

# CHORAL ARTS NEW ENGLAND Chorus!

June 2011

*Encouraging Choral Excellence through Alfred Nash Patterson Grants*

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## Choral Arts 2011: Identity, Inspiration, Innovation

Supporters of choral music from throughout New England gathered at the Wellesley College Club on April 9, 2011 for a discussion of the state of the choral arts led by a panel of four distinguished choral directors, each with a unique perspective.

Organized by Choral Arts New England

and moderated by Board member **Alysoun Kegel**, Artistic Director of PALS Children's Chorus, the panel considered how choruses have grown and adapted over the past few decades and what the future may hold.

Choral Arts New England Chair **Kristin Odmark** welcomed attendees, recalling the organization's founding to further the legacy of Alfred Nash "Bud" Patterson, and acknowledging long-time supporters such as choral singer Robert Leech, whose bequest made the event possible.

### A Historical Perspective

**Donald Teeters**, Music Director of the Boston Cecilia, began with a brief, entertaining review of Boston's choral history, starting with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when choral singing blossomed throughout Europe and America. At that time, groups of 1,000 or more singers were turning out to sing composers such as Handel. In Boston, that movement produced The Handel & Haydn Society (1815), with some 500 members, and the Boston Cecilia (1876), with a "mere" 250.

The public was excited to discover music they had never heard before, both by "antique" composers like Handel and contemporaries they knew well.



Panelists Donald Teeters, Johanna Hill Simpson, Nick Page, and Richard Coffey

Under founder B.J. Lang, Boston Cecilia premiered literally hundreds of works, many by local composers.

However, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century both Handel & Haydn and Cecilia had fallen into a "slump," due to administrative problems and aging membership.

The situation

improved following World War II, when men in their twenties, with mature voices, returned to fill Boston schools. Bud Patterson, for one, took advantage of this vocal windfall by starting the Chorus pro Musica in 1949 and exploring hitherto-neglected choral repertory.

At the same time, college choruses grew much more serious, particularly the Harvard-Radcliffe choruses and the New England Conservatory Chorus under Lorna Cooke DeVaron. Both developed a relationship with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, as did Chorus pro Musica. By setting high standards and introducing audiences to first-rate new and little-heard music, these groups established a trend that continues to this day.

There are now many excellent school and community choruses that have profited from the general increase in awareness and excitement for choral music. In fact, there are more qualified singers than there are audiences to hear them!

Teeters applauded the many wonderful specialized groups that now exist—in early music, for example—but said that with today's many highly-qualified singers, he would like to see more groups that specialize in contemporary music.

## Inspiration from Professional Choruses

**Richard Coffey**, founder and Artistic Director of the 50-voice professional chorus CONCORa, described how that ensemble reaches out to inspire audiences in concert halls, schools and even night-clubs with music both antique and contemporary, and how professional singers can contribute to larger groups of mostly non-professionals.

Coffey leads two other choruses, both with a professional component: the Hartford Chorale, which has a professional “core” of section leaders, and the choir of South Church in New Britain, Conn., with 32 volunteer and 5 professional singers. In addition, Coffey is affiliated with the Main Street Singers, a non-sectarian auditioned children’s chorus founded by South Church.

CONCORa was launched in 1974 by South Church as a professional cultural outreach chorus.

Music Director Coffey, fresh out of grad school, was turned loose to find the money for salaries.

Today, independent of the church, CONCORa performs a variety of early music (such as

Bach) and contemporary music—everything but the 19<sup>th</sup> century large-chorus repertoire—and includes an SATB quartet, CONCORa-to-Go, that performs in schools, and an octet, “On the Town,” that performs cabaret-style music.

The Hartford Chorale is the region’s principal symphonic chorus, singing with the Hartford Symphony and in recent years also with the New Britain and New Haven Symphonies. Coffey has led the Chorale for six years of its 40-year history, during which time it has grown from 120 to 180 singers. All are volunteers except for an eight-voice professional ensemble of section leaders, drawn from CONCORa.

As for repertory, Coffey says, “between CONCORa and the Hartford Chorale, the sky is the limit.” For the avant-garde, CONCORa recently performed seven pieces composed by seven conducting students at the Hartt School of Music; and on the orchestral scale, the Hartford Chorale just performed living composer Stephen Montague’s Requiem and Berlioz’s *Te Deum* with the Hartford Symphony in Edward Cumming’s final concert as Music Director.

This level of musical inspiration requires innovative nurturing, and Coffey closed by evoking the spirit of Alfred C. Fuller, the original “Fuller Brush Man,” who sold his brushes out of his own case as he built his enterprise (and whose Alfred C. Fuller Arts

Center graces the Hartt School). Like Alfred Fuller, Richard Coffey brought a case—filled with concert brochures.

## Singing as an Act of Compassion

No one knows more about breaking down barriers between audience and performers than **Nick Page**, Founder and Artistic Director of the Mystic Chorale. “It’s all about the shared experience of putting voice to emotion through song,” says Page, an ethnomusicologist who considers himself a “song leader” rather than a choral director.

Page spoke movingly of the importance of legacy. His life was changed at the New England Conservatory by Lorna Cooke deVaron and Francis Judd Cooke (also his church organist in Lexington, Mass.); later, he worked with Chris Moore, founder in 1956 of the Chicago Children’s Choir, which today has over 6,000 members. For Moore,

the inspiring legacy was his own experience in the Harvard Glee Club under “Woody” Woodworth, where everyone was welcome, without auditions—with the assumption that “you had to be amazing.”

Page worked with Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock, a song leader who “in her sing-a-longs turns a group of people who have never before met into a community.” He met Alice Parker and was inspired by her commitment to getting people to sing. These experiences led him in 1990 to form the Mystic Chorale. The Chorale, with over 200 singers, is non-auditioned and entirely volunteer, except for three paid staff. They sing everything from memory, have made several professional-level CDs, and often tour abroad.

As part of an “alternative” choral movement that is growing worldwide (including such groups as Vermont’s Village Harmony and the Family Folk Chorale in Arlington, Mass.), Page works with “living music”—ethnic and folk, such as Black Gospel, Jewish liturgical, jazz, pop and bluegrass. “The spirit of God is in all of it,” he says.

## Getting Young People Hooked

**Johanna “Jody” Hill Simpson**, Founder and Conductor Emerita of PALS Children’s Chorus, knows well that the future of choral music lies with our children. Her way to prepare them is to foster a love of excellence and to “create memories—create an addiction that will make them want to *re-create* the [choral] experience over and over.”

One of the great joys of working with children, she says, is that they are completely accepting of risk.

### Like to learn more?

Audio recordings and transcripts of the discussion are available at [www.choralarts-newengland.org](http://www.choralarts-newengland.org)

She doesn't like to perform "safe things"—she much prefers to "create an incredibly safe environment where the kids can take huge risks." Those are the experiences, she believes, that will lead them to search for more. Such "scary gigs" for PALS included learning the *Sprechstimme* from Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and singing an oratorio in Vietnamese. Another was Howard Frazin's oratorio *The Voice of Isaac*, which depicts the thoughts of Isaac as his father, Abraham, prepares to kill him—"a weird sound world, repulsive subject matter, and very hard music—it was great!"

Simpson believes that choral music must engage the audience and act to transform them. The PALS children, singing without scores, are keen observers of the audience reaction, and that effect is an important part of their experience. Simpson has always included dance and drama teaching in her instruction, believing that singers who don't know how to act and move are repressed and wooden, almost "choral puppets." As inspiration, she cited performances by the Tapiola Children's Choir of Finland, both visually and musically beautiful; the Indianapolis Children's Choir conducted by Henry Leck, who used tambourines and ribbons and movingly threw their hands in the air; and the Chicago Children's Choir, with an entire staff of choreographers and others working to maximize the audience experience.

Simpson closed by emphasizing that the most important thing a children's choir can do is to bring new works into being. It is an ideal "lab" for composers. Children are quick to grasp new music and learn it the "real" way, *musically* rather than visually from the scores. They are open-minded and have lots of stamina, if you keep them focused.

### **"You are not the Birthday Child!"**

Ultimately the inspiration for both singers and audience comes from the music. But the singers have a special responsibility to communicate, to be a medium between composer and audience. For singers, Richard Coffey pointed out, the major moments of understanding and emotion often come in the rehearsals—which, he says, is just as well. Come concert time, they must get out of the way—or, in the words of Robert Shaw, "you have no right to cry on the stage—the concert is the

audience's turn to cry." Jody Simpson put it similarly: "It's important to teach young choristers that they are not the birthday child at this party." However, she added, "if you've done your job and the audience is obviously moved, upset, enlightened, delighted, or whatever, then you feel empowered, and once you've felt that power you'll want it all your life."

### **What Now?**

What should we do to ensure that choral singing thrives in the future? All panelists agreed that it is critical to encourage new composers, who give us "new hope and new sounds," in Richard Coffey's words. Audiences might be reluctant to take a chance on an unknown composer, but the performing ensemble can allay those fears by building a reputation for quality.

Maintaining the highest standards is good in itself, even if audiences are small. Donald Teeters quoted Stephen Jay Gould, former Boston Cecilia singer and board member: "If [Cecilia] can no longer present music at the highest level of art, we should quit." Nick Page cited "reciprocal altruism," that "just the act of doing good things, shining with all your light, comes back a thousand-fold."

But there was no doubt of the need for innovations to engage audiences, particularly in a time of declining concert attendance. Instead of luring people to the concert hall, choruses could go to the people, like "Singing City," a Philadelphia urban chorus that sings in schools, shelters and nursing homes. Flash mob singing ("the Hallelujah effect") can also attract interest; this phenomenon and the success of shows like *Glee* might be the reason for the apparent prevalence of choirs in commercials today. Technology might help: YouTube can publicize and help disseminate new repertory, and there are even virtual choirs, such as that formed by composer Eric Whitacre—though technology will never replace the experience of live singing.

How might Choral Arts New England better support choral singing? It was suggested that larger but fewer grants might help, because the cost of presenting concerts is so high. A grant of \$5,000 could be a determining factor for a concert. The C.A.N.E. Board will explore that idea further in the coming year.

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*Chorus!* is published periodically by Choral Arts New England. Its purpose is to share information of interest to New England choruses, singers and their supporters, and so to help foster the choral community. If you have news to share or would like to comment, email us at [news@choralarts-newengland.org](mailto:news@choralarts-newengland.org)

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## **“Together in Song” celebrates New England Choral Singing in Western Mass.**

WGBY, the Public Broadcasting TV station in Springfield, Massachusetts, recently sponsored a remarkable choral program that involved some 1350 singers in 47 choral ensembles from across the region. Called “Together in Song,” it was a “community-minded” competition that was broadcast live on Saturday evenings in March and April. The final concerts, also broadcast live, were part of a two-day “Together In Song Festival” at the Paramount Theatre in downtown Springfield that was hosted by Kevin Rhodes, Music Director of the Springfield Symphony Orchestra.

Performing ensembles competed in one of five categories: children’s choirs, high school choruses, college ensembles, small adult groups, and large adult ensembles. Performers were rated by a panel of judges, and, in addition, the viewing audience was able to vote as an “extra judge.” Four groups from each of the five categories were selected for the semi-final performances.

Judges rated ensembles on a five-point scale in each of five areas: basic technical ability, difficulty of music, appearance and presentation, confidence and proficiency with the music, and an overall subjective rating.

The event was a real showcase for the choral tradition: WGBY has a viewing audience of over 200,000 people in New England, and in addition, all five hour-long semifinal programs and the finale are available on the festival web site.

The judges’ picks in each category were:

- Children: Hampshire Young People’s Chorus, Amherst, Mass.
- High School: The Lyrics, from Longmeadow (Mass.) High School
- College: The Amherst College Zumbyes
- Adult small ensemble: Peterborough Chamber Choir, Peterborough, NH
- Adult large ensemble: Saint John’s Church Tehillah Choir, Springfield, Mass.

The real winners were all of the choruses that participated and the choral arts in general.

Together in Song was conceived by Rus Peotter, WGBY General Manager. Indications are that the program will be repeated next year. Perhaps it will serve as a model for similar festivals in other New England cities! More details can be found at [togetherinsong.wgby.org](http://togetherinsong.wgby.org).