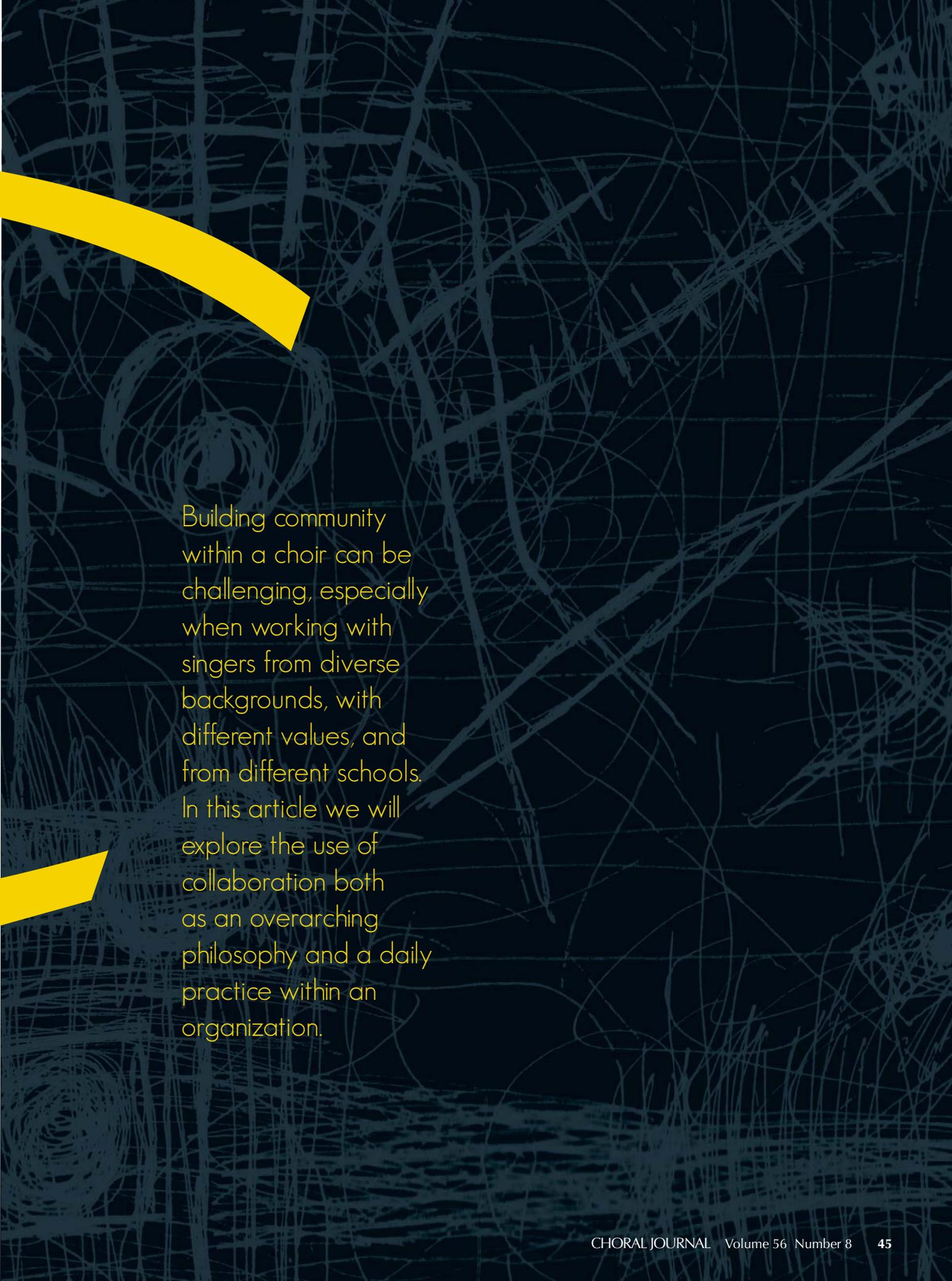


*The Better C:*  
Building Community  
through Collaboration

Roberta Q. Jackson and Debra D. Burgess

Roberta Q. Jackson and Debra D. Burgess  
Co-conductors, Portland Symphonic Girlchoir  
2015 Recipient ASCAP/Chorus America Award for Adventurous Programming



Building community within a choir can be challenging, especially when working with singers from diverse backgrounds, with different values, and from different schools. In this article we will explore the use of collaboration both as an overarching philosophy and a daily practice within an organization.

# The Better C: Building Community through Collaboration

To better understand this challenge and how to deal with it, we must begin with the definitions for community and collaboration. Community is defined as a group of people, a neighborhood, or kinship. Collaboration is defined as teamwork, partnership, group effort, association, alliance, relationship, and cooperation. Community in musical organizations can also be defined as a means to excellence and a more effective way to share the power of music, transforming singers into one entity, able to delight, inspire, and challenge the world of people who share the experience of their music making. Whether conducting a youth choir, college ensemble, or adult church or community choir, building community among a diverse group of singers can be one of the major challenges facing directors. Collaboration is one of the most effective ways to build community.

## Benefits of Collaboration

Working together toward musical excellence and the joy of performance benefits not only the singers and conductors in the ensemble but all associated with the journey, whether it be other musicians associated with the music making, volunteers, families, audiences, and those listening to the music in a recorded format. Music enhances all who encounter it and can change how we live our lives.

Empowering singers to make decisions regarding the selection, learning, and performing of the music and sharing the responsibilities and risks involved enhances their growth as musicians and allows for the shared ownership of the product of music making. From the first read of a piece of music through many performances, when singers are able to contribute their excellence and ideas, the product is enriched by the wealth of contributions. The whole is greater than the parts. The more parts you have, the more the whole is enhanced. A collaborative philosophy thrives on a sense of partnership yet increases individual ownership. Collaboration enhances the worldview of an individual and of a community. When you contribute a part of yourself to create something beautiful, you become a part of something greater than yourself. Collaboration promotes valuing and accepting the ideas and contributions of others.

## Competition Undermines Collaboration

Choral singing is the ultimate collaborative activity. Singers breathe together, unite their voices, collectively express ideas, and produce a product that can only be created together. While there is a place for healthy competition based on the desire to build and improve the choir's musical abilities, a strict focus solely on competition produces winners versus losers and promotes an "us versus them" mentality among the singers and, sometimes, directors. Competition as a contest does not reflect the artistic spirit of creativity and the love and passion for what we do but rather can reduce a beautiful performance to a race that must be won. Valuing competition over collaboration diminishes the collective spirit of artistic engagement and negatively affects each member and, ultimately, the final performance by the choir.

Competition often dismantles self-confidence and undermines the ensemble's collective sense of self. It is not a truly viable evaluation of the choir's artistic ability but rather the opinion, despite it being knowledgeable or expert, of several judges. The "in the moment" glow of winning is overshadowed by the inherent suggestion that all other choirs are somehow less valuable. Sadly, singers are the true losers when competition is the "end all, be all" focus for the entire season or the year. Collaboration is always "win-win." When choirs work together, the results are greater for all involved, and this type of collaboration promotes mutual respect and appreciation for all. Most importantly, it produces more joyous rehearsals and performances with the mutual goal of experiencing the lifelong value of musical excellence.

## Creating Community

Community is created when each singer is empowered as a young artist, when singers are allowed and encouraged to contribute to the artistic process, when singer mentorship within and between ensembles is promoted, and when mutual singer encouragement in rehearsal and performance is expected. Artistic leadership utilizing collaboration between directors also models and demonstrates collaboration, which builds community. Collaboration within an organization may include authorizing and encouraging volunteer leadership to utilize their individual skills, promoting use of co-coordinators

for each choir, and utilizing every volunteer who signs up to help, strengthening the sense of ownership and responsibility among the adults involved. In many organizations, parents are expected to volunteer. Tools such as VolunteerSpot for concert support make volunteering more accessible to a broader spectrum, is more easily tracked and implemented, and results in a greater sense of connection with the organization, which promotes the collaborative philosophy throughout the specific community and beyond.

### Attributes of Collaborators

To build a choir community with collaboration as a strong element of your mission, the leadership must be willing to share power, share responsibility, share the credit, and take risks. Collaborators are self-assured in their beliefs, confident in their skills, comfortable with “give and take,” life-long learners, open to new ideas,

willing to listen, and capable of trusting and exhibiting mutual respect.

### Collaboration as a Part of Core Values and Organizational DNA

When a choir’s mission statement includes collaboration as a philosophy to build community, it insures that the governing body of the choir values and protects that concept in all aspects of the organization. In this philosophical vein, when a singer joins the choir, whether as a kindergartener beginning this exciting journey in the youngest choir or as a high school singer in the oldest choir, each begins and continues the journey as a member of the choir as a whole. When membership in an ensemble is based on age and grade, the journey through the organization is a natural one each singer makes, surrounded by the singers they have sung with throughout their tenure. In this model, each singer’s gifts and skills

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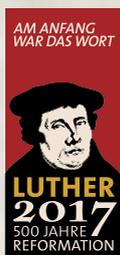
are appreciated and each ensemble is valued equally, demonstrated by having all ensembles featured as their own entity and also as the combined choirs in concert.

It is not enough for the artistic staff to model and espouse a collaborative philosophy. It is critical that all staff members are team players who support the organization's mission and values without a personal agenda, and, when interacting with parents, supporters, and audience members, demonstrate their support by being respectful, welcoming, and encouraging of other staff and board members. Negative attitudes undermine and can even derail the growth of the organization. Conversely, collaboration nurtures all organizational aspects.

## Collaborative Artistic Leadership

One leadership style demonstrating teamwork is the co-conductor model: directors who share the same phi-

losophy of music education and whose approaches are complementary but not identical. While not for everyone, this model also opens up the concept of collaboratively leading in conjunction with other conductors in the organization. Rather than a pyramid style of leadership, this model involves leading in a co-fashion, which can be very successful. It promotes and demonstrates collaboration, models problem solving when dealing with differing views, demonstrates that two or more views can be better than one, and teaches how to listen musically and also to each other. The active listening skills involved in this process also improve the overall listening skills needed to become an excellent musician. When differences of opinion about how to proceed, how to solve a musical problem, or what to rehearse next are negotiated and worked out in rehearsal, singers learn that by listening to the other person and being willing to compromise, a better result or outcome occurs. It also demonstrates that the needs of the



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group and the music itself are paramount and that leaders must always keep that as their ultimate focus. One might also use this collaborative approach with accompanists, student leaders within the choir, and parent volunteers in the rehearsal.

### **Collaborative Procedures: Solo Clinics and Solo Auditions, Mentoring, and Interactive Choir Rehearsals**

#### **Interactive Choir Rehearsals**

By sharing the responsibility for music to be learned and performed, singers are empowered as young artists, regardless of age. Regularly soliciting singer input in all ensembles as to what places in the music need attention, appropriate dynamics and tempo fixes, and insight into the text engages each singer as a partner in the exploration and discovery of the music and music making. It may also strengthen a singer's ownership in the choir process and his or her desire to continue with the organization from year to year. When a singer's identity involves being part of a group of people dedicated to making excellent music every week, in every rehearsal, and with "performance" defined as every time you sing together, each singer's musical prowess grows individually and contributes significantly to the ongoing process and the strength of the music being made.

#### **Mentoring**

Organizations with multiple-leveled ensembles can utilize older singers to volunteer to help with the younger choirs in their rehearsals with such activities as the beginning organization of their music binders and the initial learning involved with reading an octavo. This concept can be developed into a mentoring program with regular hours and can benefit not only the younger students in many ways but also the mentors, who are able to accrue needed volunteer hours for their schools and organizations. The benefits to the choir organization include more time spent on rehearsal rather than the logistics of using music, assistance in leading part singing, modeling solfège and rhythm reading, and modeling other music reading readiness tools and the season's repertoire. This activity

promotes a deeper connection between choirs and the vision of choir as an ongoing, lifelong endeavor.

#### **Solo Clinics and Solo Auditions**

Offering seasonal solo clinics that focus on the process of preparing for an audition for concert solos is another method to focus the choir on solo performance in a collaborative manner. By explaining the procedures of auditioning from the perspective of both the singer and the directors and allowing singers to have the experience of auditioning in a "mock audition" setting, these clinics demystify the auditioning process. They also prepare the singers for the audition and provide a supportive environment in auditions. Encouraging singers to applaud each other at the end of each song's solo audition reinforces the "us" rather than the "me" view and alleviates much of the anxiety always present in auditions. Creative "soloing" opportunities such as announcing or reading in concerts and playing accompanying instruments is another way to give more singers a more active role in the choir, encouraging ownership in rehearsal and performance.

#### **Types of Collaborations**

1) Hosting a workshop and culminating concert focusing on the works of a renowned guest composer gives area school choirs, music and choral teachers, and singers from the sponsoring choir the opportunity to work with a recognized living composer, perform several of that composer's works under her or his leadership, and make music with other choirs. Working with a composer is a unique experience that gives young singers firsthand knowledge and insight into the composer's technique, personality, and compositions. Sponsoring this opportunity for area schools and their choral directors who might otherwise not have the resources to provide a similar experience makes it an ideal form of community outreach easily grantable for the sponsoring organization. It is a positive experience, making a unique opportunity available when unachievable by an individual choir.

2) Joint commissions or consortium commissions offer greater opportunities than would be possible individually. Whether it is a Chorus America consortium commission

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or a joint commission of a major work such as a children's choral opera, each choir shares the creation of a new work and all that it involves. By sharing resources, it is possible to commission a larger work, yet each choir conceives its own production. Ideally, all key players, including the musical and stage directors, will embody the collaborative spirit.

3) Collaborating with distinctive local choirs, such as an intergenerational choir or other adult choirs, provides the opportunity to hear their members, who ages span the generations, celebrating the joy of singing. Hearing choirs such as these inspires younger singers to keep singing. In shared concerts, the guest choir can perform a "solo" set and then the choirs combine to sing the finale together, creating a unique experience for singers and the audience. Other formats also are viable, including collaborating to perform a major work, and is a memorable experience

from the first vision to the final concert.

4) Performing with a professional orchestra can be an amazing experience for choristers. Seeing young choristers sharing the stage with the orchestra for children's concerts gives the younger audience members a sense of connection with the performers and inspires them to also want to perform. One unique example of this type of collaboration is a Halloween concert featuring entertaining repertoire sung by choristers performing in costume and singers leading members of the audience on a "safari" through the orchestra as it plays appropriately "scary" classical works.

5) Consider collaborating with a youth ballet company whose dancers parallel your singers' ages. Performing with other young artists who are equally passionate about their art will inspire your choristers. The ballet company's artis-

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tic director can choreograph choral works for your choir to perform jointly with the dance company. Audiences find this type of collaboration fascinating and engaging.

### **Adjudication, Touring, and Commissioning as Collaboration**

Experiencing the work and performances of other choirs and directors should be a critical part of any choir's vision and practice; it results in the artistic bar being raised, both from hearing and experiencing the work of other choirs, and enjoying the privilege of working with other gifted conductors or composers.

Participating in adjudicated festivals and receiving feedback can be useful, invigorating, and inspiring. Attending festivals often requires a choir to tour to different areas of a region, country, or the world, and this opens a global perspective for individual singers and the choir community. Traveling as a choir adds a new dimension to collaboration because singers are challenged to be flexible and creative on and off the stage, uniting the choir organization in a unique way. The artistic experience enhances the choir's musical skill and individual connections are strengthened into lasting friendships. As touring expands the choir's vision to a global one, it also creates a sense of community with other choir organizations throughout the country and the world.

In similar fashion, commissioning—authorizing the composing of a new work for a choir—can often involve not only the composer but also collaboration with the choir's singers, who may provide text ideas, poems, stories, or artwork that may inspire the composer as he or she conceives and composes the piece. Meeting with the composer before the work is begun or completed can also enhance the composer's knowledge and understanding of the choir's personality and give he or she a clearer picture of the music they are writing. Bringing the commissioned composer for the premiere of the new work can be exciting for the singers and the entire organization as well, giving the composer a chance to hear the work brought to life. Including a time for questions and answers for the singers also gives them access to hearing from a living composer regarding the process and details pertaining to their choir's own piece, and this interaction enriches the singers' understanding of the work and the compos-

ing process in general. It also plants seeds for choristers to become composers themselves. For example, Amy C. Burgess has written original music and lyrics for stage productions such as "Show Me Real" for the Clare Cook Dance Theater; choral works for various schools, and commissioned works for the girlchoir in which she sang for six years, where her love of composing music was encouraged.

If commissioning is beyond the scope of your choir's budget, participating in a consortium commission, such as those offered by Chorus America, gives an affordable alternative so that your singers can experience a new work written just for them. Often, composers express that it is important to ask them what the financial commitment will be, because it might be surprising to learn that it is more affordable than you originally thought. Commissioning new music can be an important element of enhancing singers' creativity in bringing a new work to life and is equally important to perpetuating the life and importance of choral music in our world today. The process is enhanced by having the composer come and experience the choral community, listening to the ideas and desires of the singers in relation to the commissioned composition and the directors' own parameters.

Allowing each choir to be part of annual commissions, either individually or and as a combined choir, gives each singer a feeling of ownership and pride in the final product. Each composer can become a part of your choral community as their music lives through the choir and into the greater community of artists and audiences. Participating in continuing education opportunities, such as the Choral Music Experience Institute with its founder, Doreen Rao, who annually features one or more guest composers, can inspire directors to commission and gives them the opportunity and privilege to work with many excellent composers. In recognition of frequent commissioning and excellent performance of works written in the past twenty-five years, ASCAP/Chorus America annually presents the Award for Adventurous Programming.

### **A Collaborative Philosophy Fosters Increased Volunteer Participation**

Choral organizations with few paid staff positions generally utilize parents or volunteers in a myriad of leader-

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ship positions, such as choir coordinator(s) for each choir, house manager, volunteer coordinator, store manager, uniform coordinator, grant team, PR committee, music library team, and riser facilitator. Being closely involved in the operations of the choir unites volunteers with paid staff to do the work of the choir.

The board of directors is the other key volunteer group. An involved, inspired group of board members with a strong connection to the choir's mission expands the organization's community growth. Being personally connected to the choir, whether as an alumni, current singer parent, alumni parent, or community member, gives board members the impetus to go out into the community and find the resources to allow the choir to be sustainable today and beyond. Having a congenial meeting atmosphere is also conducive to creating a friendly and welcoming environment for volunteers and staff working together.

Using creative aspects of collaboration reaps rewarding benefits for all involved.

## Increasing Your Donor Base through Collaboration

The more connected parents, audience members, and community partners are to the choir, the greater the potential for their financial support. Encouraging those who have the means to contribute the gap between what tuition provides and the actual costs of educating each singer is achieved in direct proportion to a donor's level of connectedness to the choir, its mission, and its artistic product. Participation in fundraisers is also greatly enhanced and repeated when potential donors feel a part of the choir. Engaging community partners by including personal invitations and complimentary tickets to concerts and events



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increases their sense of connectedness to the organization and demonstrates the value of their donor participation. While not the primary motivation for utilizing a collaborative philosophy, this is a welcome by-product.

### **Challenges of Collaboration**

The challenges of collaboration include giving up power and sharing ownership of ideas, products, and outcomes. Collaboration takes more time, which needs to be built into the schedule for planning rehearsals and concerts. It is sometimes difficult to meld differing points of view into a constructive outcome. Sometimes it is necessary to give up an idea and concede to your collaborator's idea for the common good. It can also be difficult to maintain a balance of stage time between the performing groups or choirs. There may be a difference of opinion between directors as to how the performance should sound or look. However, the challenges of collaboration can be met and surmounted if each party believes in and values its mutual benefits.

Collaboration begins with each person in the community knowing that their personal contribution will be honored and that their opinions and suggestions will be welcomed and considered. Mutual respect and a sincere desire to make things work for the good of the choir and the organization are two cornerstones of successful collaboration.

### **Conclusion**

Focusing on the collective strengths and appreciating the unique contributions of each choir's individual singers, while valuing teamwork at all levels and within all aspects of the organization provides the foundation for a collaborative spirit. Being willing to take risks and try procedures and activities that foster cooperation are also part of the underpinning of this philosophy.

The ultimate reason for embracing collaboration is found in the words of singers who have experienced this philosophy and embrace it. Alumni who have been involved in a collaborative choir program say it best:

“Above all, our choir is music, and not just the notes on the page; it is the music born from each

life made a little brighter, each friendship made that much stronger, and every singer here falling in love with singing over and over again, an infinity...born from perfect harmonies.”

“I'm writing because I've been thinking a lot recently about how my choir experience influenced the things I'm now pursuing as an adult, primarily my slam poetry and social justice activism. In many ways, I learned more about community power, and art as an agent of social change, from the choir than I did anywhere else ... After being away for a few years, I feel I am now able to articulate why exactly choir was so important to me, and I want to help spread the word.”

“A small crystal box is presented to graduating seniors of the choir at their final concert. I have yet to receive it; but it has been in my mind's eye since joining as a shy eight-year-old. The box stands for perseverance and countless hours of rehearsal. Appearing empty, it is overflowing. It is the resting place of memories...The box is a testament to collaboration among my directors from whom I received guidance and support. It is not about the physical beauty of the object. It is about everything it represents and those who enabled me to become who I am. It will be among the most meaningful gifts of my life.”

In conclusion, we believe that the most meaningful moments of our singers' lives are those embracing collaboration to build community through the excellence of choral singing. We believe we are creating peacemakers and world changers by allowing the artistry of each member of the choral community to grow and blossom individually in a choir's safe space while they challenge us to change and grow with them. We believe all choir organizations that embrace collaboration enable and encourage singers to inspire change by the power of their collective voice. 