



CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

Why Choruses See Major Anniversaries as Major Opportunities

North American choruses are anticipating a wave of major anniversaries in the coming years, and their leaders are hard at work preparing to mark the occasions. The most thoughtful celebrations honor a chorus's past achievements, while laying the groundwork for an even stronger future.

BY DON LEE

Brace yourself. In the choral music world, the next decade could be party time. In just five years, the average age among North American choruses will be 50, according to findings from Chorus America's latest Operations Survey. Which suggests that big, round-numbered birthdays are on the horizon for lots and lots of choruses.

It almost goes without saying that anniversaries like the 40th or 50th are worth celebrating. But worthwhile celebrations don't happen without

thoughtful discussion and careful planning. The leaders of the long-lived organizations interviewed for this article have found that anniversary observances become most meaningful when they reinforce a chorus's reason for being, when they inspire self-examination, and when they help to lay a foundation for the future.

From Then to Now

In 1968 Philip Brunelle founded VocalEssence, then called the Plymouth Music Series, at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis "with the idea that it would go on forever"—a rather audacious notion, especially at the time. Back then, choruses like his didn't enjoy a large peer group. "Fifty and 100 years ago, the vast majority of choruses were found in the churches and in the schools," he says. With some notable exceptions (like Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, founded in 1815), choruses functioning outside of churches and schools in the 1960s and '70s had not come close to ►



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Top: Several Chanticleer alumni, including four who sang in the ensemble's first concert in 1978, joined current singers during the 40th anniversary celebration in October. Second from top: In their season-opening concert, members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus debuted new costumes created by Yuka Uehara of Tokyo Gamine to mark the ensemble's 40th anniversary. Second from bottom: Conductor Albert McNeil and the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers are celebrating their 50th anniversary this year. Bottom: VocalEssence opened its 50th anniversary season in October with a concert recalling milestone performances from the ensemble's history.

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those major milestones. The most familiar examples, observes music historian Thomas Kelly, were “that kind of personality-centered chorus named for the director: Gregg Smith, Roger Wagner...” Kelly points out that it is more challenging for a chorus that is so strongly identified with its founder to reach a 40th or 50th anniversary. “There’s a risk to an institution in being associated with a single personality.”

The year 1968 also brought the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts, which some observers believe helped change the arts funding climate in the United States. The ‘60s and ‘70s were “a time of creative ferment,” says Chanticleer general director Christine Bullin. She believes the establishment of the NEA contributed to “a climate of receptivity, of people encouraging artists” that helped choruses and other cultural organizations find their footing. Indeed, Chorus America was established in 1978 largely to ensure that choruses had a place at the NEA table. “It’s really something to contemplate the society that made all that possible,” Bullin says. The growth of the choral field since those early days is reason in itself to celebrate. But the value choruses draw from anniversary celebrations goes beyond that.

A Time to Celebrate Who We Are

Simply put, celebrating an anniversary “allows people to understand why you exist,” says Brunelle. He started VocalEssence to give audiences in the Twin Cities an opportunity to hear choral music beyond the “10 or 12 warhorses” commonly performed. “That theme in the first season, bringing music that was not common to people’s attention, has never changed,” he says. For the current season, Brunelle commissioned a new Christmas piece from composer Nico Muhly, and the anniversary season finale will feature the Midwest premiere of *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, music by Minnesota’s own Bob Dylan “reimagined” by arranger Steve Hackman for chorus, strings, piano, and guitar. The season opened with a retrospective concert that paid tribute to past composer-collaborators,

including Aaron Copland, William Bolcom, Libby Larsen, and Dominick Argento.

Anniversaries are also a chance to call attention to mission-driven efforts that may seldom enjoy the spotlight. “Some people think only of performances, but we want people to know what our education program is too,” says Bullin. Among Chanticleer’s initiatives are an in-school workshop program that originated in 1986 and a more recent after-school honor choir. Bullin notes that the organization’s educational component “has a philanthropic value—more so in many minds than the tons of performances that we do.” Representing its educational commitment, Chanticleer spent the first three weeks of its anniversary season visiting 25 San Francisco public schools.

The mission and the very existence of the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus are intertwined with the history of the LGBTQ choral movement. The group gave its first public performance on the steps of San Francisco City Hall following the November 1978 assassination of openly gay city supervisor Harvey Milk. “That profound moment became a spark,” says SFGMC executive director Chris Verdugo. “It ignited a movement.”

From the beginning, the SFGMC took its leadership role within that movement seriously. In 1981, it scheduled a fundrais-

ing concert in San Francisco’s St. Ignatius Church to support a tour that intended, says Verdugo, to plant seeds for similar choruses in places like Dallas, Indianapolis, and Detroit. But when the archbishop heard about the plan, he cancelled the concert, saying (in Verdugo’s words), “There’s no way we’re letting gay men sing” in St. Ignatius. The chorus sued and won a monetary settlement, but the concert was not rescheduled.

At the time Verdugo and his colleagues were making plans for this year’s anniversary, the pastor of St. Ignatius—initially unaware of the conflict 37 years ago—asked if the SFGMC might want to perform there. After learning the history, the pastor invited the chorus to perform an anniversary concert in the church, and despite backlash from some members of the Catholic community, the current archbishop did not stand in the way. In fact, he sent the singers a letter that the pastor read to the chorus just before the October 26 concert, welcoming them to the church and expressing gratitude for the gift of art that they share with the community. “In that moment for me and I think for a lot of people, especially those handful of singers who were present in 1981, that was the moment where there was redemption,” Verdugo says.

The Toronto-based Nathaniel Dett Chorale came into being 20 years ago to ►



The Nathaniel Dett Chorale and founder/artistic director Brainerd Blyden-Taylor (center) are celebrating their 20th anniversary this season.

champion “Afrocentric” music of all styles. For an organization like that to have made it this far is “significant,” says founder and artistic director Brainerd Blyden-Taylor. He remembers composer Moses Hogan, a member of his advisory board in the group’s early days, saying to him, “You know you’re crazy, right? You know you’re one of maybe a handful of these groups worldwide trying to do what you’re doing?” Blyden-Taylor started the ensemble precisely because he felt someone needed to call attention not just to spirituals and gospel, but to a broader range of Afrocentric repertoire including classical, jazz, folk, blues, and more.

In naming the chorus, Blyden-Taylor did not want to draw attention to himself, but rather to “the work that we were doing and to honor someone.” His research led him to the prominent Black composer, pianist, and teacher R. Nathaniel Dett, who was born in Ontario in 1882. “I just became quite impressed with what he had been able to achieve in the early part of the 20th century, and felt this was a wonderful way to honor his work, his life, his legacy.” The Chorale began its anniversary season with a tribute to its namesake, which also marked the 75th anniversary of his death. Mindful of his goal of adding to the body of Afrocentric music, Blyden-Taylor says remaining concerts will focus on premieres, including a mini-oratorio for Christmas by composer-in-residence Stephen Newby.



At the 2017 Chorus America Conference in Los Angeles, President and CEO Catherine Dehoney presented Albert McNeil with a special honor recognizing his contributions to the choral field.

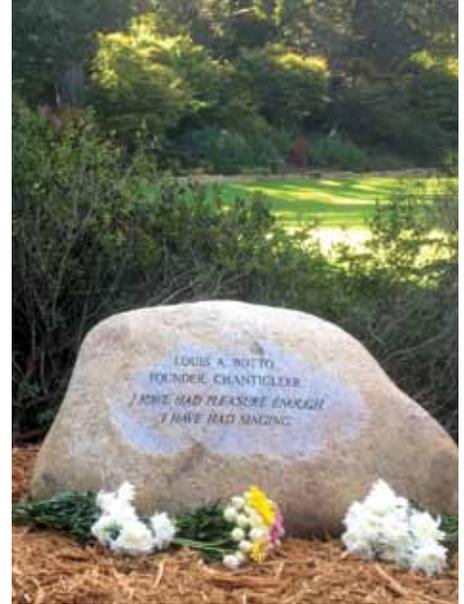
A Time to Celebrate the Shoulders We Stand On

“Maybe more important than anything else,” says Kara Dwyer, anniversary observances should recognize the contributions of present and past chorus members.

“Those are the people that care about the organization the most,” she says, “and celebrating the work that they have done validates their experience and the time that they spend.” Dwyer, who’s managing director of the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, says the chorus arranged to have former artistic director Jo-Michael Scheibe conduct the annual Summer Sing this year, and invited former chorus members back to sing, to attend an alumni reception, and to write down and share memories of their experiences in the ensemble.

The San Francisco Girls Chorus asked all of its former music directors to return for this season’s Christmas concert, says executive director Andrew Bradford. The SFGC is also introducing an award in honor of its founder, Elizabeth Appling, to recognize individuals who have made contributions to the chorus and the San Francisco arts community. And one of the chorus’s primary anniversary initiatives is an effort to reboot its alumni association. For a youth ensemble, alumni represent an especially “robust” opportunity to expand resources, he says, but the association has been dormant for several years. At age 40, the Chorus now has two generations of alumni, notes Bradford, and the benefits of staying connected are different for each of them. For older alumni, the focus will be engagement and opportunities to be involved as donors, Bradford says. For younger ones, the association will help in areas more relevant to their situation, such as internships or career and college admissions support.

By comparison, Chanticleer has far fewer alumni—over the past 40 years, about 120 men have sung with the ensemble—and, as adults, they won’t be alumni for nearly as long. Sadly, founder Louis Botto has already been gone for more than 20 years. In her anniversary planning, Bullin knew that the 40th anniversary offered a special opportunity. “At 40, there are people still around who’ve been with you since the beginning. I don’t want to be morbid, but not all of them may be here for the 50th. So the 40th is an important moment for us to capture our history, to remember why we started.”



Chanticleer honored founder Louis Botto during its 40th anniversary year with a memorial boulder at the National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco.

Verdugo expresses similar feelings. The anniversary celebration became “a really beautiful moment in our history to look back at those upon whose shoulders we stand,” he says. The AIDS pandemic that took Botto’s life began around the time the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus was founded, and claimed nearly 300 of its members. To honor them and members of other choruses who died from AIDS, the SFGMC broke ground on October 27 for an Artists Portal monument at the National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco. Nine days earlier, Chanticleer held a ceremony placing some of Botto’s ashes elsewhere in the Grove, near an inscribed memorial boulder.

A Time to Celebrate Supporters

And let’s not forget your audience members and patrons. As far as Bullin is concerned, the main thrust of Chanticleer’s anniversary message is “a gesture of appreciation for the people in the Bay Area who’ve been coming for years and years.” On June 27, 2018, exactly 40 years since its founding, Chanticleer sang for a group of longstanding supporters at an intimate fundraiser in the space where it made its debut, Old Mission Dolores in San Francisco. “It was a really lovely occasion in the presence of four of the original nine singers who sang the first concert,” Bullin says. Because Chanticleer’s support base now extends well beyond ▶

the Bay Area, the group has also scheduled a 52-performance world tour that “allows people in all these places who’ve been fans since way back when to participate in the anniversary and celebrate how far we’ve come,” Bullin says.

A major anniversary can be a major fundraising opportunity, and there’s no reason to be shy about it, says VocalEssence executive director Mary Ann Aufderheide.



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San Francisco mayor London Breed (right) made an appearance at Chanticleer’s 40th anniversary party in October.

“I had board members saying, ‘We only turn 50 once. You’ve got to take advantage of that.’ And you should. It’s a significant milestone.” Bradford goes even further. To his way of thinking, “any anniversary divisible by five is worthy of a fundraising initiative.”

Aufderheide says VocalEssence couched its campaign in the vision of creating extraordinary programming for its anniversary year. “It was a powerful message to say, ‘Make a gift to help us realize the dreams of the organization and of the founder in this 50th anniversary year.’ And they came through.” She says the chorus is also emphasizing major gifts and planned giving this year, with special attention to past and present singers and board members. In addition to re-engaging former singers via SFGC’s re-energized alumni association, Bradford plans to use the chorus’s 40th as a catalyst for “a mini-capital campaign” to renovate its home, the 106-year-old Kanbar Performing Arts Center.

A Time for Reflection

Amid all the event planning and celebrating, the leaders of these choruses have found it’s beneficial to pause and take stock. “People don’t live in a constant state of self-reflection,” notes Bullin, so an anniversary becomes an opportunity “for reminding people tomorrow is different than yesterday.” In preparing to commission a brief history of the group for its 40th anniversary program book, she spent considerable time going through old programs and videos. “It’s really worth thinking about why you started, how you started, why you stayed together, and who did all of that,” she says. While not big on the creation of strategic plans, Bullin recognizes that “it’s incumbent on me to lead the board and other stakeholders in putting the anniversary into context, and to assess the challenges of the next 40 years.”

Other organizations are more sanguine about strategic planning. The San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus is poised to announce a plan intended to position it “as a leader of LGBTQ choruses,” says Verdugo. Verdugo says the initiative will build on the organization’s 2017 Lavender Pen Tour of the American South, which was designed to promote community, understanding, and acceptance. “We took in the impact we were having in these communities and asked, ‘How do we amplify this?’” Verdugo says. He believes the effort “will redefine the SFGMC in this community and on a national and global scale.”

For Bradford, and for Dwyer in Tampa Bay, the anniversaries of their choruses have coincided with changes in artistic leadership. In Dwyer’s case that has meant postponing the strategic planning she would have launched had her previous artistic director remained. “The world doesn’t always go to plan,” she says, so now that new director Brett Karlin is in place, “I think we have to readdress most things in our organization to make sure we are all in line and all on the same page.” Valérie Sainte-Agathe’s assumption of a greater leadership role this season at the San Francisco Girls Chorus means their strategic planning involves “coming to understand her vision for the organization and then executing on that,” says Bradford. In particular, he sees an opportunity for the SFGC to build on the depth of its education program, which he believes is unique among

the many youth choruses in the Bay Area. “We’re friendly with all of them,” he says, “but we are also a business, so in a crowded field you have to differentiate yourself from your peers in some way.”

As much as anything else, it may be self-examination that has fueled the life expectancy of North American choruses over the past half-century. Reflection and strategic planning can equip even a founder-driven chorus such as VocalEssence to clarify and reinforce an identity distinct from that of its longtime leader. Leading up to the anniversary, “the focus of our work was on adaptive capacity,” says Aufderheide, “and changing ethos in a lot of ways. Especially in an organization that is founder-driven, you reach a point where it’s time to bring new voices in to change how you operate.” Brunelle says he plans to stay in his role as long as his health is good, but as strategizing began, he recognized the need for “a plan that would help us realize that the Twin Cities in 2018 is not the Twin Cities in 1969.” After wrestling over a way to talk about its work, especially the balance between community and concert work, the chorus adopted the tagline “together we sing.” It’s meant to describe a broader programming appeal, an effort to engage new audiences, and a desire to change the makeup of the chorus itself—all intended, says Aufderheide, “to better reflect the diversity of our state and our city.”

The 50th anniversary of the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers will be a “propelling” event for the institution this year, according to board co-chair Gregory Cheng. Founder Albert McNeil, now director emeritus and still a voting board member, turns 99 in February. He operated the AMJS as a for-profit touring ensemble specializing in African American spirituals. Because running a touring group “is not an inexpensive proposition,” a small group that included Cheng and McNeil began a few years ago to imagine a new chapter for the organization. They reorganized the operation as a 501c3, and started searching for an educational partnership opportunity that culminated in 2017 when the AMJS became an ensemble in residence at California State University Dominguez Hills. “At his core, McNeil was an educator,” Cheng says, pointing to the teaching McNeil did at the University of California Davis and the international tours McNeil undertook on behalf of the U.S. State Department, sharing his passion ▶



In preparation for its 40th anniversary season, the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay held a fundraiser in the home of a chorus supporter.

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for the tradition of spirituals. In light of that, Cheng sees the Cal State Dominguez Hills residency as “a natural progression of the evolution of the organization with all the attendant support and infrastructure that’s helpful to continue to promote that message.”

McNeil has been an active, positive force in transition planning, says Cheng, because “he realizes the organization is bigger than just one person.” Blyden-Taylor feels the same way about the Nathaniel Dett Chorale. His goal when he started anniversary planning in 2017 was “to think beyond myself; I would like the organization to continue past me,” he says. He applied for and received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts that, in addition to providing artistic support, will enable him to hire an executive director and, he hopes, solidify the Dett Chorale’s status as artist-in-residence at the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas at York University in Toronto.

Keeping a chorus alive for 20, or 40, or 50 years is an accomplishment not to be taken for granted. Along with strategic thinking and organizational self-awareness, a chorus’s longevity depends on strong leadership, fiscal responsibility, adaptability, and more. Fifty years after founding VocalEssence, Brunelle puts energy and vision high on his list: “having a real feeling of being inquisitive

about the music that’s out there and what I think people would enjoy hearing and knowing about. That sense of creativity becomes really important to having an organization live on.”

Persistence and commitment have a lot to do with it too. As Blyden-Taylor puts it, “I’ve just been unwilling to give up.” He’s experienced fluctuations in funding and administrative help, and there have been at least a couple of times when his board could see no way forward, he says. But somehow the Chorale has lasted 20 years. “I felt a call, an impetus, to see this organization be born and grow, and we seem to be having an impact. Folks say, ‘It’s important, the work that you’re doing,’ so I don’t feel God has asked me to set it down yet.” ■

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