

I SING, I SAY, I SIIIIIGN

Here is your GALAgram for OCT-NOV, 1999. This chapter will be my official "soap-box" chapter. All the previous Book chapters, wherein I seemed to have foisted myself upon some perceived pedestal to dispense my "GALA-gospel according to St. Joel," were just quasi-arrogant. This one is unabashedly self-righteous.

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FESTIVAL 2000 NEWS BRIEFS

Festival Expands with 14 Additional Choruses!

GALA Choruses is pleased to announce that an additional 14 choruses will perform at Festival 2000. "This increase reflects an adjustment in the performance schedule to include the first 14 choruses on the waiting list," said Kathie Michael, Director of Meetings and Festivals for GALA Choruses. "Our aim in programming the festival has been to strike the best balance possible between the needs of participating choruses and the needs of the 6,000 delegates who will want to hear those choruses. We are happy to have been able to adjust the schedule thereby opening participation to 124 choruses and 6,000 delegates — a new record."

Commissioned Works Unveiled

"Composing for GALA Choruses has been one of my greatest joys," said Carol Matthews, composer of *Light Breaking* for SSAA women's chorus, piano and two percussion, one of four works commissioned by GALA Choruses for Festival 2000. Three of the pieces will be performed by the Festival Choruses. The Festival Anthem will be sung en masse by the 6,000 delegates at the Closing Ceremonies in San Jose.

The other new commissions are, *Look Into the Mirror*, *Live All of Your Joys*, *Look Ahead* ("Cause You Can't Go Back"), a trilogy for TTBB voices by Trent Morante that expresses the power of inner strength, self-confidence and forward vision; *With One Voice* by Robert Seeley and Robert Espindola for SATB voices dedicated to Steven Cozza, the eleven-year-old straight boy who challenged the Boy Scouts of America's policy on homosexuality, and; the Festival Anthem, *A Chorus of Lovers and Friends* by Canadian singer-song writer David Sereda, a tribute to the spirit of and relationships that are built within GALA Choruses.

Last Chance to Register Before Rate Increase

December 31, 1999 is the last day to register for Festival 2000 at the US\$150 rate. Delegate registration increases to US\$200 on January 1, 2000. Registration is open anyone who wishes to attend Festival 2000 as a delegate whether or not they are performing. You must register in order to perform with your chorus or ensemble. Becoming a delegate is also the easiest way for non-performers to enjoy the festival. Don't miss this last opportunity to save. For more Festival 2000 information and registration instructions, turn to page 10.



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Allow me to draw your attention to the truly fine **ONE VOICE PREMIERS WORK WITH GLBT DEAF COMMUNITY** article featured on p.13. This article highlights aspects rarely, if ever, brought to light when choruses consider signing and interpreting.

ONE VOICE PREMIERS WORK WITH GLBT DEAF COMMUNITY

by Jane Ramseyer Miller, Music Director,
One Voice Mixed Chorus, Minneapolis

Last June, One Voice Mixed Chorus (Minneapolis) premiered two exciting commissions as part of a concert titled "Voices of the People." The first was by Vermont composer, Gwyneth Walker with text taken from graffiti on the Berlin Wall. The second was a collaboration with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (glbt) deaf community — performed in American Sign Language (ASL).

The idea for the ASL piece began late one night after musing about how to make our choral concerts more accessible for the deaf and hard of hearing community. While One Voice concerts are ASL interpreted, we as a chorus have relatively little contact with the deaf community. We often program foreign language pieces within One Voice in an effort to broaden our understanding of communities and cultures across the world. I began to imagine what it would be like to commission a piece in American Sign Language, perform it as a collaborative effort with the glbt deaf community, and provide interpretation for our hearing audience.

We held an initial meeting to discuss the possibility for such a collaboration. It included several chorus members, sign language interpreters and members of the deaf community. The group was extremely enthusiastic. A grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council provided financial support. Our primary goals for the commission were to build bridges between One Voice and the glbt deaf and hard of hearing community, and to educate audience members and One Voice singers about the experiences/stories of glbt deaf persons.

Wendy Harbour was hired as the director and composer/writer for the project which she titled "Dreams/Visions/Imaginations." As a lesbian woman who has lived in both the hearing and deaf worlds she was a perfect choice to design this commission. Written in ASL, "Dreams/Visions/Imaginations" tells the story of a person coming out as deaf and finding a sense of community, and later falling in love and coming out as lesbian. Harbor performed the story-telling role in ASL along with a trio of interpreters who voiced not only the interpretation of her signs, but also the emotions and nuances of her performance. The role of One Voice Mixed Chorus could be likened to that of the ancient Greek chorus. One Voice singers introduced each section of the piece in ASL and provide a "counterpoint" for the soloist and interpreter choir, occasionally adding emphasis for the soloist's signs. Before Harbor became deaf she had a musical background and now has woven many musical images into the structure of her composition. She envisioned the role of the ASL soloist as carrying the melody line for the piece while the interpreter choir and One Voice offer the harmony and counter melody.

The title of the commission, "Dreams/Visions/Imaginations," emphasizes the differences in language between spoken English and ASL where one sign may be used to convey a variety of words, emotions or experiences. While frequently performance art is made accessible to the deaf community through ASL interpretation, it is quite unusual for a piece to be conceived, written and performed in ASL, which has

a vocabulary and sentence structure quite distinctive from the English language. Certainly this kind of collaboration with a glbt singing chorus and the glbt deaf community is completely unique.

We encountered both hurdles and moments of absolute delight in the planning stages for "Dreams." Early in the planning process the entire project was nearly dropped because it was difficult to find glbt people in the deaf community who were willing to be onstage and out. Harbour describes the deaf community in the Twin Cities as being small and interwoven. If someone comes out and experiences rejection as a gay person there are not really other deaf communities around that one can migrate to. With this concern in mind we began to build in special efforts to market the concert within the deaf and hard of hearing communities.

At a Saturday retreat, One Voice members also participated in a workshop planned by Harbour and Anthony Verdeja, ASL interpreter for the chorus. Verdeja led the workshop on deaf awareness and culture and helped singers understand the role he plays as an ASL interpreter for concerts. The following week, Harbour continued the workshop describing some of her own experiences as a deaf lesbian, and began to outline the role that the chorus plays in her composition. She also created a video tape to assist singers in learning their parts.

For One Voice, this collaboration opened up many new doors for creative programming, innovative marketing techniques, a better connection to the deaf community, and the chance to immerse itself in a completely new language. The serendipitous connections were delightful. During one rehearsal, the chorus sang through the text of our other commission, Gwyneth Walker's "Writings from the Wall," which incorporates a repeated phrase "the walls of concrete tumble and fall." The next day our planning committee met with Harbour to review the first script draft of "Dreams." Without any knowledge of Walker's piece, Harbour read through her script describing the experiences of coming out as deaf, coming out as lesbian, and finding supportive people to help dig at the protective walls around her until they finally fell. She stopped at the look of surprise on our faces and asked if something was wrong. I clarified that indeed, something was very right!

One Voice Mixed Chorus is a 70-voice community chorus made up of singers from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities along with some straight friends. Now in its eleventh year, One Voice is known for its musical excellence, diverse repertoire, humor and fabulous choreography! Jane Ramseyer Miller is in her fourth year as Music Director for the organization and also conducts Calliope Women's Chorus. For more information contact info@ovmc.org or 612-344-9663.



Now that I've done that, here's the context for all my remarks that follow:

For those of you who don't know, and most of you don't, I am a nationally certified, freelance ASL interpreter with more than 25 years' experience interpreting in a variety of venues from doctors' offices to a Presidential Inaugural Ball. With minor exception, I have only **sung** with choruses, not **signed** for them. As such, I possess more than just a little perspective on choruses that include signing for singers and choruses that include signers/interpreters on stage.

Following on what's printed in this article, allow me to highlight some contrasts for you:

- 1) there's a big difference between being "Deaf" (CAPITOL-D, identifying with the Deaf Community and the use of American Sign Language as a cultural phenomenon) and "deaf" (lowercase-d, indicative of only an audiometric measurement, no inherent value placed on the natural language of, or identification with, the Deaf Communities in the USA and Canada: ASL)
- 2) there's a big, fat difference between a **SIGNER** and an **INTERPRETER**
- 3) there's an even bigger, fatter difference presenting a signer or interpreter as a **point of access and accommodation** (with prior outreach to and patronage by Deaf folks at concerts) or as a **performance element** (as one would design lighting and sets and movement)
- 4) music, especially choral music, is a **HEARING-culture** thing, despite any cockamamie explanation about how Deaf people get **equivalent** enjoyment and meaning from the vibration of sound, and bringing choral/music to **visual**-life requires unique and innate/intuitive skill

Everything that I've stated so far manifests itself in these realities:

- 1) choruses often forego the provision of interpreting services for the right reasons (money, lack of community) as well as wrong reasons (attention diverted away from the singers/director)
- 2) choruses often teach their singers to mimic, or ape, signs rather than teach them the basic structure and movement of ASL-based signs... SO IT MAKES SENSE IN SINGERS' MINDS
- 3) choruses often default to glossed/lexical signs in English word-order in lieu of the more difficult, but more aesthetically appealing and interesting, conceptually-accurate signs
- 4) choruses often let the appreciation of Hearing audience members drown out the lack of appreciation of any Deaf (potential) patrons

The article highlights a very important distinction: something which is “for” the deaf as opposed to something which is “of” the deaf. We proclaim that our performances are “Interpreted **for** the Deaf “ (or, more broadly, for the Hearing Impaired); on the East Coast of the US, there exists the National Theater **of** the Deaf.

Big, big difference.

Furthermore, Deaf (Culture) Community members never, in all my experience as an interpreter, use the term “Hearing Impaired.” Those who are Culturally-Identified, American Sign Language (ASL)-using Deaf people use the term “Deaf.” Hard-of-hearing people, whose primary mode of communication is not ASL are the ones who might use the label “Hard of Hearing” or “Hearing Impaired” and it’s only unenlightened or politically-correct Hearing people who absolutely use the term “Hearing Impaired.”

I won’t apologize if that seems crass or biased or unfair. It is, however, the harsh reality. “Politics,” you say? Yes, indeed.

“Impaired” implies a deficiency, not merely a difference. If someone born in France only speaks French, would we dare call that person “English Impaired?” Absolutely not (behind their backs we might.) Yet we explicitly label someone, or a generic cohort of individuals, who audiometrically perceive sound differently than others on this planet as “impaired” or LESS THAN.

If and how choruses include interpreters and signing during performances is very individual. It’s my hope that when these conversations happen, they happen honestly and without deception to chorus or audience members.