

CHORUS NOTES

A LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER

MAESTRO JACK

2011



2012



2013



2019



2013/Zack Kron Photography; 2019/Michael Clark Toomey

A lot happens in a quarter of a century. Who would have thought when our chorus started 25 years ago that we would grow into the robust musical organization we are today? I'm thrilled that we've lasted and thrived, even though as of this writing we have no idea when we can sing again in the same room or invite our neighbors to hear us.

At the beginning of this current global health crisis, we were at the epicenter here in New York. It reminded me of the last time New Yorkers were brought to our knees this way. It was September 2001, when the unimaginable happened: a foreign assault inside our own borders. Not unlike in today's ugly political climate, many looked for someone to blame, and demonized whole groups of Americans who were in no way connected with the extreme few who had attacked us.

It was a difficult time to stay positive and to keep an open heart. Our chorus has always strived to create good will in the community through singing, and to do that we've made a special point of including the music of many of the cultures that make our city great. One Monday night in our very early years, a cab driver wandered into rehearsal, a little tipsy. He said he wanted to talk to a priest, but instead found me. When he realized we were about to have a choir rehearsal, he boasted in broken English that he could sing Qawwali, which I knew to be Sufi devotional music. I asked him to sing for me, and even though his delivery was rough, I could feel his passion. I invited him to come back as guest soloist at our next con-

cert, and he did.

After that, Mr. Khan and I kept in touch. So a couple of years later, I was delighted to see him stride through the door, arms open wide, his traditional cotton tunic flowing to his knees. However, this was just about a week after 9/11, and as I walked towards him, I'm embarrassed to say that for a split second the current events clouded my mind and I thought, "What if he has explosives strapped under there?" But in the next second, I thought, "It would be better to risk death than to reject this man's embrace."

This spring, when the city first cancelled all large gatherings, we had to call off our next rehearsal. I was crestfallen, wondering how we would survive. But then I thought, since I was going to start teaching school online, why not gather the chorus one more time—on the internet? At least we could say goodbye for the season. That Monday, I was astonished when more than two thirds of us showed up on Zoom. I hadn't fully understood how much the chorus meant to our members. So we just decided to keep going. I really miss the joyful atmosphere of seeing us all together in the same bright room. But in the meantime, every week when we gather online and I scroll through the gallery of little squares on my computer screen, my heart warms knowing that we are still with each other, united by the love of singing together. Singing, it turns out, is exactly what we need to take us to the other side of this challenging time.

All the best,
Jack Eppler
Founder & Director

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EDITOR'S NOTE

My first concert with what was then Holy Apostles Community Chorus was in December 2006. (I had found HACC through an online search for “no-audition” choruses, after having choked at an audition for the “Broadway” chorus at the 92nd Street Y.) It was called Songs from the Trenches: Holiday Music at War Time. There were trumpets and trombones played by talented guest musicians, J. David improvising on the organ and Jeanie LoVetri and Jack soloing...and there was a quirky poem about peace by then-soprano Charlotte Pomerantz in the program ads. Rehearsals accommodated the eccentricities of choristers (and there were many) while everyone worked on making music and memories.

This anniversary newsletter is all about those memories, but really, little of the spirit that drives this group has changed—and isn't that wonderful?

Enjoy looking back as we move forward,
Christina Pagano
Alto 1 and Editor

CHORUS NOTES

A WALK THROUGH 25 YEARS OF NYCCC

Any organization that is still growing—and thriving—after a quarter century deserves to celebrate, and party it will when group gatherings and choral singing are once again deemed risk-free. But we can still raise a private, socially-distanced glass to the chorus and have a meander through its colorful and unique evolution.

Of course, no group like this exists in a vacuum, so on that November evening in 1994 when a group of 15 from the Chelsea neighborhood set out with Jack Eppler to go caroling, the world around them was changing in profound and interesting ways.

The Internet was just starting to go mainstream—email was gaining a foothold in business and households, and Amazon.com and Google were born. Hip-hop was creating a musical revolution, Bill Clinton was president and the economy was booming. People felt good.

The chorus’ origins are steeped in history. Its founding singers came from Penn South, a 22-building cooperative built by the ILGWU that opened in 1962 at a ceremony attended by then-President John F. Kennedy, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. NYCCC was egalitarian from the start. Homeless folks were welcome to join (and did), often recruited from the soup kitchen at the Church of the Holy Apostles, the chorus’ rehearsal and concert location, then and now. There was never an audition requirement, and audience sing-alongs were, and are, a unique and

popular part of every concert.

In those early days, the chorus created an “Executive Committee” (a version of which is still functioning today), comprised entirely of choristers and chaired by alto Joanne Collier, which became the group’s main administrative arm.

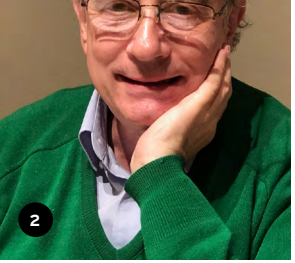
Experimentation—with growth and style, with repertoire and guest artists—marked the 90s. Recognizing the varying abilities of the group, Jack organized some pre-rehearsal “musicianship workshops”—an idea that never truly gained traction. But sometime later, an acquaintance of Jack’s, Her Royal Highness Princess Christina of the Netherlands (yes, royalty!), began meeting with interested choristers before rehearsals, working on “freeing the voice,” an activity that lasted several seasons.

The group’s first “official” guest artist was Pervais Khan, the Pakistani cab driver mentioned in Jack’s letter. The version of the Qawwali he performed at the December 1997 concert was interpreted by a friend from the Pakistani mission to the United Nations.

Even at this nascent stage, the chorus had its very own composer-in-residence, Tom Garber, many of whose works it has performed. The first, also in 1997, was his arrangement of the prayer from the opera “Hansel and Gretel,” and the following year, the group premiered his “Fond Memories of Ivy” a medley of Chassidic tunes sung in Yiddish. Tom was introduced to the NYCCC by Betty Klein, an early chorister and member of the original chorus of the 1941 Broadway production of Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin’s *Lady in the Dark*.



1. In the early days, most chorus members hailed from neighboring Penn South. 2. Composer-in-residence Tom Garber's works have delighted NYCCC audiences since its early days. 3. Post-solo in 2011, tenor Cort Cheek acknowledges the audience's wholehearted approval. Photo: Zack Kron Photography.



1998: 21 SINGERS

In those early days, it was frequently “all hands on deck” in terms of performers. At the holiday concert on the eve of the “turn of the century,” for example, J. David Williams, the chorus’ original and longtime accompanist and a master organist, entertained the audience with a Vivaldi organ concerto, and Jack sang four early Italian arias and a Mozart aria.

1999: 35 SINGERS

The chorus began to truly find its footing in the 21st century’s first decade, broadening its repertoire to embrace many cultures and musical forms, increasing its circle of “friends” and guest artists and strengthening its ties to the community. On the world front, earth-shattering events were changing the course of history, beginning with September 11, 2001. That December, guest

family in the military sat down during its performance.) A Chinese-American chorus called “Jersey Voice” rounded out the guests—they joined the group in singing the national song of Mongolia, “My Beautiful Steppes,” in Mandarin.

2004: 79 SINGERS

Ten years as a chorus—how quickly they passed! That spring concert honored *Music of the Jewish and African Diasporas* and welcomed Tiffany Jackson as featured soloist for the first time. The official tenth anniversary concert in December was *Les Fêtes à Paris* or *Holidays in Paris*, a celebration of the joie de vivre of France and its music, with Metropolitan Opera soprano, Frances Ginsberg, a friend of longtime bass Lascelles Black, accompanied by a nine-piece baroque ensemble. The main event was Charpentier’s “Messe de Minuit.”

As repertoire range expanded in the

El Rey Nimrod.” Among guest artists during that time were Nicole Tieri, a finalist from 2004’s *American Idol*, Rashad Naylor from the Broadway company of *Hairspray*, and Broadway singer Gail Nelson.

2007: 73 SINGERS

That year, the chorus became a tax-exempt New York State Corporation, first under the name Holy Apostles Community Chorus, later revising it to New York City Community Chorus at Holy Apostles. It appointed its first Board; its Secretary, soprano Margot Palmer-Poroner, is still singing with the Chorus today. The group’s new status made it eligible for grants, requiring an even greater integration with the community. So the following Spring, just prior to the election of Barack Obama, and in the midst of a global financial crisis that inhibited giving to many non-profits, it seemed appropriate to honor the retirement of Holy Apostles’ longtime rector, Reverend William Greenlaw. Then-New York State Senator Tom Duane issued a proclamation lauding the Reverend’s service to the community and social justice. The music, *Songs of Freedom and Bondage*, featured some of the earliest-known transcriptions of slave music—fitting for its setting, in a church said to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Jack’s programming vision was continually evolving, and in 2010, he realized an ambition that had been “gestating for a while,” producing a concert version (with piano) of Kurt Weill’s stirring musical *Lost in the Stars*, with guests Tiffany Jackson and Anthony Turner and choristers cast in

“NYCCC was egalitarian from the start...There was never an audition requirement...” (A policy that continues today.)

soloist Jeanie LoVetri sang the Irish lullaby, “Turah-Lurah-Lurah” in memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks. A guest doo-wop group from the subway added to an eclectic program that also premiered an avant-garde piece by composer Philip Corner.

Two years later, the Iraq war began. Featured in that year’s Spring concert was, “Say Your Piece,” an anti-war protest song created by chorister and avant-garde composer Daniel Goode. (Some choristers with

early 2000s, so did premieres of works by “chorus friends” (at least nine by 2005) and a network of guest “friends”. And Jack began to selectively showcase in-house talents, like longtime tenor Cort Cheek. Cort began soloing during the early days, beginning with the Aretha Franklin version of Otis Redding’s “Respect,” a number he’s reprised several times. Accompanist and tenor J. David Williams wowed the audience in 2005 with a Ladino rendition of “Cuando



4. Composer John McDowell's (at piano) "Woods Suite," which draws upon Native American sacred practices, was the highlight of the December 2015 concert. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey. 5. "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" was NYCCC's musical contribution to the January 2018 inauguration of City Council Speaker Corey Johnson. 6. An iconic image by photographer Ernest Cole was featured on the Spring 2013 program cover. 7. Audience members and choristers join in the traditional Native American circle dance finale of *In Search of a Vision*. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey.

many of the roles. Three years later, the chorus welcomed a full orchestra with a larger cast, performing the musical to a full house. Both concert programs featured photos by Ernest Cole, a Black photographic assistant working for a European magazine, who documented the harshness of life under South African apartheid in the 1960s. Jack noted in the 2013 program notes, "The chorus is the heart and soul of this musical and like our own Chorus, its job is to heal and unify through singing, that which is broken and divided."

NYCCC's twentieth anniversary celebration spanned a full year, from December 2014 through December 2015. The first concert heralded THE day in 1994 when the small group went caroling at Penn South. The chorus reprised some of its favorite songs and welcomed now-familiar guests Tiffany Jackson, Jeanie LoVetri and Katrina Art. Highlighting the event was the premiere of "Anthem," composed by poet and chorister, alto Charlotte Pomerantz, and arranged to the music of Mendelssohn's *Gutenberg Cantata* (familiar from the carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing") by Tom Garber. Its final verse:

*"That is why we gather here,
to sing and cry and shout
and cheer
Our beloved people's chorus
in its glorious twentieth year!"*

The year-long commemoration, culminating in the December concert, *In Search of a Vision*, reprised "Woods Suite" by Jack's friend and Adirondack camping buddy, Academy Award-winning composer John McDowell, with the rest of the camping group assisting in the performance. The program drew from a host of musical traditions, including Lakota, African, and Turkish. It opened with the French carol "Angels We Have Heard on High," in remembrance of the terrorist attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in Paris early that year, and closed with Nancy van Ness' American Creative Dance Company leading the audience and chorus members in a traditional Native American circle dance around the church.

2015: 62 SINGERS

The next five years were a blur of vibrant musical tributes, continuing shifts in national and global affairs and phenomenal growth in the Chorus. The presidential election of 2016 ushered out Barack Obama, who'd aided the country's financial recovery and left the economy thriving, and ushered in Donald Trump, New York real estate mogul. That year, in a concert called *Psalms, Sermons and Prayers*, the chorus premiered its eighth work created or arranged by Tom Garber, *The Divine Teaching of St. Francis*, a privileged son of Umbria who renounced material trappings to minister to the poor and commune with nature. Garber's piece incorporates beauti-

ful and realistic bird song, produced by toy bird call instruments made only in France that he found in a store in SoHo. "I tried out about 40 different bird calls before settling on the nuthatch, robin, nightingale, canary, partridge, mourning dove and sandpiper," Garber told *Chorus Notes*.

That concert's final number—a robust audience/chorus rendition of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"—acknowledged the recent transition of power in Washington, D.C.

The next few years presented a rainbow of themes, reflecting on musical and social history. A 2017 tribute to universal acceptance, acknowledging and celebrating the 2015 Supreme Court affirmation of same-sex marriage called *Under the Rainbow: We Are One*; a 2018 celebration of the early days of rock 'n' roll (the first concert for new accompanist Evan Alparone) and in 2019, *A Summer to Love*, a SRO 50th anniversary tribute to both Woodstock and the Stonewall riots, produced with a first-time grant from NYC Pride/Heritage of Pride. In the midst of these busy seasons, the Chorus was invited to sing at the January 2018 inauguration of Corey Johnson, the New York City Council's first gay Speaker and NYCCC funder with the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs. A rousing rendition of "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" (with Cort on solo), prompted Speaker Johnson to bust some moves along with us.

Standing-room-only concerts had been and were again the norm, and the chorus was bursting at the seams...

2019: 95 SINGERS

An extraordinary number for this group—perhaps the result of a video the year before, created by Jack and generously produced by Gary Wachter—drew a whole new crop of



choristers to the group.

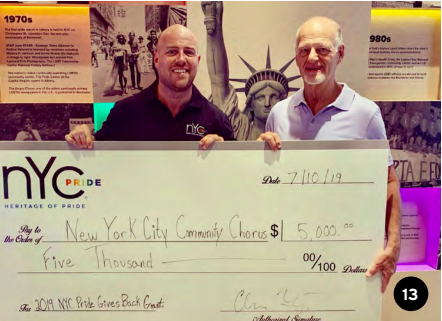
The December concert, *Imagine: An End to War*, honored the centennial of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and marked another first—hosting the New York City Flute Choir, which soloed and accompanied the group. A stunning rendition of "The Lord's Prayer" by guest artist Michèle Ivey brought the house down.

2020

Who could have predicted that the second half of NYCCC's 25th year would coincide with the onset of a pandemic? COVID was just gaining momentum in China as the chorus gathered in mid-January to rehearse a program to pay homage to the centennial of a woman's right to vote in the U.S., spotlighting tunes by female composers. The last rehearsal at the Church was March 9.

Since then, "Zooming together" on Monday evenings (with members on mute and Jack and Evan directing from various locations)—a technological gift no one could have anticipated in 1994—allows the Chorus to maintain a sense of community as it rehearses its repertoire, pausing at 7 p.m. to pay tribute to essential workers. And in June, 49 members created a virtual recording of Carole King's "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" with editor Alejandro Delgado (chorus bass) and audio pro Evan Alparone pulling it all together in the studio. Since the recording was uploaded to YouTube, it's received over 16,000 views, and was featured as a "Deep Breath Moment" in Governor Andrew Cuomo's daily coronavirus update on July 14.

Will there be another video? Yes—maybe even more than one (stay tuned!). But after 25 years, one thing continues to be true: Ain't no stopping us now!



OUR CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

Sometimes, if you're lucky, a guest artist will emerge as much more than that—a friend to the chorus, in fact, and a recurring presence. New York City Community Chorus has been fortunate enough to establish such friendships with a group of stellar artists over the years. Here's a nod to some who have graced our stage more than a few times:

Marcel van Rootselaar, a longtime friend of Jack's and part of his "Adirondack wilderness camping group," first appeared with us in 2000 when he lent the mellow tones of his saxophone to the cantorial solo in the premiere of Tom Garber's "Yizkor for the Ivyer K'Doshim," and again in 2002 for the premiere of John McDowell's "Oma Wani Yea." Years later he was on percussion with folk songs from India and Palestine, and during our 20th anniversary celebration, was key to the presentation of McDowell's complete "Woods Suite."

Bob Dee (with and without his band

Cosmosis) hit our stage with his rock guitar for the first time in 2005, and six years later played a soulful rendition of "Greensleeves" on acoustic guitar. Then, he and his band Cosmosis rock 'n' rolled with NYCCC during our 2018 and 2019 *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On: Rock 'n' Roll & Its Origins* and *A Summer to Love* tributes to the genre. Most recently, Bob and the band accompanied our 2020 virtual production of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow."

Jeanie LoVetri's thrilling soprano has often graced our stage, singing everything from Handel's "Let the Bright Seraphim" in 2007 to "When You Wish Upon a Star" and "Santa Baby." She has been on hand for many of our key moments, including our 20th anniversary celebration, and at every one of our fundraising cabarets.

Baritone **Anthony Turner**'s gorgeous voice was first heard by our audience in December 2007, and then the following spring when he was the curator and guest soloist for

our concert, *Songs of Freedom and Bondage*. Since then, he has been a principal soloist in many concerts, including *Lost in the Stars* as Leader (with and without full orchestra) and Tom Garber's *The Divine Teaching of St. Francis*.

Tiffany Jackson's formidable soprano was first heard in Spring 2004, performing music from "Porgy & Bess" in a show highlighting music from the Jewish and African diasporas, and she's since sung opera and Broadway tunes at numerous concerts. She was the principal guest artist at the 15th anniversary performance honoring J. David Williams, played Irina in both our productions of *Lost in the Stars* and joined us as we celebrated our 20th year.

Katrina Art's behind-the-scenes work as admin and stage manager for the Chorus is second only to her amazing, wide-ranging voice. Since her first appearance on the program in 2013, Katrina's performances have ranged from Broadway to contemporary rock—with a detour into a seductive Arabic belly-dance in 2017. She's also been a welcome addition to many of our cabarets.

Soprano **Ilya Martinez** and baritone **Rafael LeBron** first took the NYCCC stage

in December 2008 with a medley of Spanish songs. The husband and wife team returned four years later in the chorus' *A Child's Holiday* concert, dazzling us with operatic and folk tunes. That same year, the couple invited the chorus to join them and other professional singers in a local opera company's production of operatic choruses on Manhattan's Upper West Side (it was thrilling!). Our 2016 Spring concert, *Zarzuela Meets Broadway*, showcased Ilya and Rafael's expertise in the Spanish lyric-dramatic genre that they've brought to many stages in New York City.

SURVEY SHOWS: IT'S MORE THAN JUST THE MUSIC

In a survey of NYCCC choristers past and present this spring, everyone agreed that in addition to the joy of singing, it is the camaraderie, the friendships, the inclusivity and coming to a "safe place to have fun" that are an enormous part of what keeps choristers coming back year after year.

A 1996 recruit, soprano **Christina Bongolan**, agrees. Writing from Florida where she is still busy singing in the Civic Chorale of Greater Miami and the Miami Shores Presbyterian Church Sanctuary Choir, she recalls her favorite memory: "It was probably my first December Holiday concert with the Chorus. Seeing our diverse group of all ages and backgrounds celebrating together in a well-performed program respectful of all religions—singing Christmas carols, lighting the menorah and other traditions in perfect peace and joyful harmony."

Describing what her ten years with the chorus meant to her, she says, "Under Jack's excellent direction and David's talented accompaniment, a warmth and friendliness was always present while hard work and dedication to the music was attained. Friendships developed, as a 'Singing Family' with a desire to help the Chorus grow. The choristers grew, too, learning fun and challenging music. Jack's belief that 'anyone can sing' made it unquestionably inclusive and made everyone feel they belonged. Bravo Jack."

Alto **Linda Shuster**, who joined in 2019, noted just how unexpected the network of friendships has been. "I was brought in by a friend, reconnected there with an old

friend I hadn't seen in over 30 years and then brought in a friend, and she brought in another old friend. What a remarkable tapestry!"

Another early chorus member, soprano **Basha Weiss**, discovered NYCCC in 1998 and notes that she was proud to have been a part of helping get the new group on its feet, working on the PR committee to spread the



1. Anthony Turner. Photo: Zack Kron Photography. 2. Katrina Art. 3. Ilya Martinez & Rafael LeBron. 4. Bob Dee. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey. 5. Jeanie LoVetri. 6. Marcel van Rootselaar. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey. 7. Tiffany Jackson. Photo: Zack Kron Photography.



1. Alto Mary Greenberg (far left) dancing at the *Sing, Cry, Shout* finale in 2015. 2. Linda Shuster. 3. Kay Osborn. 4. Loretta White (right) and her sister after a holiday concert.



word. Today Basha is still singing, though in another borough.

REMINISCENCES FROM MEMBERS, PAST & PRESENT

From **Cathy Oyoue Simon & Dan Simon**: “I joined the Chorus in 2001, just before 9/11,” writes alto Cathy “O” from her current home in California. “Couples who sing together stay together!” she says, adding, “Dan and I met 12 years ago in Jack’s choir. It made so much sense to get married in the beautiful church where we rehearsed, and to invite the whole chorus to our special day. Sweet, sweet memories!” And a key remembrance from husband, former bass Dan Simon, who came to NYCCC in 2006: “Cathy said, ‘You know, we don’t just have to meet during the break; we could meet for coffee sometime.’” (Ed’s note: And the rest is history, as they say.) On rehearsing, he recalls, “I used to listen to the practice CD on the subway. I’d play my part over and over until the song was just in me.” Both are singing in the Agape International chorus in LA.

Former soprano **Melinda Mlinac**, who joined nine years ago after coming to see her friend Bob Dee guest-solo, remembers the Cathy/Dan romance very well, especially “Jack’s graceful greeting of the bride’s family from Africa at the concert.” A job change took her away from the chorus at the end of 2017.



5. May Cheung (right) with chorus buddy, Edith Kealey. 6. Neil Matharoo and guitar at *A Summer to Love*. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey. 7. One of the chorus’ early recruits, Christina Bongolan (3rd from left) joins Barbara Weiss, Nadege Moray, Roselynn Boddie, Muriel Ellenport. 8. Miriam Duhan. 9. Tenor Nelly Stins (center) “singing out” as always. 10. Soprano Roseanne Benjamin solos during 2011’s *On the Sunny Side: The Dorothy Fields Songbook*. 11. The birth of Roseanne’s third child coincided with the chorus’ 2013’s production of *Lost in the Stars*. Photo: Michael Clark Toomey.

From **Roseanne Benjamin**, soprano: “I was initially very reluctant to join a community chorus which met at Holy Apostles Episcopal Church in Chelsea.” (Roseanne will be starting a 5-year cantorial program this fall at the Jewish Theological Seminary.) “By Fall 2004, I was pregnant. I sang with the chorus through Spring 2005 as my belly grew, and three weeks before the June concert, my son Asher was born. Asher’s first

subway ride (before his bris) was to chorus rehearsal. Jack had encouraged me to stay through the concert, and I did. I was sure my relationship with the chorus was over after that, but Jack convinced me to stay and bring three-month-old Asher to rehearsal. Today, Jack and longstanding chorus members talk about how lucky they were to get to watch three babies grow from birth into toddlerhood, but I was really the lucky one,

to have been able to keep singing through my most hectic years.” While 2020 will be her last season because of the rigors of her upcoming cantorial studies, Roseanne is grateful for “all she’s learned from the Chorus. Jack always chooses eclectically-themed concerts, and the breadth and range of music I’ve been exposed to over the last 15 years has been extraordinary.”

Returning bass **Paul Marsolino**, whose short “first phase” with the Chorus lasted just a year, recalls: “The last concert I sang was *Songs of Freedom and Bondage: The Musical Legacy of Slavery in America* in Spring 2008. The Winter 2019 concert brought him back. “When I showed up for the first rehearsal in September, it was like coming home. The performance on December 15 was thrilling—standing room only and my friends came to support and cheer me on. I loved every minute. What a joyful experience!”

From tenor **Nelly Stins**, who found the chorus in 2010: “Coming from the Netherlands, the chorus gave my life in NYC a sense of real belonging. I met many special people who were all willing to do great things for the chorus and each other—most amazing was Brian’s [Ellerbeck] cooking and Mary’s [Greenberg] support during the 2012 cabaret I produced. For me, life is not complete without singing.” (These days, Nelly sings in the Het AGK choir in Amsterdam). A standout moment: “When I came to see if the chorus might be where I would want to sing in NYC, I ‘felt’ the people in that beautiful church with Dutch organ, and I immediately fell in love with Kurt Weill’s *Lost in the Stars*. Jack told me I was too late to sing the Weill concert, but I convinced him he needed me to support the tenor section—victory YESSSS! The beginning of my NYCCC Love Story.”

Alto **Mary Greenberg**, now in her eighth year with the chorus, shares this flashback from concert day: “We showed up

at the church at 1:30 for our 2 p.m. warm-up (showtime was 4:00) and a quilting event was in progress! The church staff and some of our members had to hustle to get things concert-ready (audience and stage seating had to be arranged in a hurry and we had to set out post-show refreshments). And with Jack’s ‘the show must go on’ spirit, we started warming up in the kitchen, amidst all the tables, sinks and other soup kitchen paraphernalia. Somehow, everything fell into place perfectly, proving how resilient we can be!”

Alto **Kay Osborn**, who joined in 2011, reminds fellow choristers of a familiar pre-concert moment: “Maybe what I love the most is that feeling of excitement as we all cram together in the cloakroom area right before we go onstage, everyone a little nervous but happy to be there and determined to do our best.”

Former chorister **Loretta White** credits the chorus with helping her “find her voice again”: “As a 2nd soprano, I remember how the 1st sopranos always kept me in line when I stepped into their range.” She also recalls with fondness her first season with the chorus in Spring 2014, when “Jack gave solos to me and fellow chorister Cort Cheek and we sang, ‘If You Don’t Know Me by Now.’ I received such praise for that song.” Today, Loretta is adding her voice to the chorus at St. Agnes Cathedral Choir in Rockville Center, NY.

Neil Matharoo’s very first day as a tenor in 2017 is his most memorable so far: “I was a little intimidated because the material was difficult, and yet the entire ensemble was singing so well. I really wasn’t sure that I could keep up. But [fellow tenor] Cort Cheek was so encouraging, and he asked me to return for the next rehearsal. Honestly, I stayed because of Cort and Jack’s positive leadership, and I’m glad I did!”

Alto **Miriam Duhan** was recruited to head up that section in 2018, during her first season: “And I love it—who knew?” she says.



12 & 13. Choristers were honored to be part of Dan and Cathy’s wedding at the Church of the Holy Apostles.



“With every season, I feel closer and closer to the members of the chorus, especially in my section. I never thought I would find such a perfect group to sing with. I love the repertoire—there are always songs I don’t like at the beginning and by concert time, I love them.” A recent highlight: “Making the recording for the virtual concert, I feel as if I and the whole chorus were really stepping out.”

Stepping up and stepping out—that’s true of everyone who has sung with the chorus over the years. Every season, this group of amateur singers, one of many throughout the world, steps up and out and gives their all for their audience. From very recent chorister, alto **May Cheung** (2019), perhaps a sentiment common to all: “I learned that singing keeps me happy and I love to be happy. I am extremely lucky to have found this chorus.”

SPOTLIGHT: RETURNING CHAMPIONS

Some choristers join for just a season or two, but more often, the same familiar faces show up year after year, drawn by the joy of singing together and the chorus’ powerful sense of community. Margot Palmer-Poroner and Cort Cheek are remarkable for both length of service—they’ve racked up a combined total of 40 years as members—and what they give back to the organization. These are their stories. **BY MARY GREENBERG**

CORT CHEEK —
“SINGING IS MY ANCHOR”

In the chorus’ early, pre-Google days, most members came from outreach efforts in the Chelsea neighborhood, and Cort Cheek considers the moment he was approached by former chorister Charlotte Pomerantz at a street fair to be pure kismet. “You’re the answer to my prayers,” he told her.

To fully appreciate why, here’s a brief recap of Cort’s journey, a unique mix of tragedy, tenacity and the spirit-lifting power of song. As a teen, the gifted tenor had set his sights on a career in music; he was accepted into a summer program at the famed Hartt School of Music in Hartford, CT, and when his parents couldn’t afford to send him there full-time, he began twelve years of private vocal training.

Fast-forward to 1990 when Cort, returning late one night to his Crown Heights neighborhood, was shot (he attributes it to a surge in violence against gays in the area; the perpetrator was never caught). The bullet entered his back, leaving him a T4 paraplegic (in layman’s terms, paralyzed from the chest down). “I spent 6 years at Goldwater, a rehabilitation center on Roosevelt Island,” he says. Their recreation department would put on shows, and Cort, struggling to get his voice back, began to sing again. When he was no longer medically eligible to stay at Goldwater, he was placed in a nursing home in the Bronx. “It was a terrible place—I felt



One of the high points of almost every concert is a stirring solo by Cort. Photo: Zack Kron Photography.

trapped,” he says. “I had to become my own social worker and when the place was finally investigated, it was guilty of 125 violations.”

In 1997, Cort was able to relocate to an apartment in Harlem, and in 1999, an apartment on 23rd street came through, and he moved on his birthday. “I was lost—it was overwhelming,” he says. “I didn’t know anyone and I was in a wheelchair. What I needed most was a musical adventure.”

Joining NYCCC was the perfect antidote to Cort’s craving for community and song. He was immediately assigned the role of chorus librarian, which helped him get to know everyone, greeting them with a smile as he handed out music. But his organizational skills were quickly eclipsed by his beautiful,

soulful voice. Inspired by gospel icons like Aretha Franklin and Mahalia Jackson, he was often offered solo parts in the chorus’ repertoire. “My favorites were ‘Respect’ and ‘Oh Holy Night,’” he says. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4alNWj1r8A&t=40s>).

Cort’s solos have brought NYCCC audiences and his fellow choristers to their feet for years, but applause is just a small part of what membership means to him. “Singing is my life and my anchor,” he says. “It’s allowed me to heal and be sociable at the same time.” With special kudos to Jack Eppler’s choice of challenging music and his leadership, Cort believes he found the group to help him learn lessons about himself and achieve his goal of always being the best he can be.

MARGOT PALMER-PORONER — VOLUNTEER EXTRAORDINAIRE!

From ordering and distributing music and managing its website and social media platforms, to fundraising and providing refreshments so members can munch and mingle during rehearsal breaks, the NYCCC relies on a small army of helpers to keep it running (mostly) smoothly. And no one exemplifies the volunteer spirit better than soprano Margot Palmer-Poroner.

Not long after joining NYCCC in January 2000, she became secretary of the Executive Committee and has been its chair on and off ever since. Margot was also a Board member for several years, and her energy and attention to detail help the chorus’ 10 other committees stay up-to-speed on what needs to be done, especially as concert day approaches. One of her biggest coups was tapping her publishing contacts to upgrade the concert program to its current slick format (it used to be mimeographed at the church), and she also spearheads ad sales for the program.

But while she’s happily consumed with behind-the-scenes responsibilities, Margot remains fully engaged and grateful for the opportunity to sing. Her introduction to music began as a child; the native French Canadian recalls her father leading the family in Sunday brunch sing-alongs with her mother at the piano. As a teen, she studied music theory and participated in school plays.

Taking a job as translator for a local labor union in Montreal meant regular trips to New York; Margot grew to love the city, especially after meeting her future husband one summer in Provincetown. She emigrated here for good in 1961 and the couple ran their own art gallery, then published the magazine ArtSpeak (Margot served as editor while raising twin boys) for 18 years.

Her busy career left her no time to exer-

cise her vocal cords, so upon retirement, she was delighted to discover the chorus, which she says has enhanced her life in numerous ways. “I used to be rather reserved, but I’m now able to reach out and share with other choristers—I feel like I’m part of a large family.” The friendship and support of chorus members has helped her face challenges, like her late husband’s battle with cancer. Singing also improves her mood. “After a rehearsal, I feel refreshed and happier. I even sing by myself at home, which has the same basic effect.”

Chorus director Jack Eppler honored Margot’s dedication by presenting her with an award during the chorus’ December 7, 2017 concert. Thinking she may need help making her way through the closely placed seats, down the steps and onto the stage to accept her trophy, he asked choristers Lee



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and Mary to accompany her to the podium. But even before he’d finished speaking, “The two sopranos sitting next to me lifted me up from my seat and gave me a push, and I ran to the front,” Margot recalls. Which is pretty par for the course for this always-at-the-ready, indomitable lady.



1. Margot (left) and fellow soprano Melissa Crossley post-concert. 2. Before heading to NYC, Margot served as translator for a trade union in Montreal.

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ON THE TOWN

Combine New York City's vast choral network, an abundance of composing talent, and New Yorkers' appreciation of formal and informal music performances and the result? Opportunity, for choristers citywide to add their voices in song on a variety of "stages." NYCCers have sung in many venues over the years—from the chorus' origins as a band of Chelsea carolers to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and the High Line. Here are just a few of their vocal adventures:

1. For the premiere of John Luther Adams' "In the Name of the Earth," 600 singers—8 from our ranks—gathered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in August 2018. Produced by the Mostly Mozart Festival, the 50-minute piece celebrates the North American continent. Front row, from left: Patricia McGovern, Christina Pagano, Mary Greenberg, Alelie Llapitan, Susan Olderman, Miriam Duhan. Second row: Frances Key, Alison Selover. You can have a listen to the finale here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urOZ8C9f1Qw>. 2. One cold, snowy night in 2017, 7 members trekked to Carnegie Hall to serve as audience "ringers" for Master Voices' performance of Bach's St. John Passion. From left: Mary Greenberg, Margaret Nelson, Alelie Llapitan. 3. In June 2019, Sing for Hope (singforhope.org), a non-profit that enlists musicians for public performances throughout NYC, invited the Chorus to serene rush-hour commuters at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Accompanist Evan Alparone is on the keys. 4. When soprano and composer Frances Key (far left) presented "Earth Cry" at the Theater for the New City Arts Festival in May 2019, 9 NYCCers lent their voices to the 7-minute call to environmental action.



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