

Telling LGBTQ+ Stories through Choral Music: A Case Study of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus

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Abstract: This article examines how gay choruses use music to compel emotional responses and reflection in their audiences on the issue of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and violence. Considering the utility of the music — what the intended, and actual, outcomes of its performance are — this article also looks at how chorus members perceive their role as instigators of social change. I argue that affinity is the means by which choruses achieve their activist and outreach aims through three specific types of connections: between choral members, between the chorus and its audience, and between choral members and specific figures in LGBTQ+ history.

Résumé: Cet article examine la façon dont les chorales gay utilisent la musique pour astreindre leur public à une réponse émotive et à réfléchir à la question de la rhétorique et de la violence anti-LGBTQ+. En examinant l'utilité de la musique – quels sont les résultats escomptés, et réels, des interprétations scéniques – cet article se penche également sur la façon dont les membres de la chorale conçoivent leur rôle d'instigateurs du changement social. J'avance que les affinités sont le moyen par lequel les chorales atteignent leurs objectifs activistes et de rayonnement grâce à trois types particuliers de connexions : entre les membres de la chorale, entre la chorale et son public, et entre les membres de la chorale et certains personnages choisis de l'histoire des LGBTQ+.

On Thursday July 12, 2012, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (SFGMC) performed at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Their *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert was sponsored by the Matthew Shepard Foundation (MSF), an organization formed in 1999 by Shepard's parents, Judy and Dennis, with a focus on social justice for the LGBTQ+ community (Matthew Shepard Foundation n.d.). Shepard was an openly gay student at the university in the late 1990s. On the evening of October 6, 1998, Shepard was at the Fireside Lounge, a local Laramie bar that no longer exists, where he met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson.

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The three men, all in their early 20s, played pool and drank beer. McKinney and Henderson allegedly pretended to be gay in order to lure Shepard from the bar, offering him a ride home. Instead, they drove Shepard to a remote location just outside Laramie where they tied him to a fence, beat, pistol-whipped, and robbed him, and left him to die. Several hours later, Aaron Kreifels, a passing bicyclist, encountered Shepard — still tied to the fence, his face blood-stained with tear streaks — and called paramedics and police from a nearby house. Shepard was rushed to a hospital where he lay in a coma for five days before passing away on October 12.¹

Almost 14 years later, the partnership of SFGMC and MSF in this particular location prompts a few observations. First, Laramie, the site where Shepard lived and studied at the time of his death, is still often regarded as a politically, socially, and religiously conservative “red” area of the US (National Public Radio 2014). Second, the *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert is an outreach performance few other gay choruses have attempted in this specific locale. It served as an opportunity for SFGMC to perform for a “red” area audience atypical of their usual metropolitan hometown crowd in a locale where gay chorus concerts may not regularly occur.²

With approximately 300 singers, SFGMC is a large ensemble. However, the chorus estimates the Laramie audience was approximately only half their size, leading to questions about how openly gay people are received in Laramie 14 years after Shepard’s death. Speculation about the audience — who attended, how they identify, and why they were there — inspired the chorus to reflect on the impact of their outreach activities and perceived successes. Of course, the definition of “success” can vary by outreach performance, which can inform future approaches. After talking with audience members in the lobby after the concert, singers also realized there might not have been as many gay people in attendance as they had hoped. While any number of reasons might account for this, singers questioned whether stigmas of LGBTQ+ people still exist in Laramie that might keep “out” people from attending SFGMC’s concert. Questions about how openly gay people are accepted and treated inform the drive and purpose behind the work of SFGMC — and other ensembles in the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA Choruses) — when engaging in “red” area outreach.

This article is concerned with how songs are deployed in concert to engage the audience and compel emotional responses — through a sense of affinity with the singers — that could potentially encourage reflection on the issues of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and violence broached in the music. I am primarily concerned with the utility of the music and what the intended, and actual, outcomes of its performance are. This article also considers how choruses perceive their roles as instigators of social change. Affinity, I argue, is the means by which the chorus achieves its activist and outreach aims; it can be understood here as three specific

types of connections: between choral members, between the chorus and its audience, and between choral members and the heroes and martyrs of LGBTQ+ history.

Affinities are key to understanding the successes and popularity of LGBTQ+ choruses. In his 2007 study of commissioned choral works for lesbian, feminist, and gay choruses, Robert Mensel argues that “affinity music” should be recognized as a genre unto itself. Mensel examines the emotional impact of four new works of choral music on singers in both the rehearsal and performance space, contending that experience can be as transformative for the individual singer as it is for the ensemble as a whole (219-222). In feedback, singers’ friends and family indicated that they were particularly affected by the ways in which gay chorus music expresses LGBTQ+ perspectives — especially music that validates same-sex relationships while advocating for marriage equality, and music that emerged from the AIDS epidemic, representing the experiences of loss and mourning while confronting stigmatizations surrounding both LGBTQ+ people and HIV/AIDS.

In her 2015 study of the Seattle Men’s Chorus, Wendy Moy analyzes the social capital — the (potential) value found in relationships and connections — developed among choristers, between choral members and their artistic director, and between chorus and community. She divides social capital into three types: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding capital refers to the ties between members of a closed network, such as between the members of a chorus. Bridging capital involves the ties developed outward across different demographics, such as a chorus develops with its audiences and broader community. Finally, linking capital is about the vertical ties within an institution, where a power differential exists, such as between chorus members and the artistic director. Affinities — the sense of similarities and relationships between people — facilitates the creation and maintenance of different types of social capital. As the music discussed in this article focuses specifically on heteronormativity — particularly the violent consequences of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and sentiment in culture, from the Shepard murder to the bullying and suicide of LGBTQ+ youth — the use of affinity as an expressive device in musical performance becomes significantly important to engaging audiences.

For this work, I interviewed SFGMC singers (referred to throughout by pseudonyms) who performed in Laramie.³ Additional interviews took place with two of the chorus’ artistic directors, Dr. Kathleen McGuire (2000-2010) and Dr. Tim Seelig (2011-present), and two audience members in attendance, both of whom were suggested by members of SFGMC. One of the audience members was a current student at University of Wyoming, an active member of the campus LGBTQ+ student group and a volunteer who worked the SFGMC performance; the other was a singer with Boston Gay Men’s Chorus and had followed SFGMC

from the 2012 GALA Festival in Denver to attend the chorus' performance in Laramie.

In the next section, I demonstrate that gay choruses can be understood as communities of practice that draw singers with shared identities (gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, and heterosexual allies of the LGBTQ+ community) and experiences, and how this informs an agenda for outreach and activism. Focusing more specifically on the SFGMC, I consider how its origin is intertwined with openly gay activist and politician Harvey Milk, whose assassination profoundly impacted the chorus's approaches to LGBTQ+ activism. The chorus also endured the devastation of the AIDS epidemic for nearly two decades, decimating singers in the 25-50 age range in particular, leaving a generation gap in the chorus. Just as late-1990s medical advancements began helping people with HIV/AIDS to live longer and healthier lives, Shepard was murdered and, in the years since, the LGBTQ+ community has contended with many issues pertaining to the violent consequences of living in a heteronormative culture. A sense of shared trauma — affinities — draws singers to the chorus.

Much of the chorus's work, particularly with commissioned music, is centrally concerned with the creation and maintenance of affinities: music reproducing the conflict of being LGBTQ+ in a heteronormative society, anxiety over what to do about it, and resolution in coming out. This music uses affinity to create change: by giving voice to LGBTQ+ experiences through song, the chorus attempts to elicit empathetic and affective responses from the audience. Analysis of music on anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and violence includes SFGMC's performances of "Never More Will the Wind," which the chorus performed in Laramie to mourn Shepard, and "Testimony," a song addressing self-destructive behaviours and suicide among LGBTQ+ people. Giving voice to their own stories, this music has an emotional impact on singers as they feel affinity with specific lyrics and sentiments in these songs. Singers' emotional responses to this music reflects the impact they intend to have on the audience, particularly in "red" areas. By stirring the feelings of audience members, the chorus hopes to create social change by provoking contemplation on the painful, and sometimes violent, consequences of heteronormativity.

Choruses as Sites for Affinity

The Shepard murder impacted the lives of many singers interviewed for this work, whether or not they were already members of SFGMC or other LGBTQ+-affiliated organizations at the time, who sought solace in an environment of people with a shared identity.⁴ Wenger characterizes organizations such as

SFGMC as communities of practice engaged in a specific activity — in this case, music-making — that strengthens bonds between participants (1999: 51). Such meaning is negotiated by the players in the community, usually produced and shaped by social dynamics and informed by history (52-55). As a community of practice, the gay chorus makes meaning through rehearsing and performing music centered on a shared LGBTQ+ identity historically subordinated by heteronormative culture. As the SFGMC and GALA mission statements suggest, their intent is to further societal and legal progress on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community (San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus n.d.; GALA Choruses n.d.).

Gay choruses work towards full social integration of the LGBTQ+ community by promoting greater societal acceptance, operating as “small-scale communities within larger urban settings” (Finnegan 2007: 301). Of course, not every GALA ensemble works within a larger urban setting, as there are many gay choruses in suburban and rural settings. But choruses like SFGMC function in and of themselves as “small-scale communities” working within their “larger urban settings.” In that sense, the membership of gay choruses in urban and rural settings generally reflects the diversity of the larger communities in which they reside. Notably, people of colour and transgender singers are increasingly bolstering the memberships of urban choruses such as SFGMC, Seattle Men's Chorus, and Boston Gay Men's Chorus, among others.⁵ The gay chorus is a “common-interest group” working toward social change both in and, as this work illustrates, outside of their hometowns (see Finnegan 2007: 314). In this sense, music-making becomes an activity that “brings people together” and “has certain wider implications for society more generally” (Finnegan 2007: 329).⁶ The reasons any given individual joins the chorus can vary: a desire to make music, to feel part of a community of people with shared identity, and/or to engage in activism that aspires to compel social change locally, nationally, and even internationally. As such, singers often idealize their particular choruses, and the cultivation of a strong sense of community within the ensemble can compel pride and loyalty (Mendonça 2002).

The history, purpose, and politics of the lesbian and gay choral movement can provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ people while engaging the larger community with issues of concern (Strachan 2006). Because choruses draw membership from the broader community, the ensemble may include singers with varying levels of musical proficiency (Bithell 2014: 88). The gay choral movement conjoins community values (in terms of both interpersonal relationships within the ensemble and socio-political concerns expressed through musical performance) and aesthetics (presenting high quality professional performances) (Strachan 2006; Bithell 2014). Ensemble members' sense of pride and loyalty can result in what might be characterized as a “utopian musical community” (Turner 1982).

Participation in musical ensembles can often result in “an intense, powerful, and even transformative communal feeling” (Mendonça 2002: 537). Such sentiments are often expressed by the participants in this project and their feelings of belonging to a community of non-heterosexual singers.⁷ Identification with the chorus community can create affinity between singers, informed by a sense of shared history — to a sense of affinity with historically significant actors in the history of the LGBTQ+ community — from the Stonewall riot, to Harvey Milk’s work as a gay rights activist, to the brutal murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, and more.⁸ Affinity can be facilitated between singers, sometimes of different generations, who share common experiences with homophobia, transphobia, and violence, as well as the ways in which their rights and protections have been impacted over the years.

Anthony Cohen argues that social movements are “invariably a coalition of interests” in which a wide variety of people “can find their own meanings” in the symbolism of that movement (2001: 18). The word “gay” functions as a symbol that often appears in the names of ensembles such as SFGMC, although this is not always the case — ensembles such as Seattle Men’s Chorus or Heartland Men’s Chorus (among others) are historically established and recognized as LGBTQ+ despite the lack of an explicit reference in the ensemble name; this is often underscored when they partner with other LGBTQ+-identifying organizations. The growing diversity of gay choruses in terms of age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity and non-conformity appears to foster community bonds, as singers recognize the vast experiences of their fellow choristers — a “coalition of interests” (Cohen 2001: 18).⁹ Where performative aesthetics are concerned, gay choruses emphasize positive and often multi-dimensional framings of gay masculinities with songs that make use of rhetorical devices such as sincerity, irony, and humour (MacLachlan 2015). The purpose is to humanize the vast experiences of the singers on stage, who present clearly as gay, rather than “passing” with heteronormative musical statements that might be more comfortable for audiences. Without shying away from music that overtly reflects LGBTQ+ experiences, the music’s emotional content is foregrounded to create a sense of affinity between the chorus and the audience.

SFGMC

SFGMC’s origin story constructs and reinforces affinities between its members and key figures in LGBTQ+ history. When SFGMC formed in late 1978, it was the height of the gay rights movement (as it was referred to at that time). SFGMC is the first known chorus to use the word “gay” in its name (GALA

Choruses n.d.). A leading figure in the 1978 gay rights movement was Harvey Milk, an openly gay activist and politician, and a pivotal figure for the LGBTQ+ community during his 11-month tenure on the city's Board of Supervisors. Due to both Milk's influence as an activist and politician, and the momentum of the gay rights movement in fighting cultural and institutional homophobia, the late Jon Reed Sims was inspired to form the chorus.¹⁰ On October 30, 1978, SFGMC held their first rehearsal. During the first month of rehearsals, the fledgling SFGMC could not have anticipated the profound impact Milk would have on their future. On November 27, slightly less than a month into SFGMC's existence, former Board Supervisor Dan White assassinated both Milk and San Francisco City Mayor George Moscone (San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus n.d.). The murders of Milk and Moscone devastated the city.

The events that led to Milk's and Moscone's deaths occurred shortly after the defeat of Proposition 6, a proposition on the California state ballot in 1978, opposed by both Milk and White, that sought to ban gays and lesbians from working in the state's public schools (Epstein and Schmiechen Epstein 2011).¹¹ Unexpectedly, White resigned four days after Proposition 6 was defeated. But then on November 14, 1978, only days after resigning, White asked to rescind his resignation and return to the Board of Supervisors. Moscone was not legally required to reappoint White, and he chose not to. Instead, Moscone decided to search for a replacement to represent White's district.

Milk and others on the Board of Supervisors understood that, if White were replaced, the Board could become more left-leaning, and so they lobbied against his reappointment. Moscone's public explanation for not reappointing White focused on White's rash decision to resign without consulting other supervisors or members of the public in the district he represented. While Moscone agreed that White could be excused for political naiveté because of his lack of experience, he also stated that the people of District 8 deserve "what's fair, right, and just" (Epstein and Schmiechen 2011). Essentially, White killed Milk and Moscone over what he saw as a plot to keep him from resuming his role on the City Board of Supervisors. Astonishingly, White was only convicted of manslaughter, serving five years of a seven-year sentence before he was released. This was particularly controversial, with accusations of homophobia levelled at the American justice system for lenient sentencing.

SFGMC gave their first performance on the steps of City Hall on November 27, among a mourning public (San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus n.d.). In a candlelight vigil, the chorus performed Mendelsohn's "Thou, Lord Our Refuge" in memory and honour of Milk and Moscone. The SFGMC singers could not have known they were taking part in one of the most pivotal moments in LGBTQ+ history, nor could they anticipate its specific impact

upon the role of the gay choral movement in confronting homophobia in the decades to follow. As I discuss further below, SFGMC still feels the profound impact of Milk's life and work as an openly gay activist and politician who changed the socio-political landscape for LGBTQ+ rights. As such, SFGMC's and Milk's stories are inextricably linked, a relationship the chorus openly embraces as a means of illustrating the organization's activist roots.

The personality of any given gay chorus is informed by the relationships and affinities between its artistic director and its singers, and their mutual respect for the history and standing of their organization in the larger community. At the top, the artistic director fashions the concert season thematically, selects appropriate music, and runs rehearsals. The artistic director is also regarded as the leader and primary representative — the public face — of the chorus. Since their formation in 1978, SFGMC has had several artistic directors. The three most recent — Dr. Stan Hill (1989-2000), Dr. Kathleen McGuire (2000-2010), and Dr. Tim Seelig (since January 2011) — have led the chorus through decades of profound losses and gains, including the decimation of the AIDS epidemic, the murder of Matthew Shepard, the suicide of Tyler Clementi (and many other LGBTQ+-identifying youth), and the 2015 Supreme Court ruling in favour of marriage equality, among many other examples. I interviewed McGuire and Seelig, who are both deeply respected by the chorus's singers. Each has had a lengthy career in choral music that has bolstered their reputations — McGuire as the chorus' artistic director for ten years, and Seelig through his work with Turtle Creek Chorale (a GALA member chorus) in Dallas, Texas from 1987-2007. As SFGMC artistic directors, both have been responsible for commissioning new works and engaging in outreach tours. In my interviews with them, both discussed the value of music in fostering relationships — or affinities — within the chorus, as well as between the chorus and its audiences (Mensel 2007; MacLachlan 2015; Moy 2015).

I met with McGuire in Melbourne, Australia on a hot and sunny afternoon, where she recounted her personal history and a series of events that led to her working with SFGMC (interview, February 7, 2014). Originally from Melbourne, McGuire's approach to music as a form of social activism was heavily impacted by visiting the United States. While looking into graduate studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1996, McGuire encountered a rally on campus celebrating the US Supreme Court's ruling on *Romer v. Evans* in the state of Colorado. Prior to the ruling, a 1992 amendment ("Amendment 2") excluded sexual orientation as a legally protected class — for instance, an employer could fire an openly gay employee because of their sexual orientation without recrimination. Upon relocating to Colorado from Australia, McGuire took the position of artistic director of the Rainbow Chorus. A few years later,

in October 1998, the Rainbow Chorus sang for a vigil at the hospital where Shepard lay in a coma. This shaped McGuire's approach to music and activism. Reflecting on her job offer, in 2000, for the role of artistic director of SFGMC, McGuire recalls:

I started that job having just finished my Doctorate, thinking, "Oh — I'm a conductor." I don't know when the turning point happened. But when I realized that the work I was doing ... the music was the means to the end. I was actually a social justice advocate and my passion was for civil rights, and music was the means by which I did that. Then I really became an effective artistic director for the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, because that's what's required. And I realized that's where my passion lay too. This is not something I did on my own. This is what the [SFGMC] guys wanted to do. And they're still doing it in various ways. (interview, February 7, 2014)

When McGuire met the SFGMC, she encountered a chorus in need of revitalization. It had been decimated by the AIDS epidemic, having lost hundreds of members over the course of nearly two decades. But McGuire also arrived in San Francisco at a time when the medical field had begun developing drugs and medications that could keep people with HIV+ diagnoses alive longer and prevent HIV from progressing to AIDS. McGuire recognized the significant need to preserve the story of the chorus as it battled and survived the AIDS epidemic — and ultimately, cultural homophobia based on misinformation and stigmatization about the disease:

That was a very conscious thing ... to try and make sure that we could make everybody in the group feel valued and needed, and that their contribution was important to the group. It was very challenging. Those guys, they're survivors. I think there's a lot of survivor guilt in there, too. (interview, February 7, 2014)

When McGuire stepped down in December 2010 to return to Melbourne, her successor, Seelig, brought with him the same type of understanding. I met with Seelig at SFGMC's administrative office. Seelig is an openly gay man with a long history as a member of GALA Choruses, having served as artistic director of Turtle Creek Chorale for two decades (1987-2007). In discussing his approach to artistic direction, Seelig explains the connection he feels with singers:

I don't think I'm unique at all about my own path — being a church musician, being thrown out of the church, having kids, losing my family, being HIV-positive. When the [SFGMC] search committee called [in 2010] and said, “You’ve made the finals” — woohoo! I’m so excited! *{dances in his chair and laughs}* [They asked,] “What are the three greatest attributes that you would bring to this position? So, what is it you would bring to the table if we hired you?” I said, well number one is empathy. There’s very little that any chorus member has gone through that I haven’t been through — whether that’s rejection, losing family, being HIV-positive, there’s still the stigma. You can’t surprise me anymore. I’ve been there. So, it allows me a freedom, an emotional freedom. (interview, April 7, 2014)

Seelig’s sentiments embody what the individual brings to communities of practice, and the sense of affinity that choruses like SFGMC value and foster (Ruskin and Rice 2012). Many in the chorus either know somebody who has experienced homophobic violence or they themselves have experienced it firsthand. For Bill, a singer in his mid-fifties, who survived a near-fatal homophobic attack, performing commemorative music about Shepard allows him to feel a sense of affinity.¹² The music becomes a means by which singers like Bill can share their stories, making social commentary on the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ violence by way of expressing personal experience. The chorus’s hope, then, is to move audiences emotionally.

Biography, Experience, and Musicking

The biographies of gay chorus singers inform the ways in which they relate to the music on a personal level, how they make music in the context of the chorus, and how they relate to one another. The potential exists for singers to feel affinity with one another based on shared experiences, particularly a shared sense of shame (see Gurly 2014), stigmatization, and community trauma (see Alexander 2004). Consequently, the process of musicking — the exchange between chorus and audience, performing music that feels intensely personal and which elicits emotional responses from the listeners — results in a feeling of stronger ensemble cohesion and community. Jon, a Caucasian man in his late 40s, approaches learning, understanding, and interpreting music from an intensely personal perspective by starting with the lyrics:

I try to take the lyrics out, and just read the lyrics on their own. I want to see what the lyrics are saying. And I think the smart musician takes his own experiences, applies them to the lyrics, adding his feelings about what has happened. And that's when you make music, instead of singing notes. (interview, May 1, 2013)

Jon's statement reflects a sense of affinity with the protagonist in the lyrics. After I asked about how singers can personalize a given piece of music, and how individual meaning-making builds the collective expression of the chorus, Jon responded, "People need to be 'out of the book,'" i.e., not reliant on the score (interview, May 1, 2013). When singers learn and memorize music efficiently, they can focus their attention on Seelig as he helps to shape SFGMC's collective expression, making the music affective through collective interpretation.

Singers value the opportunity to present their stories through musical performance, a valuable means of broaching personal topics. Songs or multi-movement works that contain lyrics about experiences with homophobic violence are often intentionally set to affective music — affective in terms of how melodic contour, harmonic progressions, and dynamic variation are used to reinforce the lyrics — and designed to evoke an emotional response. Both "Testimony"¹³ and "Never More Will the Wind,"¹⁴ pieces I discuss more below, embody such an aesthetic. Bill, a longtime member of SFGMC, explains that, because the stories presented through musical performance can be difficult to hear,

the value of music in exploring sensitive subjects in an accessible way cannot ever be [overstated]. And the use of musical harmony to convey a politically sensitive message, in a way that makes it more palatable to an otherwise sensitive audience, is something that I think has been explored for centuries but is entirely valuable and appropriate in this situation. (interview, May 2, 2013)

The combination of expressive and meaningful messages in the lyrics (with which singers can feel affinity) and highly affective music carries the potential to "change lives," a phrase many GALA Choruses singers use when talking about their aesthetics and mission for social change. I met with Simon, a Caucasian man in his late fifties, at the First Universalist Unitarian Church just prior to the start of an SFGMC rehearsal. Simon spoke of the important potential to move audiences emotionally, something I heard from many choral members:

Before we go on stage, they will usually say, “Tonight we’re going to change somebody’s life.” Somebody in that audience is going to hear us, whether it is a straight person or a gay person, and it’s going to change their lives. It may cause a gay person to come out to their families, or it may make a straight person realize that gay people are not evil. (interview, April 30, 2013)

McGuire described her first-hand experience of the ability of music and performance to challenge social constructions of “gay,” particularly in rural and “red” areas moreso than in urban and metropolitan centres:

Kathleen McGuire: I hear this so often from young people. Regardless of what their parents are telling them, or their preacher or their teacher, they’re getting bombarded with positive stuff [about LGBTQ people] from the media. But I think the gay choral movement has actually been a big part of that as well. In these little towns, it was like you were going back in time. They’ve got this preconceived idea, the sexy/scary stereotype [of LGBTQ+ people]. I think [touring “red” areas] has been the thing that’s most effective [for outreach]. So, they’ve been sort of brought up to the present date: “No [gays don’t look like those stereotypes] — gays look like *this*.”

Kevin Schattenkirk: So, negotiating the whole construction of “this is what we’ve been told in our churches,” and in homophobic sentiment, that “this is what gay people are: A, B, C, D, E...”

KM: “This is what we’re supposed to be afraid of, this is what’s going to infect us.”

KS: And then being confronted with the reality of it, and realizing that the reality doesn’t match up with...

KM: Right, and then they start questioning their belief system. They start to question what they’ve been told. And they start to see the reality. One of the things I saw repeatedly [in “red” areas] was the number of people who had never actually met a gay person, or one gay person in a town who shows up [to the concert]. Especially the young people — there might be one person who comes along and they suddenly realize they’re not alone. That has been the most

powerful thing I think, for them to realize, “Wow, look at all those gay people on the stage! I’m not a freak! I’m not alone!” But in a country town where they really haven’t met gay people, and they’ve only seen them on TV, to actually see real live “normal” looking people, doing a “normal” thing, is so empowering. *That*, I think, has been one of the most effective things that all of these choruses do when they go outside their comfort zones. (interview, February 7, 2014)

The “normal” thing McGuire describes as being pertinent to the chorus’s outreach work is manifest first in singers simply appearing on stage in all of their diversity — singers of varying races, ethnicities, ages, body shapes and sizes, and, maybe less obviously, gender identity and/or non-conformity. Whatever the audience’s perceptions are of what “gay” should look like, the chorus’s appearance is similar to that of any other choral ensemble. Performing a concert that combines musical proficiency and showmanship underscores the chorus’s professionalism and serious musicianship while simultaneously entertaining the audience (with sets, props, costumes, dancers, and “choralography” — basic choreography for the entire ensemble). Finally, the concert program itself is grounded in the familiar — drawing from the canons of musical theatre and popular music — supplemented with the occasional newly commissioned piece. Whether the chorus is performing comedic songs, musically proficient and serious material, or tear-jerkers, the concert program often represents a wide swath of emotions and experiences.

At least where SFGMC (and other choruses with the word “gay” in their names) are concerned, the audience witnesses the concert with full knowledge that the performers on stage are not heterosexual. This allows members of the audience more inclined towards heteronormativity the opportunity to engage any potential cognitive dissonance that may arise. Audience members can negotiate what they see on stage with the notions and stereotypes of what they have been conditioned to believe “gay” looks like. Such an approach to confronting stereotypes can be effective, particularly when it involves humour (see MacLachlan 2015). For instance, when SFGMC performs “Mama, I’m a Big Girl Now” from the musical *Hairspray*, the camp homosexuality of approximately 300 hundred male singers — again, in all their visible diversity — is utilized to be laughably ridiculous. Equally as effective are the pieces of music that address more serious and poignant concerns, such as mourning, loss, and self-destructive responses to heteronormative culture. This — a concert that draws from and focuses on a breadth of human experiences and emotions — I argue, is the “normal thing” audience members see on stage.

Music about Mourning and Adversity: “Never More Will the Wind” and “Testimony”

A few months prior to SFGMC’s 2012 concert in Laramie, the chorus performed Shawn Kirchner’s “Never More Will the Wind” for their hometown audience. Kirchner set to music a poem of the same name by Hilda Doolittle (more commonly known as H.D.). Composed in 1995, the song predates the Shepard murder by three years, but it also demonstrates how gay choruses will often repurpose existing songs for new reasons. When performed before Shepard’s murder, the audience might have heard H.D.’s poem as a general statement of mourning:

*Never more will the wind
cherish you again,
never more will the rain.*

*Never more
shall we find you bright
in the snow and wind.*

*The snow is melted,
the snow is gone,
and you are flown:*

*Like a bird out of our hand,
like a light out of our heart,
you are gone. (H.D. 1986: 103-4)*

But SFGMC repurposed the song as a statement about and for Shepard when the chorus performed it in Laramie after his death. The San Francisco and Laramie concert performances of “Never More Will the Wind” differed in only one way. During the chorus’ hometown performance in 2012, a spotlight shone on a replica of the fence to which Shepard was tied the night he was beaten. This was a rather provocative decision, and the chorus chose not to include the fence in their Laramie concert. While the fence was intended to remind audiences of the Shepard murder and, by extension, that acts of homophobic violence continue to happen even in San Francisco, to include the fence in the Laramie performance might have been akin to throwing water in the audience’s face. The Laramie concert, after all, was sponsored by the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which already served to remind the audience of the tragedy that took place in

their city. While the fence was intended as a tribute to Shepard, it had a strong impact on the singers performing:

You just couldn't help but think of Matthew Shepard as we were singing this, having him tied to that thing and dying on it. Some people actually thought it was too much, "No, that's just too visual." And other people were like, "No, we need to have that there to remember that that's how he died." (Simon, interview, April 30, 2013)

Many singers expressed to me the importance of repeating the Shepard story — whether through music specifically about him, or with repurposed songs such as "Never More Will the Wind" — because acts of anti-LGBTQ+ violence continue to happen. Ray, a Caucasian man in his mid-fifties and member of SFGMC for 10 years, contends that Shepard's story is important to tell "because it was so brutal and so hateful and so unnecessary." For Ray, "the poignancy of Matthew and some of these other characters is that they represent just the tip of the iceberg of actually what happens" (interview, May 1, 2013).

SFGMC began rehearsing "Testimony" in early 2012, a song that had been specifically composed for and given to the chorus by Stephen Schwartz. Schwartz drew from the It Gets Better video campaign to construct the song's message: an "out" adult person reflects on their youth when they were afraid to come out and contemplated suicide.¹⁵ The lyrics elicit starkly personal and vulnerable responses that inflect both the rehearsals and performances of the song, as Seelig explains:

We actually had a psychologist come to rehearsal [because] the singers were dropping out, saying, "I can't come to rehearsal — it's too hard." And he said, and I don't know if this can be corroborated or not, that nine out of ten gay men consider suicide at some time in their path. I totally believe it. I don't know if it's the case, I haven't seen the studies. But when he said that, everybody's like, "Of course!" At some point, of course you think, "Hmm, it would be a lot easier if I just went away." And ["Testimony"] hit. So many singers know someone who has committed suicide. And here we're singing this really hard music, really beautiful music with an incredible hope at the end. But you've got to get there. You have to be able to get through that sludge to find that hope.¹⁶ (interview, April 7, 2014)

Because of the song's message, singers were often careful in explaining exactly how their stories are reflected in "Testimony." No singer confided in me any struggles with self-harm and/or suicidal ideation. In a few instances, stories of someone else's struggle would come through second-hand sources. While I am not going to examine the stories of singers whom I did not interview, my interlocutors' awareness of others' personal struggles illustrates the close-knit community SFGMC attempts to foster among its members.

On a warm San Francisco afternoon, Jon and I meet at Sofia Café on 16th Street. The warm, inviting, and quiet atmosphere is conducive to an intimate discussion about "Testimony" and its impact on the performers themselves. Jon does not elaborate on whether or how his personal story is reflected in "Testimony," but he suspects that "everybody's interpretation of it depends on their life experience" (interview, May 1, 2013). Jon recites a specific lyric he finds particularly affecting:

I would have missed so many travels and adventures,
More wonders than I knew could be;
So many friends with jokes and secrets,
Not to mention the joy of living in authenticity.

After tearing up and taking a moment to collect himself, Jon confides, "It must speak to something in my experience from way back. And the other [line] that nobody can hold back on — it's the most brilliant line of [the song] — is *{looks and then points to the last line on the lyric sheet for "Testimony"}* 'I want to come back as me'" (interview, May 1, 2013). This particular line is the last one the chorus sings as "Testimony" arrives at its final cadence. Many singers interviewed for this project expressed that their emotional response to this line, specifically, reflects their experiences in overcoming adversity — whether that be with heteronormative bullying, cultural homophobia and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, self-doubt, feelings of worthlessness, or contemplation of suicide. Furthermore, it appears to reify their feelings of self-acceptance that result from their coming out and finding fulfillment in life.

For Seelig, that last line of "Testimony," in particular, "is incredibly poignant." Pausing for a few seconds and carefully considering the artistic meaning of the line versus the reality of those seven words for him — "I want to come back as me" — Seelig says, "It depends on what day you ask! *{smiles and pauses}* Not every single day would I want to come back as me *{laughs}*, and not even part of every day. I mean, you have to spend some time with yourself to be able to sing that authentically. That's hard" (interview, April 7, 2014). Simon similarly perceives how heteronormativity has impacted many LGBTQ+ people

who would “rather be like everybody else,” or more specifically, heterosexual cis-gender people not subject to harassment and/or violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (interview, April 30, 2013). Like many SFGMC singers I spoke with, Simon hopes “Testimony” will compel heterosexual cis-gender audiences to reflect on the impact of heteronormativity:

What I’m hoping is that the people — especially straight people — realize what so many gay people go through. I was talking to someone once about being gay, [they were] saying, “It’s a choice as a lifestyle.” And I looked at him and said, “Do you think I would pick this? Why would I choose this? To be discriminated against?” And on and on. It kind of threw him back. And so, I think for straight people, to hear that “I want to kill myself” — it affects people. It affects gay people that hear it because they’ve probably gone through that. And straight people, I think it makes them realize that, “Oh my god! This is what these poor people are going through.” (interview, April 30, 2013)

In January 2014, SFGMC began rehearsals for *Luster: An American Songbook*, a concert to take place a few months later. The chorus would premier their latest commission, *Tyler’s Suite*, a multi-movement work overseen by Stephen Schwartz with each movement composed by a different composer. *Tyler’s Suite* honours Tyler Clementi, the 18-year-old gay Rutgers University student who committed suicide in 2010. The impact of the work’s overall message on chorus singers was similar to “Testimony,” as Seelig explains:

One [singer] in particular said, “I can’t come to rehearsal. This is too hard for me to sing.” He said, “I did lose a friend recently to suicide.” But [the work is] not about suicide. So, what I said, and I maintain this — this is about our relationship to the world. That’s what *Tyler’s Suite* is about. It’s not about a boy who jumped off a bridge. It’s about our relationship to the world, and it’s about the world in which we live, and how did this happen? How did we...? {pause} We have to take responsibility for allowing a world to be created, and continue, where a boy would do that. So, it really is about relationships. (interview, April 7, 2014)

Such a statement — taking “responsibility” for “a world” where an LGBTQ+ person like Clementi would succumb to cultural homophobia and take his own life — is not just a comment on the impact of heteronormativity, but also

appears to be a statement on the LGBTQ+ community providing safe spaces for other at-risk LGBTQ+ people. The question Seelig's statement raises is how gay choruses can help mitigate acts of self-harm and suicide among LGBTQ+ people. Commissioning new music that addresses heteronormativity, cultural and institutional homophobia, and anti-LGBTQ+ violence is the means by which choruses engage in activism — with relevant statements about the contemporary concerns of the larger LGBTQ+ community. These choruses also engage in activism through outreach, performing in locales outside their comfortable hometown spaces, in communities that are not necessarily LGBTQ+-friendly.

Conclusion

Jacob, a Caucasian man from the UK in his mid-thirties and a singer with Boston Gay Men's Chorus, travelled to Laramie to see SFGMC perform their outreach concert in partnership with the Matthew Shepard Foundation in July 2012. Jacob describes the gay choral community as “[having] become like a second family to me.” He spoke passionately about the affinities he feels between himself and LGBTQ+ people, particularly those whom he senses are hurting:

Thinking about these kids who are killing themselves, or something like [the murder of] Matthew Shepard, in some way it feels like an attack on my family ... It feels like an attack on *my* people. So, it hits me in a place that is very personal. (interview, February 25, 2014)

Similar sentiments are reiterated in various ways by other singers, reflecting how they value the relationships they have cultivated through shared identity (LGBTQ+) and struggle (as victims of discrimination, violence, and contemplated or actual self-harm). Choruses are sites of affinity creation, articulation, and maintenance.

Petersen (2011) considers how the Shepard tragedy galvanized urban LGBTQ+ populations in particular, especially gay men, in terms of violent hostilities directed at non-heteronormative masculinities in both urban and — specific to this case — rural locales. Bill contends, “I think it's really critical that we really move society forward using music in this way, both to honour — part of it is a memorial — and to challenge. And sometimes even just to remind” (interview, May 2, 2013). As acts of homophobic violence continue to happen in both rural and urban locales, singers feel the visibility of the chorus is necessary in mitigating acts of discrimination and violence. Singers appear to find their work most rewarding when the chorus performs music that expresses the sometimes

dark and even violent realities of their commonly shared experiences. As Jacob states, “When it has bite to it, and when it has a challenge to it, that’s when I think we’re doing really good, really important work” (interview, February 25, 2014). The “challenge” lies in musical performances that humanize the consequences of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and violence, inviting the audience to be emotionally moved by the stories in the music, to empathize and feel affinity with the singers on stage. 🌻

Notes

1. Information in this paragraph about the Shepard murder was sourced from Lofreda (2000) and Petersen (2011).

2. As of April 2021, there are no known GALA-affiliated or LGBTQ-specific choral ensembles in the state of Wyoming.

3. Research interviews and fieldwork undertaken for this article took place in 2013 and 2014.

4. Sarah-Jane Gibson’s “Locality, Identity and Practice in Choral Singing: the Queen’s Island Victoria Male Voice Choir of Belfast” finds that the choir’s identity may derive more from singers’ ideological beliefs and communities of practice rather than from their locale. This is much the same case with SFGMC, where the locale — San Francisco — is less significant than the chorus’ LGBTQ+ roots.

5. Interviews with Dr. Tim Seelig (SFGMC, April 7, 2014), Dennis Coleman (Seattle Men’s Chorus, March 23, 2014), and Reuben Reynolds (Boston Gay Men’s Chorus, February 26, 2014).

6. For more on the emergence of communities through common interest in aesthetic forms, see Straw (1991) and Hast (1994).

7. While individual choruses function as social movements unto themselves, those choruses also function as part of a larger social movement organization: the GALA Choruses organization. This ties in particularly with Wenger’s description of constellations of practice (1999: 126-131). Where this pertains to SFGMC’s position in the larger GALA Choruses’ world is specifically in Wenger’s characterization that “such configurations are too far removed from the scope of engagement of participants, too broad, too diverse, or too diffuse to be usefully treated as single communities of practice” (126-127).

8. Davis and Heilbroner (2011) produced *Stonewall Uprising*, a documentary detailing the riot that essentially gave rise to the gay pride movement. After continued police invasions of the New York City gay bar the Stonewall Inn, on June 28, 1969, patrons of the bar fought back against the police, who were overwhelmed by the crowd. The Stonewall riot stands as the most significant act of resistance to homophobia in recent LGBTQ+ history because, later that same day, the first gay pride parade took place in New York City.

Brandon Teena was a transgender man who was raped and murdered by two men

in 1993, after they discovered Teena had been passing as male but was assigned female at birth. Teena's story is significant to recent LGBTQ+ history, especially with regard to violence against trans people in the US. The story is represented in the documentary film *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) as well as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), the latter starring Hilary Swank as Teena. Scholar Jack Halberstam also discusses Teena in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005).

9. Núñez (2012) analyzes how choral ensembles attempt to attract a more diverse singing body, and how the business practices of such ensembles are modified to better accommodate growth (of both the chorus and audience reach) and change. In interviews for this work, executive directors and artistic directors illuminated how chorus outreach is not solely limited to audiences, but also to recruiting new singers to more adequately represent the diversity of the larger LGBTQ+ community. Also, choruses such as Seattle Men's Chorus often partner with LGBTQ+ youth organizations and other choruses (often with their sister ensemble, Seattle Women's Chorus) to expand the scope of their outreach. Because choruses value both their history and the evolution of their tradition over time, and because many choruses are "tuition-based" (singing members pay dues to participate), recruiting newer and younger singers with tight personal budgets means that choruses have had to develop financial means of supporting these recruits. Choruses such as SFGMC, Seattle Men's Chorus, and Boston Gay Men's Chorus, among others, offer financial assistance and scholarship opportunities for those singers in need. Again, as Núñez explains, this means choruses must alter their approaches to business practices to accommodate changes to their memberships (2012: 212).

10. Unfortunately, Sims passed away from AIDS-related complications in 1984. All biographical information on SFGMC's history was obtained from: San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. 2017. About. Our Story. [Sfgmc.org](http://www.sfgmc.org) [accessed December 17, 2017]. Available at: <http://www.sfgmc.org/about-sfgmc/>

11. I am indebted to Epstein and Schmiechen for the wealth of information on Harvey Milk (2011, see especially pages 8-9).

12. In an interview at his home on May 2, 2013, and as part of a larger conversation on how he could relate to Matthew Shepard and other victims of homophobic violence, Bill discussed his experience, saying, "I'm incredibly lucky that I wasn't a Matthew Shepard. I've got four facial fractures in my face, and this whole side of my face {points to the left side of his face} has been completely reconstructed. I've got pieces of metal and stuff like that. So, I'm acutely aware. And that's permanently numb as well, right down here {points to his left jaw}. So, I'm acutely aware. My head was sort of like, that far away {hands spread about 1-2 feet} from a very solid brick wall. At any point, they could have done something that they didn't intend to — or that they *did* intend to — and it would have been curtains for me. I'm very lucky that I didn't get excessive bleeding into the brain."

13. See It Gets Better: "Testimony" by SF Gay Men's Chorus & Stephen Schwartz: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XZRNL9ZnyM>.

14. See Tribute to Matthew Separd, from SF Gay Men's Chorus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cg-vN7cHd38&t=1s>.

15. It Gets Better. [Official website]. <https://itgetsbetter.org/about/> (accessed July 1, 2019). As their website explains, the *It Gets Better* video campaign was founded in 2010 by Seattle-based advice columnist Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller in response to an epidemic of LGBTQ+ youth suicides. Anyone can contribute a video to the campaign. Essentially, the intent is to provide youth with stories from people who transcended bullying, self-destructive behaviours, and contemplations of suicide to find a more fulfilling life in adulthood — the message summed up by the project's name.

16. A recent study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) finds that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are at a higher risk for depression, suicide, drugs and alcohol use and abuse, and unsafe sex. The CDC also finds that nearly one-third of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have attempted suicide, compared to 6% of heterosexual youth. This study can be found at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) [accessed December 17, 2017]. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

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