

Welcome to our *Chorus Notes* re-boot!

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Dear Members and Friends of the Chorus,

I'm delighted that we are bringing back *Chorus Notes*, which is a great way for us to share news of our singing community and upcoming projects. We aim to publish two issues in our concert year—in the Winter and Spring.

In its early years, the chorus had an active publicity committee, and one of their first endeavors was the creation of *Chorus Notes*. To help publicize an upcoming concert in the newsletter, they asked me for its theme. I'd not really thought about thematic programming—it was the committee that nudged me to come up with a descriptive theme to tie our concerts together.

That turned out to be fortuitous. Around that time, we began to get our first public funding for our concerts—first through the office of Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, then the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and subsequently via the office of Christine Quinn, our local representative on the City Council. Later, that funding was channeled through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which awarded grants based partly on the recommendation of a panel of music professionals. I'm confident that our theme-based concerts appealed to the panel, so perhaps indirectly, the first incarnation of *Chorus Notes* was instrumental in our musical and financial success.

Over the years, the awards panels have continued to laud our programming themes. It has been exciting for me to witness the chorus grapple with historically or socially interesting themes, and see the enthusiastic response of our audiences: a crowded auditorium shouting out Woody Guthrie songs; weeping to soulful slave songs above the vaulted cellar of the Church of the Holy Apostles, where runaways may have been sheltered by the Underground Railway; sing along to the lyrics of Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, and Yip Harburg; circle the aisles to Native American drumming; and dance the jitterbug in our aisles.

We've got lots more ideas to explore. Our winter concert includes music to celebrate the warmth of the holidays and also bring a little light to these dark days. The highlight will be "The Divine Teachings of St. Francis of Assisi," written for us by our "composer-in-residence" Tom Garber. We performed Tom's wonderful music a couple of years ago, and we're happy to have the return of baritone soloist Anthony Turner, percussionist Michael Wimberly and Ok Kyun Kang and Yoonmi Lee for the ensemble of birds. Come late January, we'll begin work on our spring concert, continuing last year's theme of American rock music.

Welcome back, *Chorus Notes*.

Jack Eppler

Founder and Director



Talking with Tom Garber, our "Composer-in-Residence"

Not every chorus is lucky enough to have a composer-in-residence. Our very special "CIR" is Thomas Garber, a classically trained musician and longtime computer programmer/analyst at the Bank of New York Mellon. In the course of his 24-year association with the Chorus (the last several as a member of the Board), Garber has arranged a number of unique pieces for our group. Two of them, "The Divine Teachings of St. Francis" and "Fond Memories of Ivje," form the cornerstone of this year's holiday concert, *Behold How Good & Pleasant: Together in Harmony*.



Garber grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, an atomic scientist by training, studied violin briefly and then actually taught himself to play by playing along with records. He remembers his childhood home as always filled with the music of Mozart and Dvořák Quartets—and his mother (who played the piano) singing songs from Broadway musicals.

Garber's musical studies began with piano at age six; cello lessons were added two years later. Fast forward to university, where he majored in cello at Carnegie Mellon, graduating in 1973 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music. During his college years, Garber played with a piano trio whose rendition of a Mendelssohn Trio was a prize winner of Pittsburgh's citywide prestigious Carnegie Awards. He received other recognition for his playing, including being selected to perform as a piano soloist with the Pittsburgh Symphony for its Young People's Concerts. After graduation, Garber moved to Europe to pursue graduate studies and earned a Masters in Music from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Territet, Switzerland, with a major in cello and minor in composition. He was recruited by the Kurpfalz Chamber Orchestra in Mannheim, Germany, where he was a cellist for several years.

Following are excerpts from a recent conversation chorus first alto Christina Pagano had with Garber:

Q. What inspired you to create a piece about St. Francis?

Some friends prompted me to write the piece. One friend told me about a recording produced by Jim Wilson called "God's Chorus of Crickets," a recording of crickets chirping in his back yard. Wilson discovered when he slowed the recording down a number of levels, the crickets suddenly sounded like angels singing. My friends suggested I write a piece that included a human chorus singing the same music as the crickets, and proposed the text be St. Francis' "Sermon to the Birds". I loved the idea, and decided that the piece should tell a story in which St. Francis discovers that the birds and the crickets already know about God, and really don't need him to give them a sermon. And that's the story the piece tells.

Q. Where did you find the birdsong instruments that make the piece so completely charming?

Yes, the birdsongs really bring nature into the piece. The instruments are actually toy bird call instruments that I found online. They are made in France by a company called Qu'elleest Belle. Their only store outside of France is in Soho (how's that for serendipity?). I went and tried out about 40 different bird calls before settling on the nuthatch, robin, nightingale, canary, partridge, mourning dove and sandpiper. (continued...)

Tom Garber (cont'd.)

Q. Many of the works you've done for the chorus are derived from the Yiddish tradition. Do you speak Yiddish, and if so, where did you learn the language—growing up in Pittsburgh?

A. *While I don't really know Yiddish, it is close to German, which I picked up in Mannheim. And since I read Hebrew, which uses the same alphabet as Yiddish, I can read the language. When Jack asked me to write a medley of Yiddish folk songs, I decided to have it be in memory of my grandmother's home town of Ivje, in what is today Belarus, but was Poland when she lived there. I took myself to the Yivo Jewish Research Institute, where I saw at least a dozen photos of Ivje.*

Q. How did you select the songs that make up "Fond Memories"?

A. *The Institute also had a remarkable four-volume collection of Yiddish Folk songs that I bought—the songs in the piece are from that collection. Just to make sure that what I had selected*

was authentic, I confirmed with Yivo that the songs were really sung in that village. Not only did they confirm that, but they made recordings of the songs for me sung by Yiddish performers going back to the 1920's. I also attended a rehearsal of the Workmen's Circle Chorus directed by Zalmen Mlotek, whose mother was Yivo's top archivist. His improvisations of the piano accompaniments in an authentic style taught me how to write the piano part.

Q. There's a lovely story behind the title of the piece, isn't there?

A. *Yes. When I asked the people at Yivo how to say 'Fond Memories of Ivje' in Yiddish, they said that 'fond memories' is a concept entirely unknown in Yiddish. After some discussion, they determined that the Yiddish title of the piece should be 'Longing for Ivje.' I think that's a wonderful, sentiment because my grandmother, who left her home at age 18 in 1907, must have always longed for Ivje...*

Rockin' the House Last Spring

Father's Day may never be the same for dads lucky enough to celebrate their holiday at the Chorus' Spring concert this year. When will they ever get to hear Sister Rosetta Tharpe's 1948 hit "Up Above My Head," with its roots in African-American Gospel, jazz and jump blues, performed on the same stage with the Beatles' "I Saw Her Standing There"? Or find themselves heartily singing along to "Hound Dog" or "Downtown"—and not feeling self-conscious?

Not only has rock 'n' roll had a revolutionary influence on our country's music and style that continues today, the music itself still draws—bringing more than 300 people to Chelsea's historic Church of the Holy Apostles that Sunday to hear guitarist Bob Dee and the Cosmosis, with drummer Joe Foster and Simon Walsh on bass, riff on some of rock 'n' roll's greatest hits, and choristers harmonize to doo-wop's "Sh-boom," "Great Pretender" and "Rock Around the Clock."

"Despite rock 'n' roll's status as a treasure of America's musical heritage, in our 24-year history we'd never dedicated a concert to this repertory," said chorus founder and director Jack Eppler. "Some expertssay rock 'n' roll's classic dance rhythms, appealing to young people of all races, may have helped spawn our civil rights movement. Given our group's mission of inclusion, it was high time we looked at the genre. Besides, it's great fun to sing!" (continued...)



Rockin' the House (cont'd.)

One dad's experience:

"As a family, we try to celebrate Father's Day with activities that include the whole family and are fun—I would rank this celebration, our first-ever at a chorus production, right up there with the best," said Kevin Crossley, dad of new-to-the-chorus soprano Melissa Crossley. Not a singer himself (but a student of the squeezebox as a kid), Crossley admitted that it was "neat seeing Melissa up on stage", but even more, from the beginning the family noticed a special vibe, in both the audience and the chorus itself.

"You couldn't help but sing along to those audience songs...everybody was doing it," he said, adding that the numbers were fun and familiar—and the group a welcoming mix of talent and aspiration. "It was a different, but great, Father's Day," and, P.S., daughter Melissa spied her dad dancing in the aisles at the end!

A "boogie night" for tenor dad's family

Longtime chorister Jerry Kaplan certainly looked like he had stepped out of the fifties when he joined fellow tenors onstage that day. With hair slicked back (à la "the Fonz"), leather jacket and a touch of eyeliner, he was ready to perform. And so he did—to an audience that included daughter Mara and 14-year-old granddaughter Ondraya. Jerry surprised even fellow choristers when he joined wife Jeanie LoVetri, a well-loved chorus guest artist, in a swinging lindy on stage, as Jack told the audience to "get up and dance". Fun fact: Jerry and Jeanie honed their dance chops at ballroom dancing class, where they met 24 years ago.

Kaplan loved the concert, pronouncing it "one of the most enjoyable we've had in many years. It was great to hear choristers joined by the audience in those classic fifties and sixties songs and to see the smiles on everyone's faces as happy memories came back. And it was even more special to sing and dance with my daughter and granddaughter in the audience."

Daughter Mara echoed her dad's sentiment. "Wonderful to see my dad, all dressed up, singing some of his favorite songs—some of the many he taught me as a young girl. Even more special, was that now my daughter was able to share in the memory."

One man's pursuit of the genre:

The "oldies but goodies" theme had an interesting side effect on some fans. Nostalgia for the genre prompted Joseph Ryan and Margaret Chang, friends of chorus alto Amy Shaheen, to chase down some classic rock bands performing in and near the city. So far, Ryan and Chang have seen The Who at Bethel Woods (site of the Woodstock festival in 1969), Gordon Lightfoot in Montclair, N.J., Judas Priest and Deep Purple at the Jones Beach Amphitheater and John Sebastian at Central Park Summerstage.

According to Ryan, "Seeing The Who perform the rock opera 'Tommy' on a beautiful summer evening was classic rock at its best. John Sebastian and Gordon Lightfoot brought back memories of my early college years in Greenwich Village. And Deep Purple—the guitar riffs in 'Smoke on the Water' were the best ever!"

All this good will has prompted plans for a second chapter, according to Eppler. "In last spring's concert we focused on the origins of rock 'n' roll and the earlier part of the era, up to the arrival of the Beatles in the mid-1960s. There was so much joy in the audience and in the chorus. That gave me the inspiration to continue to explore the genre with rock music from the psychedelic and hippie eras. So for Spring 2019, we'll be singing music from 'Hair', the first rock Broadway musical, as well as songs from the lineup of the Woodstock Festival, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary next summer."

SPOTLIGHT: Millie Hetherington

When stepping into a chorus rehearsal and before the singing even begins, the first thing you might notice is the diversity of its members. Young and old, racially varied, and in dress reflecting their employment status (some are business-suited up; others in way more casual attire), you'll also see a few walkers, wheelchairs and canes. But labels disappear during the Monday evening singing sessions when everyone mingles with ease, especially during rehearsal breaks when a table of noshes and nibbles beckon. In this inaugural issue (of the second coming) of Chorus Notes, we begin a regular feature—"Spotlight"—to shine a light on one chorus member who helps make the New York City Community Chorus the special group it is.



Reflecting on her own "kismet-like" call to the chorus, self-identified "seasoned senior" Millie Hetherington first heard about the group in a write-up in the *Westsider* newspaper that wasn't even supposed to be there. The West 90th Street resident called director Jack Eppler to find out more, and he said the article had been slated only for the Chelsea edition, but urged her to "come on down". That was in January 1997, and she's been a proud alto ever since.

The opportunity to sing with others was perfectly timed: Millie had retired the year before and was recuperating from breast cancer. "I remember my very first rehearsal. When I arrived and heard the chorus singing, I said to myself, 'Wow, this is where I want to be.'"

Back in the day, Millie had hoped to pursue a singing career—a long-time McGraw-Hill employee, she loved to perform at the company's soirées. "I once asked if I could sing with the band at one of their hotel Christmas parties, and I did...alone!" With the encouragement of co-workers, she took voice lessons for about 1 1/2 years, "but then I fell in love" she says, and turned her attentions to her soon-to-be husband. Still, "Sinatra never had lessons," she points out.

One of her most vivid chorus memories is a terrible rainstorm that preceded a Spring concert. "Getting there was awful," she recalls. "But the sun came out when we started singing." And she's learned to stop worrying during the final weeks of rehearsal when it often seems the chorus will never pull it off because somehow, everything always falls into place.

During her 21 years of singing, Millie has seen the NYCCC expand from a mere 20 members to its current roster of 60+, but the joy of joining in harmony with the community and the attendant camaraderie have remained the same. Says Millie, "It's been a warm, welcoming and rewarding experience!"

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Did you come to the Cabaret?

Hello HelloHello, fellow choristers and wonderful friends of the Chorus! Did you catch this year's Cabaret on August 12, 2018? No? Really? You must be a newbie chorister or recent Chorus friend to have missed it.

I'm Susan Steinhardt, chorus alto and the happy producer of the cabaret (for the last five years, with a lot of help from many choristers), and I'm proud to work with all these dedicated folks on what has become a signature fundraising effort for our group.

If you'd been there you would have heard a wide range of selections, both musical and spoken word. Soprano Cheryl Kann-Ferst started the show with a belty rendition of "Come to the Cabaret" from the musical *Cabaret*, which would have done Liza Minnelli proud. Fellow soprano, Thelma Thomas, longtime chorister and our resident storyteller, emceed the event, introducing each act while weaving tales with humor and suspense through the evening.

Soprano and songwriter Frances Key performed two selections from her musical, *Aussie Song*, which she hopes to mount in New York City sometime soon. The story is a tale of Frances' mother's growing up in Australia in the 1930's, her bond with her musically-inclined father, and her immigration to the United States as a war bride during World War II after marrying an American sailor she met when he was on leave in Perth.

Alto Sue Hertwig also presented an original composition, "Whatever May Come," which she called a "happy dirge" and a true tribute to optimism.

Tenor Ruth Hirsch tickled the ivories with the remarkable J. David Williams (who graciously accompanied us this year) in a Schumann piano duet. J. David's melodious tenor entertained with two tunes, one by André and Dory Previn and another by James Taylor.

And a host of other singers belted and crooned for the audience's pleasure. I pay tribute to the outstanding Katrina Art and Jeanie LoVetri, loyal chorus friends who joined us again this year, and longtime cabaret stalwarts altos Christina Pagano and Virginia Terzian, and basses John Fitzgerald and Bill Maher, whose numbers ranged from classic Gershwin ("Someone to Watch Over Me") to Laura Nyro political ("Save the Country"). And yes, I chimed in with Rodgers and Hammerstein's "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No."

If you had been there you also would have had your choice of a wide variety of "eats," including salad, sandwiches, and snacks donated from such generous local merchants as Fairway Market, Morton-Williams, Ideal Supermarket & Westside Market. Fellow choristers also contributed food, wine and drink—thanks to bass Bill Maher, soprano Margot Palmer-Poroner and alto Mary Greenberg.

While you were munching on the food, you might very well have taken a chance on one or more of our 20+ raffle prizes and come away from the evening with a gorgeous necklace, a silk scarf, a night in the theater or a delicious free brunch for two. Thanks to chorus board treasurer Pat Tyre for her faultless organization of that event.

I almost forgot the best part—that you could have—missed helping raise money for the New York City Community Chorus, so we can keep on sharing timeless music with our community, both near and far, and with our friends and families. Don't dare miss it next time!! You—YES, I mean YOU—must be at the next Cabaret, TBA!

