

Singing Association or Chorus?

Therein lies a contradiction, or can both be combined? A contribution for discussion—by Michael Blume

The absolute majority of singing groups organized in the DCV are singing associations. This is a 150 year old tradition of many other countries are envious. For some time now, the dangers exist that many of these associations, because of aging, at first can no longer satisfactorily meet musical challenges and then, after a while, completely dissolve.

The creation history of the singing associations, especially the male singing associations, is sufficiently known. At their founding, they were entirely age-homogeneous groups which frequently gave themselves nicknames such as “Concord”, “Harmony” or “Unity. Importance was therefore given to commonly shared goals. In some [German] states there are an extraordinarily large number of male singing associations, even today. For the most part, they developed out of the labor movement.

Emancipation in the working world has also had an effect on the singing associations: the chorus scene has been emancipated. Many male choruses have had to give up and to try to keep themselves alive by changing to a mixed chorus. For the most part, these emergency operations had no detrimental consequences. By the founding of female choruses and the increase in mixed choruses, the disproportion of chorus types was slowly corrected during the post-war period. This was no doubt painful for the associations in question, but in time inescapable, since the social conditions for predominance of male singing associations no longer existed. Whoever considers the numerical development over the next 10 to 20 years, with consideration of the age structure of the singing associations, will no longer be surprised by this development.

The earlier DSB also contributed to the, unfortunately even today, widespread opinion that mass was more important than class. Instead of developing sustainable cultural programs, large membership numbers were bragged about as the foundation of a mass movement. An important step forwards would be the development of the singing associations into choruses.

Tradition yes—but also movement

Without a doubt, the social involvement of many associations—serenades for seniors, singing in nursing homes and hospitals are an important component of cultural work in the community. But if we are concerned about inspiring young people for choral singing, then the association has to be inspired first.

It is not about throwing old traditions overboard! However, the change to new conditions and requirements of our society could occur much faster and more effectively.

Take a sports club as an example and be more concerned about work to acquire new blood. The is hardly a sports club with children and youth groups. In this regard, the majority of singing associations are lagging far behind. If one considers that all children love to sing, it is impossible to understand that with over 21,000 choruses organized into the Deutschen Chorverband, [DCV] only about 2000 children’s choruses exist. Herein lies a large and far-reaching omission. The lament about

the passing of choruses could be effectively countered by creating children's choruses by the adult choruses. Unfortunately many existing children's choruses are musically neglected in the belief that chorus direction can be transferred to less qualified or even unqualified individuals.

The idea of many overaged choruses that young voices can [successfully] integrated is doomed to failure. In what of today's social areas is there a harmonious blending between twenty and 70 year olds? A development towards choruses with a homogeneous age structure has unintentionally developed. Many singing associations have become senior choruses and the number of youth choruses, thank God, continues to grow, although slowly.

Large Association = Good Association

I would like to illuminate the terms association and chorus somewhat closer.

The association is an organized merger of several people with a common hobby. A primary goal of the association is a membership as large as possible.

Large association = good association. This equation is correct as long as the association specific interests remain in the foreground. In the desire not to lose and singer, all agree to accept the lowest common denominator concerning musical questions. All, even the slowest or even the disinterested have to be kept in a good mood. This prevents almost every further development and leads to a dead end. In many singing associations, there is no consensus over the self-image of the association and the desired goals. Musical development does not stand in the foreground. The disinterest of choral music by many members in singing associations shows itself also in the refusal to listen to other, and above all, better choruses in concert. One is self-sufficient.

The directors of the association usually aren't musicians and can therefore better develop extra-musical activities. The dues paid by the members of the association are much too small because, as a rule, they do not cover the operating costs. They have not kept pace in any manner with the development of [employment] compensation. From this, fund raising activities arise, in which, for the most part, only a small number of the association membership participate. The question by the director regarding participation at the next [fund-raising] activity is increasingly answered by silence.

In addition to musical activities, a singing association pursues many other goals. The organization for parties and celebrations, social circles, and not to be overlooked, cultural social activities in the community. For this, a large voluntary commitment is necessary.

The changes in our society have contributed to the fact that many of the above described activities, which at one time were offered exclusively by associations, are today accomplished primarily in the private sector. The requirement of travel and celebrations is often already saturated. The willingness to sacrifice a large portion of one's free time for the association has strongly diminished.

A dilemma in the association scene is the insufficient musical development of the singers. This limits the repertoire of the associations to the simplest and most trivial literature. This limitation is legitimately natural. However, if more is desired, some assumptions have to be changed.

Every call for changes immediately finds many critics, who want to hold to the existing without compromise. The development of the DCV to a musical association can only succeed if the base is in agreement. The first step towards musical competence would be an improvement of the notation knowledge of the chorus members. The inability to extract information from notes leads to the use of the parrot-method in many choir rehearsals. I find that not only disgraceful but also very ineffective. A prerequisite is that the singers take their music home and the choir director offers aids for self-study, for instance with practice CDs.

Young, musically interested people—and such are important for our choruses—have no desire to practice six months or more on a piece that could be learned, with some understanding of notation, in three weeks. I have never understood why grown-up people stubbornly refuse to get more information out of the sheet music that is pressed week after week into their hands. There are many opportunities to improve one's understanding and capabilities. Mind you: we are not talking about perfect sight-reading. Who can do that *prima vista*?

Chorus Members want to sing

For a chorus, coming to terms with the music is clearly in the fore-ground. The focus lies on intensive rehearsal work with the goal of a qualitative high-value performance. The consensus of the chorus members with the musical content leads to a harmonious and effective musical presentation. The speedy processing of new pieces provides a large variety and a broad repertoire. The private involvement of the chorus members with the music to be learned is thereby an important assumption. Primarily, chorus members want and not be drawn into extra-musical activities. The financial problems arising from this can only be resolved by appropriate dues. How do singing association and chorus fit together? Today I also see for the singing association the possibility to acquire the possibility of chorus quality. I recommend, together with the chorus director, the development of a program that describes the musical contents and solidifies the short-term and long-term goals. These self-assessment conversations should be held regularly once or twice a year.

This “chorus-program” then will have to be accepted and supported by all participants. Furthermore, the methods used to achieve the desired goals should be made clear. With the clarification of these questions, it will also become clear whether the marriage between the chorus director and the chorus members can have continued existence.

Finally, some wishes to all choruses and chorus directors.

Move the activity with the music to the center of your efforts. Form new choruses and singing groups. Intensify your work with youth.

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