

## We Are Family: Building Choir Communities Through Shared Leadership

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### Abstract

LGBTQ+ choirs have long served as spaces for artistic expression, identity affirmation, and activism. However, scholars might consider how leadership structures within these ensembles shape their artistic and communal outcomes. In this article, I examine the impact of community leadership practices on the artistic and social life of Out Loud Chorus (OLC), an intergenerational LGBTQ+ community choir and member of GALA Choruses. Drawing from practice-based reflections and research on community music-making, I argue that community leadership structures potentially align with the values and lived experiences of queer musical communities.

OLC's departure from a traditional, conductor-driven model to a collaborative structure included shared programming decisions, member-led initiatives, open feedback channels, and committee-driven leadership. Using these practices, OLC redistributed power, inviting singers to co-create the ensemble's artistic vision and organizational direction. As a result, many audiences and choristers reported that concerts became more adventurous and reflective of the community's diverse identities, while member engagement and retention increased. Additionally, these democratic processes fostered intergenerational mentorship and strengthened resilience within the ensemble, resonating with research indicating that participatory arts practices can enhance creativity, belonging, and collective identity (Bird, 2017; Gaunt & Treacy, 2019; Weststrate et al., 2024).

I conclude the article by offering practical strategies for GALA choruses to integrate shared leadership practices into their own leadership models, including creating structures for member input, empowering singers to lead projects, embracing dialogue across differences, and balancing expertise with participation. By considering these practices, LGBTQ+ choirs might enhance their artistry, while also embodying the values of equity, collaboration, and resilience that affirm queer community music-making. In doing so, leadership itself can be a creative, communal act and a pathway to thriving for queer choral ensembles.

### Keywords

LGBTQ+ choirs, intergenerational, leadership practices, community music-making

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*On the night of our spring concert, I stood in the orchestra pit and watched members of Out Loud Chorus (OLC) hurry around with clipboards, props, and microphones. Unlike the traditional image of a choir where the director manages every detail, here singers, section leaders, committee chairs, and even first-year members planned and executed the final preparations. The atmosphere buzzed with a sense of shared vision. When the curtains rose and we launched into the opening song, the audience's energy mirrored the commitment of every singer onstage. That evening, the performance was not only musically excellent; it was alive with the collective spirit of a community that had shaped its own artistic voice.*

I use the vignette above to describe what I learned as OLC's Artistic Director (AD), that democratizing control and fostering agency can transform a choir. When members of OLC had opportunities to shape the ensemble's artistic and organizational decisions, they seemed to invest more deeply in the work. Their voices extended beyond the music and into the leadership and vision of the choir. This participatory approach potentially disrupts the traditional top-down model of choral leadership (Corbalán et al., 2023; Kambs & Menon, in press; O'Toole, 2005; Palkki, 2022), replacing it with a structure that is more reflective of the ensemble's collective identity and values (Yi, 2024; Gaunt & Treacy, 2019). In GALA choruses, where music-making is inseparable from community, activism, and the affirmation

of diverse identities (galachoruses.org, 2025), these shared leadership practices may resonate particularly strongly.

Queer choirs have long served as sanctuaries and platforms for visibility, offering members a place to sing, connect, and advocate (Beede, 2025; Cates, 2020; Gordon, 1990; Southerland, 2023). However, while some scholars have examined the social and activist functions of LGBTQ+ choral groups (e.g., Gallagher-Steuver, 2025; MacLachlan, 2020), I believe the field can pay more attention to how leadership structures within these ensembles can shape artistic outcomes and member engagement (see for example, Cooke, 2024). Specifically, I look at how the ways in which choirs make decisions about repertoire, staging, governance, and community outreach can influence the music they create and the experiences of the people who make it.

To make this case, I position OLC as an example of how democratizing choral structures strengthens both artistry and community life. Over the years, we moved away from a hierarchical model of leadership, where the AD made all decisions and imposed them upon the singers, toward a collaborative approach where singers helped co-create programming, took on meaningful leadership roles, and participated actively in shaping the chorus' identity. We saw that these practices improved efficiency, while also deepening artistic innovation, strengthening intergenerational bonds, and fostering a stronger sense of belonging across the ensemble.

Drawing on research from queer studies, community music, and leadership in the arts (Gaunt & Treacy, 2019; Holden & Bruce, 2022; Pryor, 2020; Yi, 2024), I argue that queer choirs are uniquely positioned to thrive when they embrace participatory leadership models. In the sections that follow, I first situate this discussion within existing scholarship to explain why LGBTQ+ choirs provide fertile ground for shared leadership practices. Then, I describe the processes OLC adopted, analyze their impacts on both artistic output and social dynamics, and conclude with practical considerations that other GALA choruses can adapt to their own contexts. Through this analysis, I hope to show that communal structures in choral leadership can be both an administrative choice and a radical act of creativity and community-building that aligns with the ethos of queer music-making. While not an empirical research study, I draw on reflective documentation, member feedback, and relevant literature to offer transferable practices for other GALA choruses seeking to build community through shared leadership.

## Shared Leadership Practices in Queer Spaces

Queer choirs occupy a unique place in the choral landscape. Unlike some traditional ensembles that emphasize strict hierarchies and conductor-centered leadership (Corbalán et al., 2023; Menon & Salvador, in press), LGBTQ+ choirs often emerge from grassroots organizing, centering the needs and voices of marginalized communities (Roma, 2018; Southerland, 2023). Their origins are rooted in activism and collective care, from the early days of the gay and lesbian choral movement to today's GALA network, which continues to champion visibility and equity through music (Cates, 2020; Southerland, 2023). These choirs do more than sing together, they create affirming spaces where individuals can belong, heal, and advocate together (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018).

I refer to shared leadership practices in choirs as more than voting on repertoire or allowing occasional input from singers. Instead, I position these practices as a philosophy of shared ownership that distributes leadership, where the community co-constructs artistic and organizational decisions (Gaunt & Treacy, 2019). Yi (2024) suggested that distributed leadership in ensemble settings occurs when authority is shared rather than centralized, often leading to members feeling greater investment in both the processes and the outcomes of the ensemble. In OLC, this participatory model encouraged singers to contribute their perspectives, skills, and creativity, ultimately enriching the ensemble's artistry. Such models may also challenge the traditional "conductor-as-authority" paradigm, creating space for multiple voices to influence the ensemble's direction (Adenot, 2015; Hess, 2012; O'Toole, 2005).

Menon et al. (in press) caution about how replicating binary power structures uphold power hierarchies that perpetuate structural violence in music spaces. However, queer approaches to leadership might challenge these rigid hierarchies and binary power structures by embracing fluidity, collaboration, and resistance to normative constraints (Holden & Bruce, 2022; Pryor, 2020). In choirs where members are not only diverse in identity but also deeply committed to creating affirming and equitable spaces, these values may resonate (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). When leadership structures reflect these commitments, an environment where everyone, regardless of age, gender, or musical background, has a role in shaping the ensemble's identity may be possible (Gallagher-Steuver, 2025).

Researchers of LGBTQ+ musical communities underscore the importance of agency and co-creation. Bird (2017) found that LGBTQ+ choirs provide members with spaces to affirm identity and build community through collaborative artistry. Similarly, Weststrate et al. (2024) suggested that intergenerational queer communities thrive when members engage in shared projects that heal divisions and foster resilience. Their findings suggest that community leadership structures in choirs are compatible with queer values and may be essential for creating the conditions under which queer musical communities can flourish (Weststrate et al., 2024).

Despite these connections, there remains a gap in the literature linking leadership structures directly to artistic and social outcomes in LGBTQ+ ensembles, and specifically how shared leadership might shape both the artistic and the community life of queer choirs. This gap provides an opportunity for practice-based contributions, where directors and practitioners can share how their leadership choices affect their ensembles' artistry and community. Therefore, I use OLC to offer one such example. In the next section, I will describe how OLC implemented shared leadership practices and how these practices reshaped our artistic and communal landscape.

## **Out Loud Chorus as an Example of Communal Leadership Structures**

Out Loud Chorus (OLC), based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is an intergenerational LGBTQ+ community choir and a proud member of GALA Choruses. Their membership ranges widely in age, gender identity, musical background, and life experience. This diversity has long been a strength, yet when I began my tenure as AD, OLC resembled a fairly traditional leadership structure. I finalized repertoire, shaped the artistic vision, and determined most programming decisions, while a board of directors handled organizational matters. Although this model was functional, it did not fully reflect the collective spirit that animated our singers or the values at the heart of our mission.

### ***Shifting Toward Shared Leadership Practices***

Recognizing that our singers brought immense creativity and expertise, I sought to move beyond the conductor as the "sage on the stage" (see King, 1993) who controls the flow of power in the rehearsal (Menon et al., in press). Over time, we democratized several practices that redistributed decision-making power and expanded member involvement in meaningful ways. These practices included collaborative programming, member-led initiatives, and open feedback structures.

### ***Collaborative Programming***

Programming decisions seemed to have an immeasurable effect on the quality of participation. Repertoire was something we attended to every rehearsal and became the medium of expression throughout the season. I found that programming music that came from the choir often led to better buy-in and motivation to continue with the music throughout the concert preparation, aligning with prior research on repertoire selection (Rotjan, 2021). Singers created committees to design our concert season, featuring two fully staged concerts. One such committee, *music selection committee*, met over the summer preceding the concert cycle. Singers would work together to come up with

a list of relevant concert themes before voting on the two themes for our season. Then, singers contributed repertoire suggestions through populating google sheets and small group discussions. To streamline the music ordering process, all repertoire submitted had to include a link to purchase sheet music and a recording, if available. I would create a program populated from the choir's suggestions, including my own, and submitted it back to the committee for approval. Once we agreed, we would order music and get ready for the concert season.

### **Member-Led Initiatives**

Because choir members had a co-constructed vision for the season before it started, they had plenty of time to build momentum to execute that vision. Sub-committees emerged which took on fundraising (e.g., program ads, donations, sponsorships), community outreach (e.g., finding partners, setting up community performances, advertising), and choreography. The chorus also relied on the Putting on a Show Committee, which handled all the artistic elements of the production beyond the weekly rehearsals (e.g., venues, lighting design, staging, props). Beyond concert-specific initiatives, members also led social events to bolster community within the choir. These events ranged from movie nights at a member's house to karaoke outings at local queer businesses. Supporting member-led initiatives aligned with concepts from ensemble leadership research, which emphasized how co-creation and distributed authority can enhance both the process and the product of music-making (Gaunt & Treacy, 2019; Yi, 2024)

### **Open Feedback Structures**

Importantly, not every member was satisfied during the concert seasons. We strove to create structures which allowed members to communicate and resolve things. We created channels for in-person meetings called office hours, where members could meet with board members to discuss any issues. We also had an online submission form called a productivity tool, where members could submit feedback anonymously or by name. The form required that all feedback was solution-driven and required the complainant provide a potential solution. Asking for a solution helped communicate expectations and diversified how the board thought about resolving issues. Additionally, we always scheduled post-concert debriefs and anonymous surveys to ensure that every voice, whether seasoned member or newcomer, had an opportunity to shape the ensemble's direction.

### **Challenges Along the Way**

As we moved toward more democratic practices, we encountered challenges. Collaborative decision-making often took more time than top-down directives and balancing artistic expertise with member preferences required careful negotiation. At times, conflicting opinions emerged, especially when programming intersected with deeply held identities or political concerns. However, these tensions became opportunities for dialogue and growth. For example, in a concert about nature, we programmed "Under the Sea" from The Little Mermaid. One non-Caribbean member wanted to make sure that the use of Caribbean vernacular would not offend Caribbean people. After doing research and engaging other members from the Caribbean, we had an open dialogue with the chorus. Rather than weakening our ensemble, the process of working through differences strengthened our collective commitment to the choir's mission. Our discussion echoed findings from research on how challenging power in transcultural music relationships can foster a critical consciousness (Sánchez-Gatt et al., 2025). In the end, we decided to keep the song and write contextualizing program notes.

There were some other challenges that emerged when making space for participants' voices in the choir. As AD, I often had a detailed plan and pace for rehearsals. I encouraged singers to make connections to the music and co-construct our artistic vision, even during the rehearsal process. However, this created a situation in which a small number of singers took up a large amount of space. To address this, I started asking the choir to hold their feedback until a specified part of the rehearsal on each song. I also encouraged singers to write comments on a notecard or to ask their section leaders. I could address comments that way without disrupting the flow or rehearsal or frustrating other singers, while still giving members an opportunity to share their thoughts. Similarly to Tang's (2023) findings on student-centered learning, I functioned as a facilitator and ultimately regulated the pace and effectiveness of the rehearsal. Similarly, I had to negotiate a variety of preferred learning modalities (e.g., sight reading and learning by ear) and musical skills such that my pacing was not too fast or too slow but built upon the diverse musical experiences of the members (Menon, 2025a).

### ***Towards a Cultural Shift***

As these shared leadership practices took root, the culture of OLC began to change. Rehearsals became spaces where singers could contribute ideas about the music and the overall direction of the choir. The board and artistic leadership learned to view themselves as facilitators rather than sole decision-makers. This cultural transformation reflected the values at the heart of queer community-building: shared power, mutual respect, and the belief that every voice matters (Holden & Bruce, 2022; Pryor, 2020). This shift toward shared leadership had tangible effects on our music-making and our sense of community. Over the last four years, the choir has more than tripled in size, going from around 50 members in 2021 to 180 members in 2025. The next section explores these impacts in detail, focusing on how shared leadership practices helped shape OLC's artistic output and strengthened its social fabric.

### ***Impacts of Shared Leadership***

OLC's adoption of shared leadership practices brought about changes that were visible both in performance and rehearsals. In sharing power and inviting singers into decision-making processes, the choir cultivated a stronger sense of ownership over its music and community. These outcomes seemed tied to the structures OLC created that better valued every member's voice. I present these impacts across two primary dimensions: artistic output and social dynamics.

### ***Artistic Output***

When singers were given opportunities to influence programming, staging, and performance design, the artistry of our concerts evolved in exciting ways. Collaborative programming brought forth repertoire that I might not have chosen on my own, or even known, that reflected diverse cultural backgrounds, political commitments, and personal stories. For example, a member-led suggestion to include Wrabel's "The Village," an arrangement by a trans choir member about transgender resilience, became a concert highlight and resonated deeply with both performers and audience members. This co-creative process led to creating more adventurous programs that reflected the ensemble's collective identity. These programming efforts echo findings from studies on ensemble leadership, claiming that when musicians share in artistic decision-making, they can develop a heightened sense of ownership that elevates performance quality (Rotjan, 2021; Yi, 2024). Similarly, Gaunt and Treacy (2019) described how reflective, team-oriented ensemble practices can foster creativity and responsiveness. In OLC, singers who had contributed to programming or staging approached performances with an intensity and passion that translated into more dynamic concerts.

Shared leadership practices also allowed us to experiment with novel performance formats. Instead of rigid concert templates, we embraced multimedia collaborations, thematic narratives, and member-driven staging and lighting ideas. These innovations allowed us to express counterstories from the chorus that challenge dominant understandings of queer histories framed through loss (Love, 2009). By weaving members' stories and perspectives into our artistic work, we created performances that felt deeply authentic to who we were as a community, while deepening connection within the choir. When we put on a show featuring music from the 80s, our music selection committee chose to program "Running Up That Hill" by Kate Bush. The song had intergenerational appeal because the Netflix show Stranger Things featured the song, which resonated with younger members, along with older members who remembered the original version from the 80s. An older member shared how the song reminded him of a good friend who passed during the AIDS crisis in the 80s. Another member spoke of how they lost a sibling, and the text "if I only could make a deal with God, I'd get him to swap our places" added a layer of emotional complexity. Because the concert theme evoked so many personal accounts, we chose to record vignettes from our members and played those recordings as a narrative framing device in our concert. Disrupting the audience's performance expectations created a deeply personal experience and intensified social connection in the choir.

### ***Social Dynamics***

As members became more involved in decision-making, they reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging and investment in the ensemble. Rather than perceiving OLC as a space where they solely came to sing, some members saw themselves as co-creators of the choir's identity and future. For many members, their attendance improved, their volunteerism within the choir increased, and the choir's retention rates rose. These outcomes align with research on queer musical communities, which emphasizes the role of choirs in fostering identity affirmation and resilience (Bird, 2017; Weststrate et al., 2024). When members viewed leadership practices as affirming the value of every voice, some members experienced both musical growth and a sense of personal empowerment. For LGBTQ+ individuals, many of whom have faced exclusion in other spaces, the potential of belonging may carry particular weight (Cates, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018).

OLC's shared leadership structures provided space for members to explore intergenerational dynamics. Rather than reinforcing age-based hierarchies, OLC's practices encouraged mentorship and collaboration across generations. Younger members brought fresh ideas and energy, while older members offered historical perspectives and experience. This aligns with findings that intergenerational queer spaces can serve as rare and powerful sites for healing and mutual learning (Weststrate et al., 2024). In OLC, these relationships enriched both the musical process and the social fabric of the choir.

Interestingly, I noticed varied intergenerational relationships which often resulted in dialogical and reciprocal interactions between members. These relationships extended beyond intergenerational interactions on the basis on age, as described above, to include musical experiences, time in the choir, and experience identifying as "out." Many singers, regardless of age, approached those with more musical training and experience with a sense of deference, particularly regarding musical preparations. Similarly, veteran members who had been part of the choir for a long time acted as "elders" within the space, regardless of their relative age to newcomers. Lastly, many members engaged in conversations about their unique queer experiences coming out or making sense of changing queer and gender identities and politics.

I noticed a significant impact of these artistic and social changes: OLC seemed to become a more innovative, cohesive, and resilient ensemble. Many members felt both heard and challenged, and audiences responded positively to the authenticity of our performances, based on many surveys. Based on these efforts, I suggest that democratic practices may directly enhance the artistic and communal life of LGBTQ+ ensembles. In the next section, I will distill these experiences into practical considerations that other GALA choruses can adopt to integrate democracy into their own leadership and artistic processes.

## Practical Considerations for GALA Choruses

Our journey applying democratic practices to Out Loud Chorus may offer valuable insights for other LGBTQ+ ensembles seeking to deepen both their artistry and community impact. While every choir operates within its own context, several principles from OLC's experience can be adapted to fit a wide range of organizational models. I offer some considerations that highlight what worked for us and how other choirs might navigate similar paths.

The first consideration is that shared leadership begins with intentional structures. Open participation does not happen spontaneously; it requires systems that both invite and support member input. At OLC, we developed mechanisms such as office hours, surveys, anonymous feedback forms, and collaborative committees, where all had an opportunity to contribute thoughts. These processes prevented decision-making from becoming dominated by a few and ensured that the ensemble's direction reflected our collective agenda. Research on distributed leadership echoes that when decision-making power is intentionally shared, participation can become more meaningful and sustainable (Gaunt & Treacy, 2019; Yi, 2024).

The second consideration is that choirs can encourage members to lead projects that align with their strengths. When we encouraged members to design staging and lighting, lead small ensembles, or coordinate outreach events, their contributions enriched the choir's artistic and social environment. Members began auditioning for solos, encouraging each other's ideas, and putting together group numbers that they arranged and rehearsed themselves. Importantly, members viewed these opportunities as carrying real responsibility, rather than symbolic gestures. Other GALA choruses can consider creating leadership pathways that allow singers to redefine their participation as more active project ownership within their specialized skills, on top of their singing. As Pryor (2020) argued, queer leadership thrives when it disrupts rigid hierarchies and allows for multiple forms of expertise to emerge.

Thirdly, choirs might consider embracing dialogue across differences, even when it is challenging. Sharing leadership inevitably brings dissent and disagreements, particularly in choirs where members hold diverse identities, histories, and beliefs. In OLC, moments of conflict, whether over repertoire choices or performance themes, became opportunities to deepen understanding. Instead of avoiding difficult conversations, we tried to create spaces to negotiate differences respectfully and honor the multiple truths in our community. This aligns with findings that intergenerational and cross-identity interactions, while sometimes fraught, are essential for building resilient queer communities (Weststrate et al., 2024). Importantly, we recognized that we could not please everyone and that some issues would go unresolved.

Additionally, choir directors might consider balancing their own expertise with shared participation. We did not take the approach that every decision was made by shared consensus or that artistic leadership disappears completely. As the AD, I still provided guidance on musical quality, programming coherence, and long-term vision. However, I offered this expertise in dialogue with member perspectives, not imposed unilaterally. I sought to balance the expectations of my job with shared leadership to enhance rather than dilute the ensemble's artistry (Yi, 2024).

Finally, choirs should recognize that democratizing leadership structures is both a governance strategy and a creative act. When singers help shape artistic decisions, they may invest more fully in the performance, resulting in concerts that feel alive and authentic. These outcomes align with research linking participatory arts practices with increased innovation, commitment, and community connection (Bird, 2017; Cates, 2020). For LGBTQ+ ensembles, where identity and artistry are deeply intertwined, shared leadership practices can amplify the very qualities that make these choirs transformative.

Implementing these strategies requires patience, flexibility, and a willingness to let go of strict control. Yet the rewards like greater engagement, richer artistry, and a stronger sense of collective purpose are well worth the effort. These experiences with OLC may suggest that when choirs democratize leadership structures, they better embody the inclusive and resilient spirit that defines queer community music-making. In the final section, I turn to the broader implications of how these practices can serve as a pathway to thriving for queer choral ensembles everywhere.

## Conclusion

I used OLC as an example to demonstrate how shared leadership structures can transform an LGBTQ+ choir. By redistributing leadership, encouraging member agency, and embedding collaborative structures, we created an ensemble culture that bolstered musical innovation and social cohesion. We made structural adjustments to governance that reshaped how many members related to one another, to the music, and to the mission of the choir. In the process, OLC became a space where many singers had space to express their identities, take creative risks, and build community through shared artistry.

Queer ensembles have historically been sites of activism, resilience, and cultural expression (Cates, 2020; Southerland, 2023). When they adopt leadership models that reflect queer values of fluidity, equity, and co-creation, they can strengthen their capacity to thrive in a world that often challenges their existence (Salvador et al., 2023; Salvador et al., 2024). Furthermore, researchers have found that healing and growth in marginalized communities can emerge from affinity spaces that nurture agency, belonging, and identity (Menon, 2025b; Weststrate et al., 2024). Choirs that center the voices of their members might transform those voices into collective action.

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