



Devising a 'Big Gay Sing'

Brief for Artistic Directors and Chorus Managers

Many thanks for your interest in doing a 'Big Gay Sing'. We at New York City Gay Men's Chorus have entertained literally thousands of people since we started our Big Gay Sings in March 2009, and our members have had huge fun too. The idea has re-invigorated our artistic program, got new audiences interested in us, improved our outreach and in some ways the Big Gay Sing idea saved our organization at a time of deep financial pressure, which, we are glad to say is long since past! We believe that the concept aligns with every part of our mission (and that of other GALA choruses), and we want to offer it to others to use wisely.

New York City Gay Men's Chorus owns the name 'Big Gay Sing'. We decided to copyright it not to make money ourselves, but because we did invent the concept, and we wanted to ensure that it was done well. Our intention is that any GALA chorus who does a Big Gay Sing gets in touch with us, so we can help you, and you do the best show you can. That will reflect well both on your chorus and on NYC GMC too, and then everyone benefits.

If you'd like to a Big Gay Sing, all you have to do is:

- 1) **Pay us \$50 before the date of the performance, by sending a check payable to 'Big Apple Performing Arts' to our offices, the address of which is on our website, at www.nycgmc.org.**
- 2) **Let us know in writing at least 60 days before the performance that you are doing a 'Big Gay Sing'.**
- 3) **Ensure that the following words appear in your program underneath the title: 'Based on an original concept devised by Charles Beale and Jeff Lettiere, and first performed by New York City Gay Men's Chorus in March 2009'**
- 4) **Allow us to support you in any way you like, both to understand the concept and then to adapt it to fit your context.**

Finally, we should stress that nothing is required - the advice that follows is not prescriptive. As you will see, your audience is key and your own Big Gay Sing's programming and style will depend on what your audience's needs are. What follows are some general principles, along with illustrations of what has worked well for us in New York. Feel free to adapt them as you need to.

Good luck, and please do get in touch!

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Key elements in NYCGMC's 'Big Gay Sing' concept:

The Main Goal: connecting with the audience

Our evening is focused almost exclusively on the main goal of connecting - of breaking down the barriers between audience/community and chorus members by being **interactive** in every way possible. Get the audience involved as singers, but also as speakers, soloists, dancers, participants, wearing costumes etc. Get your audience on stage, and your chorus out in the audience singing with them. In our first one, for example, we even questionnaireed our audience via our website about which songs to include.

Aesthetic: Extremely over the top, i.e. BIG and GAY

Don't be afraid of being over the top, going too far, having too much fun, being 'too' whatever you decide to be. The performance should have elements of spectacle, i.e. it should be BIG. And it should also be sooo gay that audience eyes are rolling, they are cringing in slight embarrassment and at the same time laughing in recognition. So don't be understated in your programming or staging, and go to town. Instead of one torch song, do five! Instead of one drag queen, have ten. The feeling of 'That's sooo gay' or 'OMG, they are not doing THAT as well are they?!' should be appropriate. It should be clear that we are not being entirely serious here, and that we are simultaneously celebrating the 'gay' and being ironic in our overkill. Not just gay, but TOO gay...

The Sing-along element:

This part needs the most careful artistic planning, and some of these principles can seem surprising, because go against what you would brief an arranger to do elsewhere:

PROGRAMMING

- **Balance of sing-along and chorus-only singing:** We try to program a balance of well sung set-piece NON-sing-along performances with sing-along material. 50-50 is a good starting point, and the rest will depend on your group's skills and the rehearsal time you have. The sing-along elements are simpler, and will allow your group to focus in rehearsal on some really entertaining vocal set pieces too. But you do need to rehearse the sing-alongs too as there are pitfalls.
- **Song Choices:** Choose the **really** obvious and familiar songs and hits of the past. As Artistic Director, we often do songs in our Big Gay Sings that I don't care for or find too easy, too familiar, old hat, clichés, 'over'. But those cliché songs are *exactly* the ones you need in the show, because your primary criterion is not moving forward the art form in any way (!), but simply that the audience will know them, and that they will love to sing along with them.
- **What sections does your audience really know?:** Every audience is different. Research carefully at planning stage the sections of songs, verses, choruses etc. that your audience knows **before** you commission arrangements. You may be surprised what you find – how many people know the words to the *bridge* of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow?' or Madonna's 'Vogue'? Research your particular audience carefully, to ensure they do know the songs concerned. How old are they – what was their era? Or are you trying to be contemporary, get the younger crowd? Do they know the bridge and verse 2 too? If not, just cut them, or get your chorus to sing those parts. Try your arrangements out on people on the street and random representative members of your chorus, by asking them to sing along in the chosen key. See how far they can get, with just the words and the starting note. Again, the art and hard work here is in enabling **them** to have a good time, and not for you to show them the repertoire you love.
- **Medleys:** Medleys should be carefully written to flow, to keep the audience singing, and keep tempos rising, so tension builds. Choose sequences of songs a bit like a DJ does with dance music programming, or a big band director would keep an audience on the dance floor. Transitions are key. Once audience members stop singing, they may not restart. So avoid long introductions, musically complex key and tempo changes etc., and other long periods of instrumental. Instead, get straight to the next song or point of involvement fast. A surprise tempo change can re-invigorate the singing too, so choose a change of character, from up-tempo to ballad at a key moment, or vice-versa. Introducing a brief solo suddenly can also work well to break things up, as long as we go back to the sing-along shortly. But don't mix times when your chorus sings with sing-along in the

same arrangement too much or the audience will get confused and just sit back.

- **A host/MC:** A host, perhaps a local or national celebrity actor or comedian is key for us, more important than a guest star. They should be known to the audience, warm and funny and explain the concept at the beginning. Their role is to get the audience singing at the start; to be 'on their side', to introduce items, and to do their own party piece(s) at one point. They facilitate the connection between stage and audience. They can also do banter with the conductor, chat with audience members from the stage, and generally function to bring everyone together socially, by relaxing them and making them laugh.
- **Guest star:** A guest singer who can really sing well is very useful. The brand is BOTH about audience connection AND about good singing, in whatever style will suit your crowd. We have had opera, theater and pop singers and all have gone down well. Your holy grail is a warm funny host, who also sings like an angel.
- **Your moment of serious:** We are activist organizations too. So program a moment of seriousness, around an LGBT advocacy issue, with a song attached. The audience needs that and so does your organization. And it will be more all the more touching and dramatic because it comes as contrast in a generally lighter show.

ARRANGING

- **Vocal textures:** We have found it works best if sing-along material is mostly arranged in unison/2 parts. This makes the show quicker to learn, and allows the chorus to lead the audience on the melody. It also facilitates choreography, which does not often fit well with contrapuntal or chorally complex textures. Use four parts at big moments only – otherwise keep the texture really simple.
- **Keys:** Songs should be arranged in audience-friendly keys and tessituras (i.e. the melody should sit in the 12th from treble clef bottom Bb to D, like a church hymn), **and not necessarily in the key that suits your ensemble or singers best.** It will feel low for guys at times, so other Tenor and Baritone/Bass elements than the melody in the arrangement will often go above it. In an SATB group, as a general rule if your altos are comfortable on the melody, so will your audience be.

CHORAL-OGRAPHY

NYCGMC is by no means a show choir and we do not audition for dance skills. But for us simple choreography for singers is a key element in this kind of show, because any means to connect with an audience is worthwhile. Some general advice would be:

- Choose your amount of choreography carefully, both across the whole show, and within each song. Less is more, and small amount of really tight movement is better than too much that is less confident. Many songs need none at all, and some are enhanced with 2-3 short, powerful moves at the ends of songs, at the final button, or just on the chorus of a song.
- There will be people in your chorus who are good movers and others who will just do their best (!). Two strategies we have found helpful are:
 - a. Appoint dance captains section by section, who rehearse the moves with their section by standing in front of them, either facing them and mirroring, or with their backs to them. In performance, they then perform the moves or similar ones directly in front of each section during the performance as a dance team; even in performance, that visual reminder from a dancer to the less experienced member can add confidence.
 - b. Check that those in the front row of the chorus are confident movers AND know the words to the songs.
- For us, many moves seem to work best from the waist up. Focus on hands, face and shoulders, as much of what goes on lower down is not visible, even on good risers.
- That said, you can cover a lot of different song styles with a group if they can do a simple step-touch in 3-4 different ways - perhaps fast and slow versions and versions with big and small movements side to side. We always step touch to the same side (the right) first.
- Find a choreographer who is experienced at working with singers rather than dancers, and understands the issues of singing and dancing at the same time. Good moves fit with the singer's breathing and with the gesture of the music.

PRODUCTION

- **Projecting the words:** Project all words clearly and in large font on a screen above and behind audience using PowerPoint. Think carefully about how much text to put on one slide and how big the font should be. After experimenting, we tend to keep the font very big, and have a lot of slides with small amounts of text on each. Think about how to present punctuation and sections with 'la-la-la' etc., carefully, as they can be hard to read and can put audience singers off their stride. Also experiment with the colors of projected words against the background you are using. Add funny pictures, captions and gay-friendly images between songs to keep them looking up.
- **Gotta have a gimmick:** Plan audience involvement song by song, as you would plan the lighting or mike placement. Think of an audience gimmick with almost every song, even if it's only 'stand up-sit down', 'wave your light here', 'clap on 2 and 4 on the chorus' etc. Be as artistically creative here as you are with the song choices.
- **Party atmosphere:** if possible, book a DJ and put them on stage before it starts, playing familiar dance music, show tunes, stuff the audience knows. The right audience may start to sing along before you have even got on stage. Then as the audience members come in, they are already feeling some energy and relaxing. There should be an animated buzz to the conversation, like a good party, not respectful awestruck auditorium whispering.
- **Audience costume and goodies:** Ask your audience to come in costume as e.g. Sound of Music characters, Monsters, Broadway show characters, etc. Put this on the tickets if possible. If you have the cash or a sponsor, give them cheap goodies, things to do stuff with, i.e. party hats, goody bags, key rings with lights, masks to wear, pom-poms.
- **Chorus and 'celebrities' in the foyer:** We like having the chorus members in the foyer and audience, chatting in costume as people come in. They break down barriers, and are briefed to say, for example, "Hi, I'm x, I am a T2 and [something silly about themselves, e.g. 'I have a poodle']. Then a question, 'Have you been before ...?'. Audience members report that this one-on-one interaction before the show breaks down barriers. When in the performance they are confronted with a sea of faces, but they feel they 'know' at least one person. A couple of years back, we also had a 'step and repeat' in the foyer, with drag queens dressed as celebrities, who appeared later on stage too. Audience members could pay to have their photos taken with 'Cher' and 'Madonna'. We raised money and got our pictures in the local gay magazines and websites.

COMMUNITY

- **Community Connections:** Who do you know in your local community who can help you? Are there local firemen, or a gay volleyball team? Invite them to come and join in, to appear on stage, to add color, spread the word and add audience. Make it about *them*, not about you, as it will all reflect on your brand in the end anyway. Then find songs that fit around what they do.
- **Big Gay Idol Competition:** We started this singing competition as another excuse to connect with the singing community and our audience members. The idea was to run a web-based entry system, and then have the winning singer(s) sing with us as soloists on stage. We began by finding out about the singing networks in our area – theater groups, opera, conservatoires, colleges etc., We then sent out an eblast, ran YouTube auditions, and briefed entrants to sing a 30 second extract of a chosen song in the key required a cappella on video or audio, and to post the video or audio to our 'Big Gay Idol' channel by a certain date. We then chose winners, and the prize was to sing at the show. You can also publicize the channel by email in your show marketing, so potential audience members can see who has entered and decide who they want to win.

OTHER ADMIN ITEMS

- **The Date:** We used to avoid doing concerts on Friday and Saturday nights, because we discovered we were perceived as highbrow. Now, although we also do highbrow work, we actively program our Big Gay Sings on Friday and Saturday nights, because we find audiences want a party, and see them as an alternative to clubbing.
- **The look:** Reflect the club/bar feel in your marketing, to make it look subliminally like a fun club or bar night out.
- **Licensing Budget:** Licensing can be an unexpected cost, as some of the most familiar songs are also the most expensive. Medleys can also be expensive, as all songs have to be individually licensed. Older songs cost less to license than newer ones sometimes,

and a balance of public domain songs can also be helpful to reduce costs. So start early, be flexible in your choices, and plan more songs than you need as some may be refused or be impractical.

- **Marketing:** We have become unashamedly lowbrow in language, and just say essentially we are going to have big fun. As a result, our Big Gay Sings now include large numbers of straight-(acting?!) Friday night office workers, who have been coming for years, so we market to their local venues and friends too.
- **Bar:** A performance venue with a bar really helps, so the audience can drink as they go along, especially if it can be open before the show starts. Get them to put on more staff than normal if possible.

We hope you find this useful. Please do email questions, and we'll do our best to answer them!

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Lisa Reilly

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