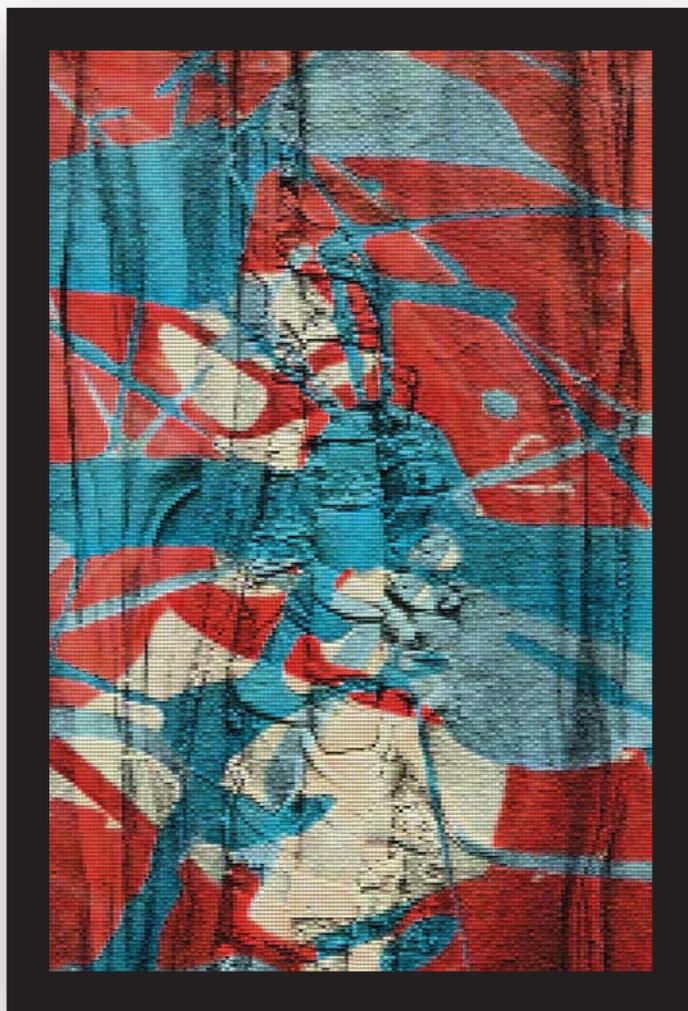


As was demonstrated through performances and interest sessions at the 2017 ACDA National Conference, choirs are not a one-size-fits-all arts experience. Choirs, their membership, their mission statements, and their repertoire and concert experiences exhibit considerable diversity. Listening to these varied choirs and learning about who they are and what they do expand our organization's vision of the choral experience. Many of the groups featured in this article embrace singers who may have been underserved in more traditional choral settings, and all embrace a mission that promotes diversity and inclusion. These choirs, and many others like them in the United States and abroad, are opening eyes and expanding minds by reaching out and sharing in unique and meaningful ways the joys of human expression through choral singing.

We thank the directors of the choirs discussed in this article for their assistance in compiling the following information.

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Angela Broeker and Jason Harris



Angela Broeker
Director of Choral Activities
University of St. Thomas
Diversity Initiatives Standing Committee Member

Jason Harris
Director of Choral Activities
Xavier University

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Dallas Street Choir

Dallas, Texas

Jonathan Palant, Founder and Director

<https://www.dallasstreetchoir.org/>



Not long after moving to Dallas in 2007, Jonathan Palant was asked by someone affiliated with The Stewpot, a day shelter for those experiencing homelessness, to conduct an ad hoc choir comprising members of their population. By the fall of 2014, this initial project grew to become the Dallas Street Choir. The mission of the Dallas Street Choir is simple: to offer a musical outlet for those experiencing homelessness and severe disadvantage.

Between eighty and one hundred singers arrive for each rehearsal, and the choir has welcomed nearly 1,300 into their rehearsal room since its inception. Regular attendance and participation are encouraged, and singers are offered their choice of a \$2 bill or an all-day public transportation pass for successfully completing each hour-long rehearsal.

Because there is no prerequisite to participate in the Dallas Street Choir, numerous accommodations are made to ensure every member feels successful: singers are given word sheets for the unison melodies they learn by rote; the choir uses accessible motor coaches to transport the high number of participants who require canes, walkers, and wheelchairs; and the choir secures accommodations for its participants at the end of evening performances. Because area shelters close their doors by 5:00 p.m., it is the choir's policy to offer a hotel room for any singer needing it when asked to perform in the evening, funded by those hosting the group.

Though the choir presents two concerts each year, most performances are by invitation and are, most often,

for educational purposes, so they include a presentation about homelessness and how to help. Performances also offer practical ways to respond when someone experiencing homelessness approaches. Because he understands that his singers are worthy of human acknowledgement on the street even when a dollar is not given, Jonathan Palant suggests the following way to respond: "Sorry, I can't help you today. Hope you have a good afternoon."

Trans Chorus of Los Angeles

Los Angeles, California

Lindsey Deaton, Founder and Artistic Director

<http://transchorusla.org/>



The mission of the Trans Chorus of Los Angeles (TCLA) is to fiercely empower trans and non-binary people to discover, love, and use their voices to change hearts and minds. Founded in 2015 by director Lindsey Deaton, the TCLA creates a safe space for all of its musicians and celebrates the complexity of humanity as it embraces its members and the unique voice each person brings to the ensemble. In contrast to more traditional voice-placement issues, the TCLA has the privilege of discovering how to place a female tenor or a trans man going through a vocal change.

Musically, Deaton's goal is to have the choir sing well in ten parts (Alto high, Alto low, Tenor 1 high, Tenor 1 low, Tenor 2 high, Tenor 2 low, Bass 1 high, Bass 1 low, Bass 2 high, and Bass 2 low) and feels a responsibility to perform at a high artistic level. She is guided in repertoire selection by the mission of the ensemble. Consequently, the choir sings choral classics, pop songs, original songs written for specific performances, and pieces with texts

that speak to the LGBTQ community.

As musical demands increase, so do the rigors of the admittance process. Begun as a non-auditioned group, potential members must now participate in an audition and interview. Their performance schedule also continues to increase with engagements at a Los Angeles Dodgers Pride Game, radio performances, social justice events, and their own seasonal concerts. When asked if the choristers bring unique needs to the ensemble setting, Deaton responded: "Each one of our choristers brings a million needs to every rehearsal. Yours do too."

Joyful Noise

Morristown, New Jersey

Allison Fromm, Founder and Director

<http://www.joyfulnoisechorus.org/>



Founded in 2000 by Allison Fromm and her sister Elizabeth, Joyful Noise is an ensemble of forty-five adults, ages seventeen through seventy, with physical and neurological challenges and acquired brain injuries. Fromm states, "Elizabeth has epilepsy and developmental disabilities, is quite musical, and loves connecting with people. I thought she might relish the powerful experience of singing in community that I had always enjoyed as a choral singer and conductor."

The prerequisite for participating in Joyful Noise is a love of group music making and the ability to focus during a ninety-minute rehearsal with minimal interruptions. Most singers are referred to the ensemble by word of mouth, and there are no auditions. Instead, prospective singers and their families are invited to a rehearsal to determine whether Joyful Noise is a good fit. During rehearsals, singers may have family members or caregivers present to provide support or assistance.

Fromm selects repertoire for its "singability" and its

potential for personal significance to Joyful Noise's singers and audiences. Repertoire that has a comfortable vocal range, logical melodic contour, and word repetition is ideal. They "love music that allows them to express their emotions and individuality. They think deeply about the lyrics of each piece and ask questions about the meaning of the words that most of us take for granted." Joyful Noise has commissioned nearly twenty works by composers such as Alice Parker and Steven Sametz. In 2003, earthsongs launched the Joyful Noise Choral Series to assist ensembles for singers with disabilities with procuring suitable repertoire.

Joyful Noise's initial performances were for local events, but they have also presented sessions for the 2008 ACDA Eastern Regional Conference and the 2009 Chorus America National Conference, have collaborated with Harvard University and Temple University, and performed for "America's Got Talent." Fromm calls her singers "ambassadors for people with disabilities." One of their members says their performances "make me feel famous and proud."

VOICES21C

Boston, MA

André de Quadros, Founder and Director

<http://www.voices21c.org/>



VOICES21C is a Boston-based choir that "does things a bit differently." In 2015, founder of the group, André de Quadros, envisioned bringing together creative singers from around the United States to form a project choir capable of bringing goodwill, peace, and global understanding to audiences here and abroad. Their website video asks: "What if we could use music to bring our voices together? What if we could sing about

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the things that we feel we cannot speak about? What if we could sing a New Song?"

After auditioning over 100 singers, twenty-two singers from seven states were selected for the first project. According to Emily Jaworski, singer in the choir, the ensemble works to break down the traditional structures that have defined choral music, engaging instead in an interdisciplinary artistic expression that includes spoken word, creative movement, and body imagery through traditional Western classical music, non-traditional world song, and improvisation. The group takes a collaborative approach, viewing all ensemble members as co-creators in the musical process.

In April of 2017, VOICES21C gave a historic performance of all-Muslim music in Boston's Center of Jewish Culture, Vilna Shul. Combining with the Zamir Chorale of Boston and the Boston Community Gospel Choir, the groups performed songs from the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian traditions and then joined together to perform

music that transcends the collective cultures. In the summer of 2017, they took their concert, "Here I Am," to Israel and Palestine. The program premiered in May of 2017 and asked the question, "What does it mean to be here, to be 'I' in today's tumultuous world?" Song material included a piece that explored deeper understandings of the contested nature of land not only in Israel and Palestine but also in the United States. Other pieces asked listeners to ponder the meaning of "I am" in the context of others, to consider whom we welcome into our homes and into our hearts, and, through a contrafactum of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is your Land," inspired action on behalf of the environment and social stewardship.

In all that they do, VOICES21C continually asks how their passion for choral music can be turned into something that transforms the world and serves the greater good.



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Tonality

Los Angeles, California

Alexander Lloyd Blake, Founder and Director

<http://ourtonality.org/>



Two moments in the life of Alexander Lloyd Blake inspired him to create Tonality, an ensemble based out of Los Angeles dedicated to promoting diversity and artistic inclusion through the medium of choral music. The first occurred in 2011 when, while traveling through North Carolina, Blake, who is a person of color, was approached by a police officer while sitting in his parked car. He was asked to provide identification, presumably because someone had reported his presence. “I must not have fit into the neighborhood. It was the first time I had been approached by the police due to my race. And while it was the only time, it opened my eyes to the issues that so many people of color have faced.”

The second moment took place at the 2016 Western ACDA Division Conference, where Blake was in the audience for Conspirare’s production of Craig Hella Johnson’s monumental work *Considering Matthew Shepard*. The performance helped him come to the realization that music could be used as a medium to confront injustices and open a dialogue about controversial and painful subjects.

Although Tonality was initially formed as an organization that would feature a diverse group of musicians sharing a message of unity through music, its mission evolved into one incorporating elements of the social justice movement and bringing about an awareness of marginalized communities through innovative programming, partnerships and collaborations, and outreach. The structure of Tonality as a nonprofit professional organization is tied into its mission. Blake recognizes the

dearth of professional ensembles focused on the diversity of their membership, and as a result he works toward ensuring that his ensemble performs at the highest possible level to serve as an inspirational example to underrepresented peoples in the world of Western art music.

Like many people of color who participate in traditional choirs, the members of Tonality have had experiences in which they were one of very few minorities within an ensemble. Blake’s organization creates an environment in which each participant can have a unique musical experience in a professional setting without a sense of “tokenism” or feeling as if they are “other.”

Tonality’s members join its ranks based on referrals or personal connections. “Because Tonality is committed to social justice, it is essential that our singers are passionate about those issues.” Blake envisions Tonality as a “visual representation” of the greater Los Angeles community, which adds a greater responsibility to ensure commensurate racial and ethnic diversity.

Mosaic

Aurora, Illinois

Seth Durbin, Director and

Alyx McCain, Assistant Director

<http://www.wvhsmusic.org/mosaic.html>



Mosaic is an ensemble of 120-140 students based out of Waubonsie Valley High School that focuses primarily on world and gospel music. The ensemble frequently performs for school events and collaborates with organizations throughout the Chicago metropolitan area, including the Chicago Sinfonietta, a professional orchestra dedicated to modeling and promoting diversity, in-

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clusion, and both racial and cultural equity in the arts. Mosaic also serves as a frequent featured performer at the House of Blues in Chicago.

In 1996, Waubonsie Valley High School High School administration charged the director to begin a new ensemble that would increase the interest of the students of color in the school. The director formed the Unity Chorus (now called Mosaic) with the mission of only performing world music while placing a special emphasis on African American gospel and simultaneously celebrating the diversity of the student body.

Students audition for Mosaic each fall by singing one minute of any song they choose. Durbin says the repertoire he and Mosaic's assistant director, Alyx McCain, may experience during the audition process ranges anywhere from musical theater to pop to classical Indian music. "Ms. McCain and I are extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to explore many different cultures through Mosaic's repertoire. Through contemporary gospel music, South African folk songs, filmi (Indian popular music from films), and other various styles, the students of Mosaic learn about music and life from around the world."

VOX Femina

Los Angeles, California

Iris S. Levine, Founder and Artistic Director

<http://www.voxfemina.org/>



Iris Levine founded Vox Femina nineteen years ago with the simple goal: give women voice. They do so by performing quality choral music written for women's voices. Diverse in culture, age, race, belief, and sexual identity, VOX Femina is a chorus committed to commissioning new works and raising awareness about issues

that affect them as a family of women. Through music, they aim to create a world that affirms the worth and dignity of every person.

Since its inception, the choir strives first and foremost for quality music sung beautifully and artistically. Levine considers repertoire selection as her most important work and spends much of her time creating engaging programs that align with the mission and are appropriate for the ensemble. Her singers come to the ensemble through word of mouth, their website, and referrals from voice teachers, conductors, and friends. Auditions consist of a music audition and an interview with one of the group's governing committees.

The choir has grown to an organization with a governing board, a part-time office assistant, a part-time executive director, an artistic director, an assistant conductor fellow, and a contracted production assistant. They maintain a subscription series and have performed over 200 times throughout the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Highlights include performances at ACDA national and regional conferences and collaborations with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Women's Orchestra, and the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles.

Giving Voice Chorus

Edina, Minnesota

Mary Lenard and Marge Ostroushko, Co-Presidents

Jeanie Brindley-Barnett, Director

<https://givingvoicechorus.org/>



Mary Lenard had worked in the Alzheimer's field for ten years when she saw a report on cognitive improvement for persons afflicted with the disease after just four months of singing familiar songs. She called Marge

Ostroushko, a veteran of public radio and music production, with the idea of collaborating on some sort of project involving people with dementia and ensemble music making. “We both had parents with Alzheimer’s,” says Lenard, “and there was emerging research about the impact of music on people with Alzheimer’s.” The result was the Giving Voice Chorus, an organization dedicated to providing an artistic outlet to those living with Alzheimer’s who live outside of care facilities, and therefore typically have fewer opportunities to socialize and be creative. The ensemble commenced rehearsals under director Jeanie Brindley-Barnett in 2014 with just thirty participants, but since that time membership has swelled to over 100 singers.

Members of Giving Voice join the ensemble based on word of mouth and referrals. Prior to this, Lenard and Ostroushko worked with the Alzheimer’s Association, adult day centers, caregiver organizations, faith communities, and other dementia-friendly initiatives to identify

potential singers. Lenard is careful to note that these are individuals who are in the early to moderate stages of dementia and are not yet in assisted living or memory care. Giving Voice provides support for individuals with lessening sight, mobility, and memory issues, and has a staff of trained volunteers on call to assist with communication and behavior strategies.

Brindley-Barnett selects a theme for Giving Voice’s concerts and allows members to suggest repertoire based around that theme. The concert program ultimately comes from the singers themselves, and frequently they are provided the opportunity during a performance to introduce the works and discuss the significance of their choices. The ensemble performs at least twice per year and, as Lenard states, “Our key performance goal is to show off to our children, grandchildren, and friends that there is real joy and courage after an Alzheimer’s diagnosis.”



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Pihcintu Multicultural Chorus

Portland, Maine

Con Fullam, Founder and Director

<http://pihcintu.org/>



In the early 2000s, Con Fullam learned of the growing community of families from war-torn countries that were immigrating to Portland, Maine, in search of new lives. The children of these families faced many challenges upon their arrival, including the acquisition of English language skills. In the process of adjusting to a new country, Fullam wanted to ensure that the daughters in these families retained their own voices by providing a musical community that was a safe space to share their stories and seek solace in sisterhood.

The repertoire for this ensemble utilizes texts that speak to the choristers' experiences, and the pieces tend to convey messages of harmony, understanding, and peace. Often, repertoire is co-written by the chorus members and their director. The ensemble is committed to telling the stories of its singers, including the accomplishments of the group's alumni. Since its inception, all of its members have graduated from high school, and 85% have matriculated to colleges and universities.

Administered by Fullam and a handful of volunteers, the Pihcintu Multicultural Chorus is expanding to include other full-time employees. The young women in the ensemble are chosen by audition, but the organization seldom rejects any potential member based on vocal skills. There is currently a waiting list for the ensemble due to transportation challenges that limit the group to thirty members.

Since its inception, the choir has reached many audience members through public performances and even more through public media, with numerous appearances on national and local radio and television programs.

But the most important task of the ensemble is to provide support for the unique needs of the singers in the ensemble, most notably that of adjusting to their new life circumstances. As their director states, "All of the members form a solid and continuing bond that they pass on to all new members, making sure that their needs and concerns are addressed."

UBUNTU, KUJI and Hope Thru Harmony Prison Choirs

Cathy Roma, Founder and Director

London, Marion and Dayton, Ohio

[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FptOztQbK-o&t=11s)

[watch?v=FptOztQbK-o&t=11s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FptOztQbK-o&t=11s)



The UBUNTU, KUJI, and Hope Thru Harmony Prison Choirs were started by Cathy Roma after her first prison choir at the Warren Correctional Institution came to an end after twenty-three successful years. Under an umbrella organization of MATA (Music, Arts, and Theater Academy in Ohio Prisons) that Roma created, the choirs are supported through Wilmington College and through grants and donations.

UBUNTU and KUJI, both men's choirs, seek to perform diverse repertoire from a wide array of styles and genres, including works created by the men in the ensembles and pieces that combine rap and choral singing. Hope Thru Harmony Women's Choir at Dayton Correctional Facility is composed of twenty-four inside and fourteen outside singers. Their mission is to sing a diverse repertoire focused on works by women composers—music with texts that speak to the lives of women and world music. Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Rosephanye Powell, and Mollie Stone have recently visited the Day-

ton Correctional Institute to work with the choir on their own compositions and traditional music.

Roma seeks to create choral singing communities within the walls of the prison. She does this through steady and frequent communication with her singers, and she engages them in open conversations regarding issues that are unique to the choir's setting. She wants her singers to understand that "working together toward a goal is one of the most rewarding experiences." She recognizes that "learning to focus and develop listening skills, learning to appreciate music from other cultures, and learning how to relate to one another in a loving way leads to better music making." Their performance schedule includes prison functions and celebrations to mark Martin Luther King Day and Women's History Month.

VOX: A Choir for Social Change

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Jack Bennet, Artistic Director

<http://dontbeafraidcampaign.org/music/>



After a hateful attack left Scott Jones paralyzed from the waist down, he started the Don't BE Afraid anti-homophobia/transphobia campaign and subsequently formed VOX: A Choir for Social Change. Since its inception, the choir has been guided by the mission of the Don't BE Afraid Campaign: to use art and creative expression to have an open and honest conversation about homophobia/transphobia. Over time, the choir has extended their mission to include other forms of discrimination/societal issues such as rape culture and misogyny, mental health, and sexual positivity.

Though the choir's structure and organization continues to evolve based on feedback from choristers, it maintains committed to reimagining how a choir can be structured, developing mechanisms for collective decision making to move the choir away from a hierarchical approach. Their facilitation group comprises members interested in guiding the activities on each year's theme through activities and conversations—ultimately helping

the choir contextualize the music it performs in relation to the messaging. In general terms, the music selected is either directly related to the theme or can be paired with it through contextualization done by spoken words, personal reflections, or speakers.

All members of VOX are auditioned to observe musical skills and are interviewed to gauge their understanding of the choir's mission and whether their goals for participation match the collective goals of the organization. The varied levels of musical experience represented in its membership and various levels of comfort members have while discussing social issues are managed by creating supports within VOX, such as a buddy system and opportunities to participate in informal rehearsals to practice choral parts. The group often collaborates with other choirs in the Nova Scotia area and brings in facilitators who lead workshops that take choral participants into the heart of each topic. VOX strives to give performances that balance musical excellence with a powerful social message.

(At the time of this publication, VOX has officially closed its chapter and a new organization has been formed: Choirs for Change. Jack Bennet will lead this new iteration of choirs for social change.)

An advertisement for "CHOR TEACH". On the left, the text "CHOR TEACH" is displayed in blue, with a stylized blue figure of a person with arms raised above the word "TEACH". Below this, the text "Practical Teaching Ideas for Today's Music Educator" is written in black. At the bottom left, the website "www.acda.org" is shown in red. On the right side of the advertisement is a photograph of a smiling woman with long brown hair and glasses, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and holding a blue folder.

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Highbridge Voices

Bronx, New York

Mary Clementi, Executive Director and Music Director

<https://www.highbridgevoices.org/>



Serving young choristers in the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx, Highbridge Voices provides a culture of excellence through a comprehensive music curriculum and academic enrichment. Over 150 students ages 9–18 are placed in one of two choirs after an audition process that includes a musical portion, a short reading passage, and math survey. All accepted students qualify for free/reduced lunch at their schools, and all who attend Highbridge Voices do so with a 100% scholarship. Highbridge Voices has operated as a tuition-free program for fifteen years.

Unlike most community children's choir organizations, participants in Highbridge Voices attend the program five days per week, three hours per day, for thirty-three weeks, corresponding with the school calendar. Choral singing and music education are at the core of the organization; students attend choir rehearsals, music theory class, voice lessons, and music history class. Mary Clementi states that this rigorous musical foundation "can lead to improved academic and social outcomes," and can "serve as a springboard for teaching students self-discipline, teamwork, and character development." In addition to the music component, students participating in Highbridge Voices receive math and English language arts instruction to reinforce the NYC public schools curriculum. For older choristers, academics include Regents preparation and homework assistance, and students in grades 11-12 participate in SAT preparation sessions and receive college application assistance.

Singers in Highbridge Voices show success in myriad

ways. Their fifteen to twenty annual performances include high-profile events, including singing at Yankee Stadium, performing for the US Supreme Court justices, and working with recording artists will.i.am and Wale. Academically, Highbridge choristers outpace their peers in District 9 by nearly double in the New York state standardized math exams and nearly triple in the English arts. Of the forty-one students who have completed the program since 2006, nearly 90 percent have gone on to college or enlisted in the military. Clementi is committed to this combination of music study and academic study. "Together, the music and academic programs give students the tools, support, and incentive to achieve success."

Chorosynthesis Singers

Seattle, Washington

Wendy Moy and Jeremiah Selvey, Co-Artistic Directors

<http://chorosynthesis.org>



Chorosynthesis was founded in 2010 as a nonprofit arts organization existing to discover innovative methods of facilitating a greater relevance of choral music in a world that is becoming increasingly socially conscious yet decreasingly artistically aware. Their first collaborative performance project, a 2011 performance of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, yielded the creation of a permanent professional ensemble: the Chorosynthesis Singers.

"We perform project-based concert programs in a variety of civic and church venues," says co-director Jeremiah Selvey. "We connect with the community by performing high school choir exchanges at local high schools and hosting and performing in a symposium on

the future of choral music through the lens of innovation in composition and socially conscious subject matter.”

In a unique take on the meaning of the word “diversity,” Selvey states, “Our ensemble is about diversity in a broader sense. [...] The look of our choir is not as important to us as diversity of heart.” He goes on to say that “unlike many ensembles with a focus on diversity, the needs of our ensemble members come less from a unified experience and more from a place of being a professional musician and looking for ways to make a difference in the world while putting bread on the table.”

Selvey and co-director Wendy Moy endeavor to bridge the gap between the traditional western repertoire of many professional choirs and subject matter that

may be relevant to the individual who does not typically attend choral concerts. As a result, they select their repertoire based around a socially conscious theme. The topics addressed include animal rights, voting rights and access, and environmental rights, among others. Because traditional choral music does not typically address these issues, the music that the Chorosynthesis Singers performs comes from a call for scores. “We have received more than 250 scores from around the world among three calls. We prioritize scores that are new or never performed, that represent the highest level of composition construction.” 



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