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# Foreword

In its service to professional, volunteer, children/youth, and symphony/opera choruses, Chorus America has long been aware of the broad reach of the choral music art form. But much of what we have known about the overall impact of choruses has been anecdotal. Until now, we have not had data to document and illustrate many of the unique and important aspects of choruses, choral singers, and their impact on communities.

A growing body of research on the importance of all of the arts indicates that they can help enrich communities, improve education, and enhance quality of life. But the results of this project by Chorus America show that choruses and choral singers are leaders in improving community life—and that, if properly leveraged, they could play a more important role.

The following report shares what we have learned through Chorus America's Chorus Impact Study. This ground-breaking study comprises several research components: 1) questions posed to the general public in two national telephone polls; 2) six focus groups with choral singers in three regions; 3) an in-depth telephone poll of 623 professional and volunteer choral singers from across the United States; and 4) data gathered from the range of organizations that support specific kinds of choruses for use in estimating the total number of choruses across the country. In addition, another 347 singers were surveyed in the telephone poll to compare the findings in two different regions with the national findings.

Through this research we collected data about all kinds of choruses—not just the types that are generally members of Chorus America—to arrive at an estimate of the total number of choruses in this country. Finally, we drew upon data previously gathered by Chorus America and by other organizations to provide a context for interpreting the information presented here.

During the process of analyzing data from this first-ever study of the choral field, Chorus America and project analysts have identified areas for future study, including, for example, issues of diversity in choruses. The data gathered through this project represents Chorus America's first venture in national research and has laid an important foundation for future inquiry. The results have reaffirmed Chorus America's dedication to continue its efforts to gather and disseminate information about the choral field.

In any attempt to study the immense choral community, one thing becomes very clear: The choral field represents a huge diversity of organizations, repertoire, and participants. This report is designed to generate action from chorus and community leaders by helping them better understand the potential of the choral field in addressing cultural and civic needs. But not every finding in this report will resonate with every chorus, or every choral singer. To aid readers in their understanding of these findings, we have referenced data from a variety of sources. Although these other studies are not always directly analogous to Chorus America's, we included them to provide additional context in interpreting the survey results.



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We hope the report will be used in three important ways:

- *To guide* individual choruses along their own paths of success. The areas of inquiry are meant to spur similar inquiries by choruses in various communities. By making the questionnaires and data available, we invite others to build upon and/or replicate this research.
- *To inform* policymakers, funders, educators, and others about the many ways in which choruses can help them accomplish their goals.
- *To provide data* to inform other arts organizations and their research so that choruses are not overlooked in the search for ways to reinforce and reinvigorate cultural and civic life today and tomorrow.

We hope that this document will help further Chorus America’s mission “to strengthen choruses and increase appreciation of choral music so that more people are enriched by its beauty and power.”



John Alexander  
President



Ann Meier Baker  
Executive Director

# Executive Summary

Early in 2002, Chorus America, the service organization for choruses in North America, embarked on a study of the scope and presence of choruses in American society. The study was conducted by two firms: Robinson & Muenster Associates, Inc. (Sioux Falls, SD), for the quantitative research, and GSC Communications, Inc. (Swarthmore, PA), for the qualitative research. These firms conducted nationwide telephone polls, focus group interviews, and assembled data from various other sources, to provide the basis for the final report, edited and supervised by Chorus America. This study presents the first-ever scientifically derived overview of the enormous chorus “industry” in America today.

The primary purpose of the research is to document the level of participation in choral singing, survey certain attitudes and motivations of choral singers, and to compare this data with specific behaviors of the general public—in sum, the study establishes some general characteristics that distinguish choral participants from the rest of society and examines the kind of impact they have in their communities.

The study found that far more people participate in choral singing than in any other performing art. Based on a random national poll of 1,000 adults, the report found that in 15.6 percent of households, one or more *adults* had performed publicly in a chorus within the last 12 months. That amounts to 23.5 million adults. When children were included in the analysis, the number jumped to 18 percent of households, or 28.5 million adults and children. The poll confirms that choral singing is America’s participatory art form of choice; a major 1997 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) survey found that more Americans sang in choruses than publicly participated in any other performing art.

Underscoring this popularity is another statistic: More than one-third of the respondents in a poll of 623 choral singers said they regularly sing in more than one chorus. This is consistent with the study’s determination of the number of choruses active today, and the high level of commitment of the participants.

The report establishes that there are approximately 250,000 choruses in the United States: 12,000 professional and community choruses, at least 38,000 school choruses, and 200,000 church choirs. There are probably more choruses than any other kind of performing arts organizations in the country.

One of the key findings of the research for policymakers is that most singers are exposed to or participate in choral singing early in life. Of the choral singers surveyed, 56 percent grew up in homes where another family member sang in a chorus, and nearly two-thirds reported they frequently heard choral music on the radio or on recordings in their homes as children. Nearly three-fourths said their parents or siblings attended choral performances. Nearly 69 percent said they had their first choral experience in elementary or middle school. Clearly, the early exposure to choral singing is an enormous influence on the choices adults make later in life. These early influences set the stage for active involvement in the arts and in other aspects of modern life, as borne out by other findings in the study.



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As several findings of the study illustrate, an early introduction to the performing arts is an important component of improved socialization, community involvement, and development of academic skills in general. Choral singing—because of its emotional content, its discipline, and its requirement for personal interpretation and communication—plays an extraordinary role in an education system that seeks to benefit both the individual and society.

The policy implications of this finding are important. As Americans seek to address long-term social problems, and debate the goals and content of public education in particular, the body of research showing the positive influence of the arts continues to grow. As several findings of the study illustrate, an early introduction to the performing arts is an important component of improved socialization, community involvement, and development of academic skills in general. Choral singing—because of its emotional content, its discipline, and its requirement for personal interpretation and communication—plays an extraordinary role in an education system that seeks to benefit both the individual and society.

The study also found that choristers are very active in their communities, even apart from their chorus participation, and behave in ways that are important to community building. Nearly 76 percent of choral singers report performing other volunteer activities. In comparison, Independent Sector’s 2001 edition of *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* found that 44 percent of adults volunteered with organizations. Sixty-three percent of choristers report charitable giving to other arts organizations, compared with 18.8 percent of American households reported in the Independent Sector study.

In this same general finding, the most important insight came from the detailed discussion in the focus groups involving chorus participants. Overwhelmingly, they reported a belief that their choral participation inspired them to improve a range of skills useful in their social and professional interactions:

- **Teambuilding.** Choral singing teaches people “to row in the same direction,” and to cooperate.
- **Listening and following.** Taking direction is essential for the organization to work,

both in terms of interaction and the actual performance of music.

- **Creativity.** Singing requires and stimulates expression, and calls on the mind to engage an abstract idea.
- **Social interaction.** Choruses help participants develop confidence and “spread their wings” socially.
- **Discipline.** Commitment to any organization requires one to manage time, and this is especially true of choruses. Because the concept of choral singing is very dependent on individual contribution to achieve the desired goal of the group as a whole, each participant must develop and sustain disciplined habits and commitments.

The emphasis on these skills is not only beneficial to the individual, but to others around the individual and to society as a whole. The improvement of the above-named skills helps choristers in their work, in their family life, and in their community participation. Beyond this practical application, however, is something perhaps just as valuable: When people work closely together to achieve an artistic goal, they often learn about other people, many quite unlike themselves. A number of choristers report that one of the chief nonartistic benefits of singing in choruses was the opportunity to mix with people they ordinarily would not meet. For example, one said, “These people whom I love dearly are politically or religiously very different from me.” Another said, “We wouldn’t be together for any other reason except for the music. That connection with people exposes us to other ideas and approaches that aren’t otherwise available.”

The study found that choristers felt strongly that this component of their choral experience—the bridging of social gaps, the opening to different perspectives on life, even apart from the music itself—is one of the most rewarding and sustaining aspects of their choral singing. Considering the popularity and wide range of choral singing across the country, the study observes that the social impact of choruses perhaps bears further investigation in the future.

In addition, the study specifically presents data that choral singers are generally well informed and politically aware. While 32 percent of Americans responding to a national survey by Social Capital Benchmark in 2000 said they read a newspaper each day, 71 percent of choristers in the study report doing so. Basically, three-quarters of people in choruses read newspapers, versus an estimated one-third of the adult general public.

About 42 percent of choristers report making contributions to a political party or candidate, whereas the National Election Studies (NES) at the University of Michigan reports that only 7 to 10 percent of those responding in their national surveys for

the past 20 years have done so. Similarly, 20 percent of choral singers report having worked for a political party, while the NES research estimates the general population number at 7 percent.

The study found that choral singers are joiners in, and major consumers of, the arts. The 1997 NEA national survey of public participation in the arts said that 35 percent of its respondents reported visiting a museum within the previous 12 months, whereas 82 percent of choral singers reported doing so; 40 percent in the NEA study reported attending the theater at least once in the previous year, while 82 percent of choristers did so according to the Chorus America study. When choristers were asked about other arts disciplines, the results were essentially the same, with choral singers reporting more than double—sometimes more than triple—the attendance levels of the general public.

The level of commitment to the choral art was further demonstrated when choristers were asked how often they attend choral concerts other than their own. Nearly half said they attend one to three concerts other than their own in a year, and more than one-third said they attended more than three concerts.

Finally, the study reinforces something not surprising but nonetheless important. The chief motivations for participating in a chorus are tightly intertwined: The music itself, the personal fulfillment that it brings, and the sense of beauty and power it imparts to the audience. Most choristers have had some level of professional training and take their singing very seriously—it is not merely a “spare time” hobby. The choral repertoire, the grandness of the sound, and the response of the audiences combine to provide the satisfaction and exhilaration that keeps them coming back. The study finds that choristers strongly believe that the impact of their singing is an enormous good to society, and that this is a way of “giving back” to their communities. This belief can scarcely be disputed, given the outpouring of public feeling at many memorial concerts across the country after September 11, 2001—millions of Americans sought choral music in their communities as a way of expressing grief, sympathy, and unity in the wake of the terrorist attacks, and America’s choruses gave thousands of special concerts for this purpose.

At all times, singing is seen by choristers not only as a release from the pressures of daily living, but as a means to inject beauty and meaning into their lives. Singers widely feel that the artistic level of the groups is pushed ever higher, and the chief reward for the effort resides in both the individual enrichment earned by the singer and the demonstrated appreciation by diverse audiences.

The sum effect of the study’s seven itemized overall findings is that:

- Early introduction in life is key to lifelong interest in choral music, and sets the stage for many positive social and personal benefits through that experience.
- Choral singers are apt to be highly involved in their communities, not only in the arts but in other positive social and civic activities as well.
- Choral singers tend to be better informed in general than most Americans.
- Choral singers overwhelmingly report that choral participation improves their lives and their contributions to society in myriad ways.
- Choral singing is far and away the most popular public arts activity in America.
- Choral music has the highest number of organizations of any performing arts discipline.

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