

Ann Meier Baker

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Chorus America offices, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2008

Q Talk about the results of your national survey...did this surprise you, and what does it say about our cultural life here in the 21st century?

A Chorus America's leaders were convinced that people were singing in choruses large and small, in all sorts of communities – older people, younger people. We knew anecdotally that there was a lot of activity, but we didn't have the numbers to prove it. So we set out to accomplish just a census – how many people are singing and how many choruses and what more could we learn about them? So we were surprised at the results. We knew the numbers would be big. But we didn't expect 28 million people singing in this country.

Q The study suggested that the discipline and teamwork required for choral singing may have some positive impact on singers' daily lives. Talk about the social implications of choral singing and how it may help foster a greater understanding of other people around us. In other words, the non-musical benefits of choral activity.

A A few years ago there was a very popular book out called *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam. The premise of the book was more and more people are bowling; it was a big activity that people use for recreation. But they were bowling alone. That is, they weren't bowling in leagues. They were going out by themselves or with a friend; bowling alone. And one of his ideas was that there were all these activities that could help build community and make communities stronger. One of them, he said, was start a chorus. Well at Chorus America we knew there were plenty of choruses, based on the initial research we'd done. But we were curious to learn more about this sort of DNA of the person who sings in a chorus. So we set about asking them through telephone surveys why they sing, how long they've been singing, did they start singing in school, did their parents sing? We asked a number of questions and actually we tried this in some samples with folks and we learned that this survey took about 20 minutes. So we hired a firm and they did the survey. But in fact, once we got choral singers on the phone they wouldn't stop talking. So the survey that we expected to take 20 minutes per person was 30 or 35, much to the chagrin of the organization that we hired to do that work. So the people who sing in choruses have certain characteristics that are good for communities and we learned more about them from this study.

So we telephoned more than 600 singers in choruses all around the country through a random-digit-dial sort of approach. We got these folks on the phone and couldn't get them off. They were so eager to tell us about why they sing, how important it is for them, how they're invested in their communities in different ways and we learned a lot about them. We had some suppositions. I thought, for example, that probably a number of people who sang in choruses had dated other people in their choruses and I had in mind this sort of headline – don't join a dating group or don't go to match.com; sing in a chorus. In fact we learned that that is the case. There was a lot of matchmaking going on in choruses, to be sure. But we learned about them in so many other ways. For example, people who sing in choruses are far more likely to volunteer their time to charitable causes. They're also much more generous than is the general public when it comes to making philanthropic contributions. They are social. They like to invite people in for supper. They are friendly. They are involved. Maybe apropos to this time of year,

it would be important to note that they also vote in large numbers and, in fact, are more likely to even run for office and be engaged and active in politics than is a member of the general public.

Q Let's circle back to the part about elections, because when this show actually airs the election will be behind us. Let's go back to some of the social benefits...

A So the Chorus America study helped us learn more about the characteristics of choral singers and what they do when they're not singing. For example, they're very social creatures, they're eager to invite people in for supper, they're friendly. They're also active in their communities in a lot of ways that are good and enriching for communities. For example....

The study showed us that people who sing in choruses are good for communities in a lot of ways, in addition to the beautiful music that they make. For example they tend to be very social creatures and they're friendly, they invite people in for supper. They like to be with other folks. They're not couch potatoes. In addition, they are eager to be part of communities in terms of their philanthropic gifts. They are far more likely than members of the general public to make contributions to social causes and to volunteer their own time for other causes as well. So they're good for communities; they're just good eggs. We wanted to try to see if we could see some cause and effect. Are they good folks for communities because they sing in choruses or do people who are good for communities just happen to gather in choruses? And we couldn't show causality, as much as we wanted to.

Q It's often said, and your survey bears this out, that choral singing is a great way to build community – this goes back to Robert Putnam's book, too. In the age of the Internet and iPods and satellite TV, where people are often more connected to their electronic friends than they are to their actual friends and neighbors in the community, how can choral music help to strengthen the sense of community?

A Choral music is about participation, so when I have my headphones on and listening to my iPod, I'm consuming music; I'm not making music. And that's really the muscles that choral singing has. Perhaps stronger muscles than maybe some other art forms. That we make the music. So when you're standing next to your neighbor and it's your line that needs to come out, he has to sublimate his line and it's your turn to shine. And there are other cases where you need to do something that makes the whole better than the sum of its parts. There aren't very many music-making activities like that and the fact that choral singers has fewer barriers to participation makes it all the more important.

Q Where do you think choral music fits in the fabric of 21st century America?

A Choral music today is alive and well. Choral singing is something that everyone's involved in and the future looks bright. There are some concerns, of course. Public school music education is not what it was and we know from our survey, for example, that almost 70% of the people who are singing in choruses today started singing in elementary or middle school. So where are the choral singers for tomorrow? That's a question for us. Chorus America's membership has all kinds of choruses – we have children youth choruses and volunteer choruses, professional choruses – a whole range. The fastest growing segment of our membership is actually children and youth

choruses, independent children youth choruses that are not affiliated with a church or a school, but that are making up for what many parents feel is missing in their school music situation.

Q You answered a question perfectly about the importance of a good early youth experience with music, because pretty much everybody I've interviewed started out as kids in a good school choir or church choir or something like that. That seems to be where a lot of people got their start.

A We assumed, actually, that it would be church that would be a more pervasive starting point. But we were surprised when it wasn't church; it was actually school choruses where many people got their start.

Q Where do you see choral music going in say the next 25 years? What trends do you see?

A Choral music is sort of light on its feet. We're portable, we're flexible, you can sing in choruses with a symphony orchestra in a concert hall, you can sing at the State Fair, you can sing at the mall, you can sing in a church. There are so many places and ways that people can be involved in choral singing and I think that bodes well for our future, that in our transient society and the "I want my music now" sort of attitude, we carry our instruments in our throats and we're able to move about and be relevant to whatever's going on. You know, after 9/11 what did people do? They stood on the steps of the Capitol and they sang together. Music – especially choral music – is something we use to celebrate important benchmarks in our lives, both happy and sad, and it's part of who we are really – our voice is what it is to be human. And using it together in a group is a special act of participation in the arts.

Q Talk about the importance of both the professional paid singer and the volunteer singer.

A Any chorus – whether professional, volunteer, adult, children – can create a transcending performance. And that's the thrill of choral music; that really anyone can participate and at a very high level. But professional choruses are comprised of professional singers who have dedicated their whole lives to this. So they've learned how to control their tone color and pitch at such a high level. They know the repertoire. They are expert at languages and have in their facility so many tools that makes choral singing even better. So maybe they can tackle more difficult repertoire, they can have a lifestyle that allows them to go on tour or make recordings. It's very important for them to raise the bar for all of us. I might say a little bit more about that that I think relates to MN. Another thing that professional singers do is they attract other wonderful musicians to a community. For example in MN, it's not an accident that you have wonderful choruses that are singing the music of wonderful composers who all happen to live in the state of MN. So success and talent attracts success and talent.

Q Let's do a little more with that. Minnesotans are obviously proud of their great choral traditions and the number of excellent choruses at all levels that we have. Putting on your national hat – from a national perspective, talk about Minnesota's reputation, whether it be its conductors, composers, ensembles...talk a little bit about what people out on the east coast say about the choral arts in MN.

A Choral music is a wonderfully diverse art form and MN reflects that. So you've got fabulous choruses of all kinds and we look to...for example, your wonderful professional choruses who have a huge appetite for commissioning as something that helps see the whole field. MN makes all of choral music in this country and beyond, better and the reputation is really outstanding.

Q Talk about the World Choral Symposium, held in Minneapolis in 2002. What factors do you think made MN end up being a good choice for all the world choral leaders to convene?

A I think there are a number of reasons the World Choral Symposium being in the Twin Cities was terrific. First of all, what a great place to host a conference. It's just really inviting and I think everyone who was there felt like they were embraced and in the true MN nice way. I think that was really important. But one reason it came there is because of the strength of Philip Brunelle and his involvement in the whole international choral music scene. So all of the riches that you have in MN were important, but I think Philip's ambassador role in bringing the World Choral Symposium was certainly one reason why it was there. And what a success. Oh my goodness. All of those choruses I think thrilled the MN audiences that already exist for choral music and so it was a win/win. Sometimes arts organizations are afraid to invite other wonderful choruses or orchestras or dance companies to their cities, thinking that it will siphon off energy. But in fact, that's not how it works. When you bring wonderful, excellent choruses to a town that's already full of wonderful, excellent choruses, it's good for everybody.

Q Let's go back to the early education experience. Talk about your findings that show the importance of good musical experiences at an early age and what the implications are for this country if schools do not continue to support choruses at the elementary and high school level.

A Most of the singers I know – both professional singers who are making a career of this and amateur singers – have personal stories to share. I sang in the car when we went to my grandmother's house and all of the family sang in harmony as we did things together, or the recorder ensemble around the piano as everyone sang along. All of these stories that people love to share about their own choral music experience started at home or at school when they were young. And it becomes a way of life. Choral singing is, for most choral singers, a way of life. They can't imagine not doing it. And it started so early. So the concern today is, where is that participation. And at some point, we have to give up this idea that everything is polished and perfect, that if it's not recorded, if it doesn't sound exactly like it does on television or on my CD, then it's not good enough or its not valuable. The participation is valuable in and of itself; especially for kids. Kids love to take part. So woe to the music teacher who spends time and time again explaining that that's a trumpet and that's a trombone. Let the kids sing. Let them take part in it. And that's really what's, I think, missing in today's schools. I spent some time at the National School Boards Foundation, so I have a point of view on this that I can share. But what we know is parents want their kids to have a good music education. They tell us all the time. That's not the problem; parents want it. They don't insist and so how can we encourage those who sing in choruses, who have children who are in schools, to insist that this is good. Also often we talk about the value of music education because it makes kids smart. We've talked about for a while we thought it made them good at math, the Mozart effect, and whole states were sending Mozart to pregnant women so that they could make sure and have smart kids. What we aren't as good at

talking about is how it makes kids whole. That music education is part of a whole education and it makes people good, engaged citizens who want to be with others. So math is important, but the whole person is I think what we're after here.

Q Fabulous. That could be on your website.

A Well, my daughter goes to a school that has a crummy music program and so I send her to the Children's Chorus of Washington and pay – I don't know what the tuition is - \$800 or \$900 a year and then they decide to go on tour so that's another \$3,500. So I have an opportunity to buy my kid a music education because she goes to a school with a crummy music education. But that's not fair.

Q You alluded to the fact that you're seeing a growth in the number of children's choirs. Talk about that a little more.

A Our membership tends not to include church choirs or school choirs. Our organization, Chorus America, supports 501c3 organizations. These are choruses that are making wonderful music but they're also running nonprofit organizations. And much of what Chorus America does is help them understand how to build a board, how to raise money, how to sell tickets in ways that add earned income; all those sorts of things. So we have a growing group of children in youth choruses that are these independent choirs and they've been started by parents like me, who are concerned about their students, their own child's education. And we want our kids to have what we had. I went to a school that had a wonderful music education. I was able to participate in so many things and my daughter's not. So I think parents like me are eager to start these choruses and support these independent choruses to make up for what's missing.

Q If you were talking to a potential funding source or someone who makes decisions about where to put resources, what would be your pitch about supporting choral music at all levels and all ages?

A Once there was a study done of audiences and they showed the audiences different images. So they would show audience members a champagne glass and they would say, what art form does this remind you of? And the audience member would say, opera. And they would show other images and other art forms would come to mind for audience members. Sometimes I think choral music is overlooked, because we don't have a symbol like a bubbling champagne glass that defines us or sets us apart as an elite sort of organization. And sometimes choral musicians feel badly about that. As for me, I think it's our strength. We're the glue that holds all of this together. Participation in the arts, being part of a group that's making beautiful music together, that brings people together who would never know one another in other ways, who – by the way – are very likely to buy tickets to go to the orchestra or the opera or to go to the museum. These folks are the glue, really, that hold the performing arts together. And so rather than be overlooked, I think choral music is really the place to make an investment for our future.

Our study at Chorus America showed also that people who sing in choruses tend to sing in more than one. So maybe they sing in their church choir on Sunday mornings, but on Wednesday nights they're with their community chorus. So it really does become a way of life and the opportunities for sort of viral marketing and viral information sharing are huge, because what they talked about with their tenor on Wednesday night they're going

to mention to the soprano at the church choir on Sunday morning. So it becomes this broader community that is knit together in really exciting ways.

Q Talk about the increasing prevalence of choruses that may have a specific mission apart from just making music.

A The missions of choruses are as diverse as can be. For example, some chorus's center around a certain repertoire – we want to sing baroque music or whatever it might be. But a number of choruses have social missions as well. So for example, gay and lesbian choruses that are very clear about this dual mission – they're trying to change the world and they're using choral music as a tool to do that.

Q Go a little further on that. How do you think they can help, perhaps, open people's minds through music? Is it the type of music they perform or is it just the nature of the chorus itself? How do you think they're achieving some success?

A Gay and lesbian choruses in this country are excellent. They're performing wonderful music, wonderfully. And one way that they go about making a change in society is to say, look what we can do. We're excellent and we've come together around a shared mission and a shared love for music and look what we can do together. In addition, gay and lesbian choruses are very active in commissioning and much of the music they commission is about the message they want to share. So that's another powerful tool that they have at their disposal.

There's a wonderful teaching artist in this country called Eric Booth. Eric's a wonderful friend of mine and he's taught me something I think is really apropos for choral music and it goes like this: People in this country are so interested in the nouns of art. Sort of the...what we get from art, our stuff, our art stuff. But what choral music is really about are the verbs of art: participating in art making, coming together and creating something that is far greater than anyone could do individually at such a high level, around things that are so valuable for communities. So really it's the verbs of art that are our secret weapon.