

# How Choral Singing Changes Lives

■ by Heidi Waleson

*As part of an ongoing commitment to education, Chorus America has embarked on a new initiative funded by Popplestone Foundation, focusing on access to quality music education and the role that choruses can play. One phase of this project includes interviewing choral singers about how singing has affected their lives. The following excerpts reflect some of the themes that emerge again and again about the positive influence that choral singing plays in bringing value, direction, and meaning to lives. A longer article with more extensive interviews is available at [www.chorusamerica.org](http://www.chorusamerica.org).*

Choral singers start young. Among the many striking findings of “America’s Performing Art,” Chorus America’s 2003 study of American choruses and choral singers, was the fact that 69 percent of today’s choral singers had their first choral singing experience in elementary or middle school. Interviews with choral singers show that such early encounters grow into close, passionate relationships with music and choral singing.

Activities undertaken by children and teens can profoundly influence the shape of their lives, and singing in a chorus is unusually powerful. Veterans of these experiences cite everything from learning skills to acquiring a sense of discipline and commitment. They understand the creation of community and the joy of striving for an artistic result that is greater than the sum of its parts. Young people who may feel out of place elsewhere find a home in a chorus — students find



Rebecca Berger

mentors and begin to understand about leadership. Some are drawn to become professional musicians and music teachers; others find that the skills and experiences learned in a chorus have subtle but far-reaching implications in many areas of their lives.

The nature of choral singing is such that one can actually teach sophisticated skills that lead to a satisfactory whole-group experience to quite young children. Rebecca Berger, who started singing with the Children’s Chorus of Maryland when she was six and stayed until she was 16, remembers those first years in the training choir as “Lots of ear training, rhythm training, sight-reading, and imitation. It was all done with games, rounds, and folk songs. It was all fun, something a kid could enjoy without feeling pressure. You didn’t know you were learning.”

The sense of commitment to the group is part of what makes the learning seem both fun and worthwhile. Stephen



Stephen Holmes

Holmes, now music director of the Maryland State Boy Choir, joined as a singer when he was nine. “I remember it as something totally different, connecting with kids who were

same as me, who had a similar passion for music and for expressing themselves.”

That social bond creates lifelong friendships, as well as a sense of belonging for young choral singers. For some, it is something that they do not feel in other areas of their lives. For Vance George, well known choral leader and director of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus for 20 years, choir served an important social function as well as being the catalyst for his life’s work. “Growing up on a farm, you’re very alone. In choir, you’re with other people, doing something you’re good at, and it gives you a sense of belonging.” When George went on to high school, choral singing continued to be an important part of his social life: He sang in a barbershop quartet with the captains of the baseball and the basketball teams. “I had gone to a one-room country school and didn’t know many people. The quartet gave me cachet — I was okay because I was in with the big school jocks.” The quartet recently sang at their 50th high school reunion.

Being part of an avocation group drawn together for a common goal has a lasting impact. Adrienne Rau, who sang in school choirs in her native Maine, participated in the Berkshire Choral Festival and is now a math major at Barnard College in New York. She says, “The biggest thing I learned from choral singing was how to work together on a project, and that you could be competitive without trying to put someone down. I didn’t like competitive sports for that reason, cause someone won or lost. If you sing, you can all win.”

Fostering that sense of community and the idea of working towards a common goal is the job of the choir staff and conductors. Former young choristers speak with tremendous love and respect for their



Jim Hayden

directors, who can become important mentors. As children move into their teen years, caring adults who are not their parents take on new significance. Jim Hayden, a high school senior who began singing with the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus when he was in eighth grade, says, "Emily Ellsworth [director] is a huge inspiration. She has taught me the meaning of music — that it's not just notes, it's what you feel. She's shown me what I need to do to be a great choral conductor." Hayden also says that he appreciated the discipline of the choir.

Many decades later, Sherif Nada, former executive with FMR Corp. and Fidelity Investments and a trustee of the Boston Lyric Opera, still speaks of the choir director who became a role model for him. Nada came to the U.S. from his native Egypt in the 1950s to finish high school at a boarding school in Massachusetts. "Everybody at the school sang, and it really made it possible for me to feel part of a group very quickly. I was in a foreign country with a different language, culture, habits — it was very important for me to belong. One thing I took from my choir director as I grew and matured in my career was that he got everything out of his singers by respecting them, not yelling at them. There was no fear factor. We delivered so much more with passion and love. I learned a lot from

that throughout my career. I always tried to treat people with respect. I built companies with that in mind, and it worked."

Choral singers emphasize that they acquired major life skills through chorus. Elise Holman, charter member of the Milwaukee Children's Choir who is now pursuing her dream to sing on

Broadway, says that choir "made me a more responsible person. I was never in any trouble with alcohol or drugs. I didn't worry about peer pressure. I was too busy, I had too many goals, and I couldn't risk screwing up. I got a work ethic from it that most 11-year olds don't have, and I've kept it. In college I could always stay focused."



Josh Pope

Seventeen-year-old Josh Pope, who sings with the Milwaukee Children's Choir, says, "The skills of tackling choral music helped me with other things, like math. Reading becomes a lot easier — when you're sight-reading music, you're doing three or four things at once."

Megan Marshall, former chorister and now assistant conductor of the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus, says that choir teaches patience in a world where that lesson is hard to come by. "Kids learn to work hard over time. Today, everything comes so fast. In choir, you work on music a lot, you think about it, you fix things."

Given that chorus can be such an egalitarian experience, it is interesting that chorus veterans cite leadership skills and self-confidence as major benefits. Again, Megan Marshall says, "It teaches leadership even if you are never given a leadership position. It teaches you to be a quiet leader for the good of the group. The biggest thing I teach — and I don't even think about it — is how important each person is, that everyone is bringing something to this group."

That sense of mutual respect and value translates to understanding and tolerance across cultures as well. Singing the music of many cultures has become an important part of many children's chorus programs. Courtney Chiavara, who spent a month in China with the Syracuse Children's Chorus, says it was one of the most important experiences of her life. "I didn't know the language, though I learned as much as I could, but on stage, there were kids from China, Sweden, Israel, and the U.S., all singing the same thing — that was remarkable."

That cross-cultural experience works at home, too. Martina Brendel, former member of the Chicago Children's Choir and now a junior at Columbia University, had a similar experience in



Megan Marshall

her high school choir. "Choir was a way to step out of my magnet program and feel a sense of belonging to kids in other programs that I would never have had. With all the advantages I'd been given by my very well-educated family and a demanding academic program, I could find, sitting next to me in choir, a person who lived in a housing project who was a much better singer. That opened my eyes. It expanded my perceptions of people and challenged any sort of narrow beliefs that I might have had otherwise about other students."

High school senior Erin Laro, who sings at school and in the Handel and Haydn Society youth programs, has found music to be a great help in weathering both large stresses, like family crises and a year in foster care, and small ones, such as too much

homework. "If I didn't have music in those rough times, I would probably have done something negative," she says.

Singing in chorus was literally a lifesaver for Courtney Chiavara, now a pre-med student at Syracuse University. When she was 16, she was stricken with a neurodegenerative illness that causes facial paralysis. "I couldn't see, talk, or swallow. Half my tongue was paralyzed. For several months, I only left the house

to go to doctors and to chorus, to try to sing. The Syracuse Children's Chorus is like a second family — I felt comfortable enough to show everyone there what was going on with me. Singing the text, immersing myself, striving to become



Courtney Chiavara

one with the music and what you're supposed to express — helped me get through it. Music was the place I turned to find comfort. I knew everything would be okay when I was singing." ■



Martina Brendel

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Sherif Nada