**75 Years of the Corpus Christi Chorale**

**Lisa Louis**

Music: “Gloria.” Mozart Great Mass in C minor. Corpus Christi Chorale

*Gloria in excelsis Deo*

**Lisa Louis:** What you just heard was a few bars of the Gloria from Mozart’s Great Mass in C minor, sung by the Corpus Christi Chorale at a recent concert.

In the past, group singing, and amateur music-making in general, were more commonplace. You didn’t have records or CDs or mp3s or Youtube, so people got together and made their own music. Now, we can listen to music on demand, wherever and whenever we want.

But even though it is so easy to listen to recorded music, people still get together to listen to and create music live. That makes me wonder, what is it that motivates us to share that experience?

Speaking for myself, I was in high school when I realized that singing in a choir means something special to me. It gets to my heart. Singing with other people, when the music  comes together, can be a mountaintop experience. We don’t get many opportunities in everyday life to feel that kind of joy, but singing together and sharing music with other people does that for me.

I’m currently a member of the Corpus Christi Chorale, an amateur community chorus here in Corpus. The Chorale is 75 years old this year. For three-quarters of a century, people in Corpus Christi have been getting together to sing in this group. They don’t get paid. They spend hours every week working on music. And then they share the music with an audience. What has kept this volunteer music organization going for so long? And there are thousands of choirs in this country, and millions of adult singers doing the same thing. What is the motivation, and what is the value?

To explore this a little further, I spoke with Arlene Long, who is the current artistic director of the Corpus Christi Chorale. I asked Arlene what is special about singing, and not just singing, but singing together.

**Arlene Long**: Whenever we're working together, if it's on a good project like singing, people are going to feel good about what they're doing even when it gets hard, even when you have to work harder than you want to. There's still--the trajectory you're on is towards something good and we all need that. We all need that uplift of feeling like we're making a difference in the world.some of the studies say our hearts get, um, synchronized when everybody in the room is singing to the same beat, and we've all experienced that. We don't usually think “Oh. I'm being synchronized with these people” but that is what happens. so many times after Chorale people have been rehearsing for an hour and a half or two, after having done a day's worth of work and they're tired, but I cannot tell you how many people say “I feel better leaving than I did when I got here.” And that, to me, says we all needed this experience of being together doing work on the same something, putting our minds and hearts and physical energy into something together. It’s the connection, I'm sure, that's so good for us..

**LL:** This really brings to light so much of why singing and music-making with other people can be such a powerful experience. What about the other people in the room during a performance, the audience. That’s the other piece, of course, of performing music live.

**AL:** When I'm in the audience, I always feel like I've received something that I didn't know was there or gotten a new perspective on something. Experiencing beauty is hugely important to us as human beings. It takes the audience's active participation in listening and they get out of it what they give it. If they can give themselves over to really take in the text and the text is riding on the harmony and melody, it's a beautiful mystery how all of that happens together to affect our response. The audience doing it together, listening together, experiences something that is different than if they each experienced probably the same exact music but not together. There's great power in being in community, both for singers and audience. Pavarotti used to talk about the circle that he could feel happening between his singing onstage and the audience’s receiving his music, and the energy circle that that created. He fed the audience; the audience fed him. And that generated the energy exchange, really. Can you see my hand going around in the air? And so, yes, the audience is absolutely as essential as the singers on stage to how the concert goes. I don't know that the audience always knows that. But I'm going to tell them they are as important as the singers because, without them, we could have a good time but it's different when somebody is listening. There is this relationship that happens between singers and audience, so that we're all in this space, in this time, in this experience together. And I can't think of anything more human and more uplifting than having a together experience. That's what we yearn for.

**LL:** So I talked in the beginning of the podcast about music-making bringing joy to everyday life. There’s a poignant example of this from an oral history interview done with an English horse driver named Fred Mitchell, in the late sixties. Fred, who was 85 at the time of the interview, had had a pretty rough life: hard work, no prospects and not much fun. Except, he says, for one thing.

I asked Arlene to read an excerpt from the interview.  Fred’s talking here about how the teenage boys in his village goof off all the time. By the way, this clip may sound a little different; we recorded this part of the interview on the stage of Texas A&M Corpus Christi’s Performing Arts Center. Let’s have a listen.

**AL:**

These boys play a lot. Look up anytime and ten to one you’ll find them playing. Football, riding around. I never did any playing in all my life. There was nothing in my childhood, only work. I never had pleasure. One day a year I went to Felixstowe with the chapel women and children, and that was my pleasure. But I have forgotten one thing -- the singing. There was such a lot of singing in the villages then, and this was my pleasure, too. Boys sang in the fields, and at night we all met at the Forge and sang. The chapels were full of singing. When the first war came, it was singing, singing all the time. So I lie; I have had pleasure. I have had singing.

All of that is true.I feel so rich for the music making and the people with whom I make music and have made music.

**LL:** Arlene says that her life is rich, not just because she’s talented at music but she’s had the opportunity to make music with others. And in the excerpt, Fred has a revelation, in the middle of the interview, that music brought joy even to his difficult life, and connected him to his community. All of the examples that he gives are of singing with other people: at work, at leisure, in church, in solidarity.  And maybe that sense of richness, of joy, of community, helps explain how the Corpus Christi Chorale has kept going for 75 years. Here’s Arlene again.

**AL:** Most people want to be part of something bigger than themselves. Most of the time we're after community feeling of some kind. Singing actually makes one feel better physically and emotionally, usually. It kicks in endorphins and all kinds of things that are good for us. Um, we like being together to create beauty or to create fun or whatever it is we're creating at the moment. Hmm. Some people have a real need to express something that cannot be expressed so well as one person but as a group can do something amazing.

**LL:** Finally, I asked Arlene what difference a choir makes to a community.

**AL:** It is a symbol that people in this community value the arts, and that's a tricky word. It has become kind of an elite word and it shouldn't be. It should be the right of every human being to be an artist in some way. Singing is a good thing, Symphony is a good thing, all the arts help us be truly more human than we might be otherwise. We need to feed that part of us that can think higher and live more fully and more in harmony with the rest of the world.

Music: Joan Whitney and Alex Kramer. “No Man is an Island.” Arr. Long. Performed by Corpus Christi Chorale.

*No man is an island, no man stands alone.*

*Each man’s joy is joy to me, each man’s grief is my own.*

*We need one another, so I will defend*

*Each man as my brother, each man as my friend.*

Bibliography

Ahlquist, Karen. *Chorus and Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Blythe, Ronald. *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*. New York: Pantheon, 1969.

Chorus America. *The Chorus Impact Study: How Children, Adults, and Communities Benefit from Choruses, Executive Summary and Key Findings.* S.l. 2009. Accessed June 27, 2019. <https://www.chorusamerica.org/sites/default/files/resources/ImpactStudy09_ExecSum.pdf>

“Community Chorus Now Has 83 Voices.” *Corpus Christi Caller*. October 30, 1945, sec. B, p. 1

Corpus Christi Caller-Times, and Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas. *Corpus Christi, 100 Years*. Corpus Christi:  Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 1952.

“Corpus Christi Community Chorus Chairmen Named.” *Corpus Christi Times*. October 19, 1945, sec. A, p. 12.

Jerold, Beverly. “Fasch and the Beginning of Modern Artistic Choral Singing.” *Bach* 35, no. 1 (2004): 61–86. Accessed June 4, 2019. JSTOR.

Joseph, Dawn, and Jane Southcott. “Music Participation for Older People: Five Choirs in Victoria, Australia.” Research Studies in Music Education 40, no. 2 (December 1, 2018): 176–90. Accessed June 4, 2019. Sage.

Kelly, Ryan. “Artistry and Equality: How the Berlin *Sing-Akademie* Transformed Community Choral Singing.” *The Choral Journal* 53, no. 10 (2013): 8–15. Accessed June 4, 2019.

Kramer, Michael W. “A Study of Voluntary Organizational Membership: The Assimilation Process in a Community Choir.” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 1 (January 19, 2011): 52–74. Accessed June 4, 2019.

Kushner, Roland. “Scale, Scope, and Structure in the Community Chorus Industry.” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 41, no. 1 (February 28, 2011): 38–54. Accessed June 4, 2019. Taylor and Francis.

Kushner, Roland, and Arthur E. King. “Performing Arts as a Club Good: Evidence from a Nonprofit Organization.” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 18, no. 1 (March 1994): 15–28. Accessed June 4, 2019. Springer.

Langston, Thomas W., and Margaret S. Barrett. “Capitalizing on Community Music: A Case Study of the Manifestation of Social Capital in a Community Choir.” *Research Studies in Music Education* 30, no. 2 (December 1, 2008): 118–38. Accessed June 4, 2019.

Lessoff, Alan. *Where Texas Meets the Sea*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015.

Meisenbach, Rebecca J., and Michael W. Kramer. “Exploring Nested Identities: Voluntary Membership, Social Category Identity, and Identification in a Community Choir.” *Management Communication Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (May 1, 2014): 187–213. Accessed June 4, 2019.

“Music Activities Council Forms Plans for Year.” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*. August 19, 1945, sec. C. p. 5.

“Music Activities Council Is Organized by Women.” *Corpus Christi Times*. March 13, 1945, sec. B, p. 2.

Plumb, Laura, and Theodore Stickley. “Singing to Promote Mental Health and Well-Being.” *Mental Health Practice (2014+); London* 20, no. 8 (May 2017): 31. Accessed June 4, 2019.

“Projects Are Suggested for Council.” *Corpus Christi Caller*. April 8, 1945, sec. C, p. 4.

Smith, Brenda, and Robert T. Sataloff. “Singing for a Lifetime: Perpetuating Intergenerational Choirs.” *The Choral Journal* 53, no. 10 (2013): 16–25. Accessed June 4, 2019.

Veblen, Kari, and Bengt Olsson. “Community Music: Toward an International Overview.” In *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, edited by Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson, 730–53. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2002.

Weinstein, Daniel, Jacques Launay, Eiluned Pearce, Robin I. M. Dunbar, and Lauren Stewart. “Singing and Social Bonding: Changes in Connectivity and Pain Threshold as a Function of Group Size.” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 2 (March 2016): 152–58. Accessed June 4, 2019. ScienceDirect.