving the Tradition of Community Choruses**

The picture presented here of the active adult amateur choral singer is heartening for those music educators investigating lifelong musical participation. Community-based musical groups in the United States have long served as the primary performing ensemble for these adult musicians removed from the academic setting. Their continued existence is essential to meeting the aesthetic needs and musical impulses of adult amateurs seeking a means of performance and opportunities to create with other musicians like themselves. For choral music educators interested in advancing scholarship on the adult amateur singer and community choirs, the following propositions are offered for consideration.

#### *Recommendations for Community Choruses*

First, we must reinforce a connectional system for all varieties of community choirs. Some community-based groups, such as Barbershop quartets (<http://www.SPEBSQSA.org>) and Sweet Adelines International (<http://www.sweetadelinesintl.org>), already maintain a national system of communication. Many church choirs that are part of

denominations (i.e., United Methodist Church; Presbyterian Church of the USA) also have associations for choir directors and members that support annual choral workshops and festivals, providing models of functioning choral organizations. Connectional systems encourage organized community singing events and opportunities for smaller choirs to join for performances of more challenging repertoire. Such systems allow for dissemination of newsletters and information, sharing of repertoire, assisting singers in new communities to locate area choirs, and encouraging interaction between choirs and their members.

Communication and exchange between choral conductors and singers is already extended to the international level via The International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM). Founded in 1982, IFCM (<http://ifcm.org>) now serves over 2000 members on all continents, it sponsors the World Day of Choral Singing, regional symposia, choral music databases (Musica), and other choral-related projects. In North America, Chorus America is the national organization for 700 independent choruses, including professional choruses, volunteer choruses, children/youth choruses, and symphony/opera choruses. The international and multi-lingual Internet resource ChoralNet (<http://www.choralnet.org>) is a collaborative project of IFCM, Choral America and the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA). This resource functions as the major gateway to immeasurable choral resources, including links to over 3000 choir Web pages from all continents.

As significant as these international and national ventures are for the art of choral singing, a regional or state-wide choral organization may be a more powerful and relevant communication tool for the local community choir. There are thousands of smaller community choruses, choral societies and larger oratorio societies who, without membership in any central choral organization, have no means of connecting with other similar organizations. Presently, the American Choral Directors Associations (ACDA), a professional organization of 18,000 choral directors from public schools, colleges, community choirs and other choral organizations, is polling its membership to create comprehensive lists of community choruses. The Eastern Division embarked on such a study in 2003. Preliminary results based on a 44% response rate report 473 community choirs with nearly 28,000 singers (ACDA, Eastern Division, 2003). This effort is an immense project that requires the investment of time and energy of many volunteers—a quality

central to the core of community choirs. As these groups are built on a strong volunteer ethic, the resources necessary to accomplish such a comprehensive listing are already in place: the community chorus members themselves.

As an example, one established model for a regional community choir connection system is The Greater Boston Choral Consortium (GBCC). Formed in 1989, this organization is the result of a cooperative effort to “promote greater awareness of the many and varied choral groups in the greater Boston area” (GBCC, 2004). The main Web page (<http://www.bostonsings.org>) distributes information for over 75 choruses in the Boston area. It serves as a link to other Boston-area chorus’ Web pages, where browsers can view concert dates and programs, ticket prices, and information on joining choirs. Capitalizing on the popularity of the Internet and access to individual choral Web pages, the Greater Boston Choral Consortium provides unlimited exposure for all choral groups involved, regardless of membership, performance ability, or level of funding.

Two other regional models are the Vocal Area Network (VAN), which supports 200 area choirs and vocal ensemble activities in and around the greater New York City area (<http://www.van.org>), and the San Francisco Bay Area Chorus Directory (<http://www.choralarchive.org>), which identifies nearly 500 choral groups in the north central part of California. Clearly, daily Internet access and swift creation of Web pages has helped accelerate this communication among singers and ensembles, in ways one could not fathom only ten years ago.

In addition to becoming a part of a connectional system, community choirs with substantial histories need to write their stories. Well-established choirs in or near East Coast cities, such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia, are often the subject of historical documentation (see Johnson, 1965; Krehbeil, 1970; Walters, 1971; Perkins & Dwight, 1977). But numerous volunteer community choruses in smaller towns, founded during the World War II years, are into their seventh decade of local performances. Few community ensembles have made available their histories to music education research (see Veblen & Olsson, 2002, for an overview of histories of community musical groups). A well-established choir with 50 or more years of community performance furnishes historical information that helps researchers trace the development of musical performance at the community level. Information gleaned from archival studies will strengthen existing choirs and illustrate patterns of success for those

forming new choirs. Aliapoulios (1969) defined the adult amateur choir as an example of an “institutionalized cultural medium *which has maintained a historical continuity*, undergone a sociological change, gained an educational status, and contributed greatly to the aesthetic needs of society” (p. 4). The writing and sharing of the stories and histories of community choirs is important to continuing the tradition of community choral performance.

#### *New Avenues for Research*

When community choirs are utilized as research settings, the research focuses primarily on demographics, educational and musical experiences, and motivations for participation.

But so few studies have explored deeper topics with this population. Green (1998) proposed that participation in an adult amateur/volunteer chorus enhances musical literacy. Bell (2000) presented information relevant to choral singer retention and longevity. Holmquist (1995) suggested that recollections of public school musical experiences by adult singers are instructive to music educators seeking to influence lifelong musical participation. These areas merit further investigation.

It is important to expand and develop the choral research agenda into this population of 23.5 million singers. Obvious issues such as the imbalance of gender must be confronted. Where are the male singers? What effects do early musical experiences play on men’s decision *not* to sing in choirs as adults? How do other available social activities compete for time? How can we reverse the effect of low percentages of male singers? Holmquist (1995) remarks that “students who have negative experiences with a school subject rarely involve themselves with it as adults. The inequality of (male) participation suggests that fewer men develop choir singer roles early in life” (p. 141).

Another suggestion for increasing male singer retention is proposed by Vincent (1997): the creation of small vocal ensembles at the middle school level that provide opportunities for individual attention. Specifically, quartets, ensembles and choruses composed of only boys would provide them “with a comfort zone that would allow for the acceptance of knowledge, would foster an understanding of the vocal maturation process, and would offer continued enjoyment in singing. Community male ensembles could coach and encourage the boy’s singing for the benefit of all choruses” (Vincent, 1997, p. 144). If the number of male singers continues to decline,

some community choirs will be unable to sustain performances of the standard SATB choral repertoire.

Interestingly enough, Chorus America reports a surge over the past 20 years in the development of large-scale men's independent choruses, a phenomenon attributable to the emergence of the gay community in America (Sigman, 2002, p. 51). Over 150 such choruses have formed, "evidence of a visible subculture within the fabric of cities large and small" as "gay men established choruses as an opportunity for artistic expression and community pride" (Sigman, 2003, p. 51). Further research in this area may clarify the sociological issues influencing male participation in adult choirs.

The visible lack of racial diversity in community choirs is an enigma. It is not reflective of our evolving twenty-first century American society. Why do not more minority representatives sing in choirs? What roles do education, ethnic traditions and social beliefs play in minority members formulating opinions about community singing? Research could identify the demographic, musical and personal issues affecting choral participation by minority groups.

Most importantly, investigations of these adult singer populations provide our profession with a direct reflection on the music educational system already in place in the public schools. Holmquist (1995) argues that "amateur singers are a rich source of insight into the long term effects of music education" (p. 14), and that "positive school experiences, including effective teaching and social acceptance, are accountable for their continuing involvement" (p. 141). Through the adult singer, we can identify specifics of excellent public school music education that encourage students to pursue lifelong singing. Conversely, we can also ferret out aspects of poor teaching and declining choral programs that discourage adults from pursuing singing as an avocation.

Case studies will provide intensive knowledge of the individual adult singer. Research must explore trends in the study of musical instruments, efforts at self-instruction of music or instruments, practice habits, and aspects of musical literacy – all issues revealed by and affecting the adult singer participation. Similarly, ethnographic studies will present detailed descriptive research of specific populations and their inclinations towards performance in adult choral groups.

In summary, community choral organizations are valuable resources for studies that extend our knowledge of musical participation beyond the

period of formal schooling. The adult who continues throughout his life to engage in musical interests and community choir performance represents the ultimate achievement for choral music educators: a lifelong musical participant/learner. As evidenced by the 23.5 million adults who perform weekly with choirs, music educators have, somehow, somewhere, done something right. The opportunity is ripe to examine exactly *how* and *what* our music education programs accomplish and how we as choral conductors can continue to address the musical needs of adult amateur singers in community choirs.

## REFERENCES

- Aliapoulios, A. A. (1969). A study of the adult amateur choral organization in the United States and the implication for adult education (Doctoral dissertation, Boston University School for the Arts, 1969). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 31, 2417A.
- American Choral Directors Association, Eastern Division (2003). *Troubadour*, 12(1). Oklahoma City, OK: ACDA.
- Bell, C. L. (2000). An examination of adult amateur community chorus and choral conductor rehearsal behavior, with implications for music education (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2000). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 61(02), 539A.
- Birge, E. B. (1939). *History of public school music in the United States – new and augmented edition*. Boston: Oliver Ditson, Co.
- Buness, D. J. (1979). Factors contributing to participation and non-participation in selected community choruses in Montana (Doctoral dissertation, University of Montana, 1979). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 40, 1737A.
- Chorus America (2003). *America's performing art: A study of choruses, choral singers and their impact*. Retrieved June 1, 2003, from <http://www.chorusamerica.org>.
- Durrant, C. (2003). *Choral conducting: Philosophy and practice*. New York: Routledge.

- Gates, T. (1989). A hist1998). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(07), 2411A.
- Holmquist, S. P. (1995). A study of community choir members' school experiences (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 1995). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56(05), 1699A.
- Hylton, J. (1983). A survey of choral education research: 1972-1981. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 76, 1-29.
- Johnson, H. E. (1965). *Hallelujah, amen! The story of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston*. Boston: Bruce Humphries Publishers.
- Krehbiel, H. E. (1970). *Notes on the cultivation of choral music and the Oratorio Society of New York*. New York: AMS Press. (Original work published 1884)
- Mark, M. L., & Gary, C. L. (1992). *A history of American music education*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Music Educators National Conference (1996). *Get America singing...again!* Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp.
- Mussulman, J. A. (1979). *Dear people...Robert Shaw a biography*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- National Endowment for the Arts (1993). *Survey of public participation in the arts, 1992: [United States]*. [Computer file]. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts [producer], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: ICPSR: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1995.
- National Endowment for the Arts (1998a). *1997 Survey of public participation in the arts: Summary report*. Research Division Report, Number 39. Retrieved June 1, 2003 from <http://www.nea.gov/pub/Survey/Survey.pdf>.
- National Endowment for the Arts (1998b). *The geography of participation in the arts and culture*. Research Division Report, Number 41. Retrieved June 1, 2003 from <http://www.nea.gov/pub/Researchcharts/summary41.html>.
- National Endowment for the Arts (1998c). *Age and arts participation, 1982-1997*. Research Division Report, Number 42. Retrieved June 1, 2003 from <http://www.nea.gov/pub/Researchcharts/summary42.html>.
- National Endowment for the Arts (2003). *2002 Survey of public participation in the arts*. Research Division Note # 81. Retrieved December 1, 2003 from <http://www.nea.gov/pub/Notes/81.pdf>.
- Perkins, C.C., & Dwight, J.S. (1977). *History of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, Massachusetts*. New York: Da Capo Press. (Original work published 1883-1893)
- Simmons, D. W. (1962). The motivations and musical backgrounds of participants and non-participants in selected community choruses (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois. 1962). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 23(11), 4380.
- Spell, G. M. (1989). Motivational factors and selected socio-demographic characteristics of Georgia community chorus participants as measured by the education participation scale, the community chorus participation scale, and the personal inventory form (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1989). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51(02), 0445A.
- Sigman, M. (2002). *Leading the successful chorus: A guide for managers, board members, and directors*. Washington, DC: Chorus America.
- Tipps, J. W. (1992). Profile characteristics and musical backgrounds of community participants in the southeastern United States (Doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1992). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53-07A, 2288.
- Veblen, K., & Olsson, B. (2002). Community music: Toward an international overview. In R. Colwell & C. Richardson (Eds.), *New handbook of music teaching and learning* (pp. 730-753). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vincent, P. M. (1997). A study of community choruses in Kentucky and implications for

music education (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1997). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58(06), 1982A.

Walters, R. (1971). *The Bethlehem Bach Choir: An historical and interpretative sketch*. New York: AMS Press. (Original work published 1918)

Wilson, H. R. (1959). *Artistic choral singing*. New York: G. Schirmer orical comparison of public singing by American men and women. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 37(1), 32-47.

Gonzo, C. (1973). Research in choral music: a perspective. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 33, 21-33.

Grant, J. W., & Norris, C. (1998). Choral music education: A survey of research 1982-1995. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 135, 21-59.

Green, V. B. (1998). Enhanced musical literacy through participation in the adult amateur/volunteer chorus: A descriptive study (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University,