Our Inaugural Issue:
Preserving History and Sustaining Excellence

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JOQCS Editorial Board

Message from JOQCS Founding Editor-in-Chief

Jessica L. Gallagher-Steuver

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the first issue of the Journal of Queer Choral Studies: The Official Academic Publication of GALA Choruses. I am very glad you are here.

I completed my Ph.D. in Music Education at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, in the spring of 2025. My research was inspired by members of Windsong, Cleveland's Feminist Chorus, the GALA ensemble I have had the privilege of conducting for the past four years. Through conversations with Windsong members, I came to realize that I had a limited understanding of the unique stressors and triumphs experienced by queer older adults, as well as the vital role Windsong played in their lives. During the dissertation process, I found a community of researchers dedicated to preserving, expanding, and demystifying the experiences of queer choral singers and music scholars. There did not, however, appear to be an academic home dedicated primarily to this work.

This journal is unique in many ways. The JOQCS Editorial Board was adamant about making the journal as accessible as possible to readers and researchers alike. JOQCS is an open-access journal; we sought to avoid creating financial barriers to this important research. Additionally, we are excited to welcome a wide variety of perspectives—including researchers, conductors, choir members, and others—as contributors. It is time to bridge the gap between GALA Choruses and the growing field of queer choral research. It feels especially pertinent at this time to elevate queer stories, queer art, queer education, and queer joy.

While assembling this first issue, we encountered setbacks, miscommunications, and frequent revisions of our expectations. One board member jokingly remarked that we were "sight-reading as we were learning the music." We found that, while we aimed to accept a wide range of articles, clearer parameters were necessary. In future issues, submissions will fall into one of three categories: original research, practitioner articles, and spotlight articles. Interested authors will select the category that best fits their work based on the descriptions in our Submission Guidelines. Authors will also determine whether they would like to participate in a double-anonymous peer review, an open peer review, or an open writing mentorship.

Throughout every step of this journey, I am grateful to GALA Choruses for their support, as well as to our board members and peer reviewers who helped make JOQCS a reality. I am truly excited to see how queer choral research may flourish with the creation of this accessible resource.

Proudly sing on,
Jessica L. Gallagher-Steuver
Founding Editor-in-Chief, The Journal of Queer Choral Studies

Message from GALA Choruses Executive Director

John D. Carrion

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Dear Reader,

I am so thrilled to invite you to read the inaugural edition of the Journal of Queer Choral Studies. This edition comes as the culmination of several years of scholarship and an entire year of administrative work to bring this journal from idea to fruition. The academic process is often a lonely journey but one that I truly believe is essential to the advancement of not only our theoretical understandings but also of our pragmatic approaches to the fundamental issues we face in our choirs, our societies, and even within ourselves.

I want to thank our Board of Directors for their support of this journal but, most of all, I want to thank Dr. Jessica Gallagher-Steuver for her tireless work to bring this journal to life. Her commitment to the rigor of the process and to the scholarship contained herein is one that will allow us to continue these conversations long into the future. I know that you will appreciate her dedication to this project as you learn from the work that her team has thoroughly vetted for inclusion.

Kind regards,

John D. Carrion
Executive Director
GALA Choruses

Music and Memory: First Steps Towards Documenting LGBTQ+ Choirs in Community Archives

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Abstract

Despite the profound impact that LGBTQ+ choruses have had on singers and audiences for the past 50 years, their stories have remained largely absent from archival institutions. In this article, I explored the ways in which LGBTQ+ choirs could address this gap in the historical record by establishing their own archival collections. Beginning with the establishment of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), I briefly outlined the modern history of LGBTQ+ choirs in the United States. I then outlined the archival theory and structure of community archives using LGBTQ+ examples. I presented the results of research into two LGBTQ+ choirs in Arizona: Phoenix Women's Chorus and Desert Voices. This research included brief histories of each chorus and the results of a survey sent to both choirs about the experiences, memories, and materials they would want represented in a potential chorus archive. Finally, I suggested topics for future research and made recommendations for establishing LGBTQ+ chorus archives.

Keywords
LGBTQ+ choirs, archives, history

Introduction

The act of singing in a chorus is a deeply communal experience. It requires singers to breathe together, to move together, and to share their voices in the pursuit of creating something more meaningful than what can be created alone. It is a practice of acknowledging shared humanity, for both singers and audiences. This practice has been especially significant for LGBTQ+ singers seeking a safe community to express their identities. For decades, LGBTQ+ choirs have created beautiful music that celebrates and validates the lives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community. In addition to empowering singers, LGBTQ+ choruses have had a profound impact on their audiences. These choirs have used music "to make more tangible for their audiences the loves and pains and joys and sufferings of queers, thereby humanizing identities that are still systematically denied full humanity" (Balén, 2017, p. 35).

Despite the profound impact that LGBTQ+ choruses have had on singers and audiences over the last 50 years, their stories have remained largely absent from archival institutions. In "Queer Lives in Archives: Intelligibility and Forms of Memory" (2018), Gina Watts discussed the way this type of absence can contribute to the erasure of community memory and identity:

> Archives represent material history: the idea that a person can find their families, or those whose lives mirrored theirs, in an acid-free box, and in doing so, find themselves, be recognized by the historical record, and claim their right to take up space in the world…. By contrast, not existing in the archive can seem like not existing at all (p. 104).

When LGBTQ+ records have appeared in archival institutions, they have often been government records produced by those policing communities rather than participating in them (Watts, 2018, p. 105). LGBTQ+ choruses have had an empowering effect on singers and communities, and they have been a vital chapter in queer history. For this reason, it is imperative to preserve the stories of LGBTQ+ choruses in archives.

In this article, I investigated the ways that archives for LGBTQ+ choruses could be established through research into two choruses in Arizona: Phoenix Women's Chorus and Desert Voices. These choruses had been active in Arizona for nearly 40 years yet did not appear in any archive in the state. Beginning with the establishment of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), I briefly discussed the history of LGBTQ+ choruses in the United States. I then outlined the archival theory, structure, and purpose of community archives using LGBTQ+ examples. I also presented the research into the history of Phoenix Women's Chorus and Desert Voices, as well as the results of a survey sent to both choirs that asked singers about the experiences, memories, and material they wanted represented in a chorus archive. Finally, I made suggestions for future research, including recommendations for creating archival collections for LGBTQ+ choruses. The goal of this research was to take the first steps towards establishing an archival collection for these two Arizona choirs. In doing so, I also hoped to create a roadmap for other LGBTQ+ choirs who wish to preserve their histories in the archival record.

Literature Review

A Brief History of LGBTQ+ Choruses

Jill Strachan (2006) outlined the history of modern LGBTQ+ choirs beginning in the early 1970s. This history reflected the separation between lesbian, gay, and transgender groups of the time, as the modern LGBTQ+ coalition was just beginning to form in the United States. Many lesbian choirs grew out of "women's music," a style of feminist music that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s to uplift women's voices and criticize patriarchal structures in society (Strachan, 2006). Founded in 1975, the ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir was an early example, and they performed feminist music that represented the experiences of women, both lesbian and heterosexual (ANNA Crusis, 2019).

The development of gay men's choirs in the U.S. followed a separate path, illustrated by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. Their first round of auditions was originally scheduled for November 27th, 1978, the same night San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk were assassinated. Instead of auditioning, singers gathered to sing a hymn at City Hall (Strachan, 2006, p. 249). This first performance of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus inspired singers around the country, and when the chorus went on tour in 1981 many LGBTQ+ choruses appeared in its wake.

The Stonewall Chorale became the first lesbian and gay chorus in the United States in 1979 (Stonewall Chorale, 2017). It began as the Gotham Male Chorus before expanding to include lesbian singers, mirroring the increasing collaboration between gay and lesbian activists at the time (Stonewall Chorale, 2017). The 1982 Gay Games invited fourteen lesbian, gay, and mixed choruses to perform together in San Francisco, and soon after these singers formed the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA). Many of these choirs were gay men's choruses, though founding members do include the ANNA Crusis Women's Choir and the Lesbian/Gay Chorus of San Francisco (GALA Choruses, 2025). Since its founding, GALA has grown to support more than 190 choruses across North America.

Community Archives

In "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream" (2009), authors Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd provided general characteristics of community archives. These archives often "derive their commitment, passion and enthusiasm from a desire to document and record their own history and that of their communities; histories which are often absent from mainstream archives and other heritage institutions" (p. 73). Community archives represent "collections of materials gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control" (p. 73).

Because these materials are gathered from the community, they do not always conform to traditional documents. Community archives might include "created as well accumulated materials and frequently comprise museum objects, books, ephemera, clothes as well as more traditional documents, photographs and audio-visual materials" (Flinn et al, 2009, p. 73).

There are many examples of LGBTQ+ community archives that can provide guidance for future LGBTQ+ choir archives. Some of these archives, such as the Sexual Minorities Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, are independent organizations that eschew institutional support and are instead entirely supported by their communities. Others, such as the Arizona Queer Archives and the Oregon State Queer Archives, are community-focused institutions that maintain partnerships with university archives. While these archives maintain various levels of community control, they also have common characteristics that can guide the formation of a chorus archive.

Many of these LGBTQ+ archives started as informal collections within their community. These "apartment archives" include the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which grew out of Joan Nestle's New York apartment in 1974 (Lesbian Herstory Archives, n.d.). A few years later the Sexual Minorities Archive, then called the New Alexandria Lesbian Library, began operating out of a Chicago apartment (Rawson, 2015). Even LGBTQ+ archives with institutional support often began this way. The ONE Archives at USC Libraries began as the Western Gay Archives in Jim Kepner's Hollywood apartment (ONE Archives, 2018, "History"), and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives started as the Gay Liberation Archives in founder Ron Daymen's basement (Barriault, 2009).

While community archives have their roots outside archival institutions and employ broad collecting policies, this positionality does not mean that they lack any archival principles in their structure. As Bettine and Mattock (2019) detailed, the community focus does not preclude any knowledge of archival practice, as community members may have a wide variety of professional knowledge that can support the archives. As the authors discussed, "community identity should not erase the other identities that community members embody, including their professional identities" (p. 695). Furthermore, community archives often make plans to share these technical skills with other members. Both the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Sexual Minorities Archives cemented this value in their missions, stating that "archival skills shall be taught, one generation…to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives" (Lesbian Herstory Archives, n.d; Sexual Minorities Archives, 2015).

The community-focused nature of LGBTQ+ choruses would make them particularly well suited to a community archives format. A community archives structure would also grant the chorus power over its records and materials, allowing the choir "to exercise some control over its representation and the construction of its collective and public memory" (Flinn et al, 2009, p. 83). This kind of community control would also insulate the archival collection from hostile political climates. As LGBTQ+ history and archives have become increasingly challenged, the risk that existing stories could be hidden, edited, or erased entirely has also grown. The creation of new historical records could also become precarious, as the loss of federal funding and legal protections for the LGBTQ+ community can discourage both individuals and organizations from participating in archival work. In this context, a community archives framework would be particularly appropriate for an LGBTQ+ chorus archive, as it could help protect the collection from external threats.

Research Design
Personal Connections

My research into LGBTQ+ choirs and community archives grew out of my desire to see my community's history preserved. I joined my first GALA choir in 2018, and it had a profound impact on my life. I spent a year singing with Phoenix Women's Chorus, and I currently sing with Desert Voices and serve on their Board of Directors. I have found a home in both communities, and my membership in these choruses informed the way I approached this research.

Much of what I know about these choirs I learned through my own experiences singing with them, and I collected most of the information in this article through personal relationships with my fellow singers. As a result, the information in this study included a mix of my personal experiences, memories shared by chorus members, and oral histories shared at chorus events. This blending of community with formal research created limitations in the types of information I could collect and introduced bias, but it also opened new avenues for discussion and exchange based on personal relationships and trust. In this way, my personal approach to the research echoed the tradition of community archivists who are often members of the communities whose records they preserve. The goal of my research was to take the first steps towards establishing an archival collection for my two choirs. In doing so, I also hoped to create a roadmap for other LGBTQ+ choirs who wish to preserve their histories in the archival record.

Path of Research

Because of my personal connection to Phoenix Women's Chorus and Desert Voices, I decided that I should begin my research into establishing LGBTQ+ choir archives by studying these two groups. This narrow focus allowed me to closely examine two specific LGBTQ+ choirs while still gathering information that could be useful to a broader audience of choruses. By researching these two choirs, I was also able to draw on my personal experiences and close relationships with each group. Unfortunately, this approach excluded the two gay men's choirs in Arizona, Phoenix Men's Chorus and Reveille, and I hope to include them in any future research and work on LGBTQ+ chorus archives.

I began my research by compiling a general history for both Phoenix Women's Chorus and Desert Voices. This process included gathering what I had learned from years singing with the choirs as well as reviewing the information posted on their websites. Unfortunately, neither choir had much history publicly available, once again underlining the value of establishing an archive documenting their histories.

To discover what choruses would like to see in an archive of their chorus, I then created a survey to interview singers about the key activities, stories, and materials they would want to include. The goal of the survey was to introduce singers to the idea of an archive and learn more about how this unique community would want to be represented. This survey started as a list of interview questions, as I originally intended to visit rehearsals and discuss the project in person. Both choruses often presented ideas and updates during rehearsal, allowing for discussions, questions, and collaboration when the whole choir was present. I had planned to follow this format for my research, as it would allow the choir to reminisce together, exchange ideas, and offer feedback as a group. However, because my research began in the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic prevented rehearsals from occurring and thus forced me to change the format.

To continue the project, I adapted the discussion questions into an online survey with a mix of multiple choice and open-ended prompts. In addition to this online survey, I also interviewed five members of Desert Voices in a group video chat, allowing for some exchange and discussion with a small subset of the choir. Between these two experiences, I received feedback from 40 singers from the two choruses, 35 through the anonymous online survey and 5 through the video chat. The online survey is included in Appendix A, and all the material collected in the survey and interview is detailed in Appendix B. Because of the small group of respondents, I chose to group the results by question, rather than separating responses out by chorus or individual participant. Since the interview asked the same questions as the survey, I also grouped those responses by question along with the survey results. While this grouping does not allow for comparison between the choirs or participants, it does allow for common themes to appear within each question.

The sudden change in format caused by the coronavirus pandemic had an impact on the research. Questions I originally wrote for discussions with the whole chorus were answered by individuals through an online survey. Online surveys are far less accessible than in-person conversations, and they do not allow for collaboration and exchange between singers. Because I sent the survey to both choirs with no additional selection criteria, the responses came only from singers who checked their emails and were willing to complete online surveys. Furthermore, by providing multiple choice options for certain questions, I embedded my own perspective as an archivist in the results collected. Finally, the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic limited my ability to collect additional information, as the choirs soon cancelled rehearsals and group events. Despite these obstacles, I was still able to gather valuable preliminary information that can help guide future research. While this information is informal and limited in scope, it still has value as a starting point for further discussions within LGBTQ+ choirs.

Results

History of the Choirs

The Phoenix Women's Chorus was born out of the Lesbian Resource Project in 1993. While I was singing with the chorus in 2018, they documented their history in a photo series on their website titled "Herstory," a portmanteau of "her history." I learned about the choir herstory in my first rehearsal, as founding members still singing in the group introduced themselves and discussed how the chorus came to be. The choir started as a "small but mighty group of women" with only half of their singers publicly participating (Phoenix Women's Chorus, 2025). Early photos of the chorus include "Hidden Singers" who stood behind a wall "to protect their jobs and families" (Phoenix Women's Chorus, 2025). In these photos, half the singers hid their faces and only showed their hands. This is a common history among GALA choruses, and most choirs have stories of members using pseudonyms, avoiding photography, and not publicly associating with the chorus (Balén, 2017, p. 13).

As with many lesbian choirs, Phoenix Women's Chorus has strong roots in the culture of women's music. Their mission, "Empowering all women through music," has reflected this culture throughout its history (Phoenix Women's Chorus, 2025). Since its founding, the choir has been an active member of the queer community in Phoenix, performing at Pride events, singing at the State Capitol during the AIDS Quilt Display in 1995, and collaborating with other LGBTQ+ choirs like the Phoenix Gay Men's Chorus. This community focus endured throughout the choir's history, and recent performances included singing the national anthem at Phoenix Mercury Pride Night, performing at the Arizona Gay Rodeo, and collaborating with the other GALA choruses in Arizona. The choir placed inclusivity and community at its core, and current members included lesbian women, transwomen, non-binary singers, and straight allies. These values of history, community, and inclusivity were all reflected in the chorus's mission statement: "Cherishing our Lesbian heritage, Phoenix Women's Chorus is a nurturing sisterhood, providing diverse choral programs, empowering all women, embracing inclusivity, and educating our communities through the universal language of music" (Phoenix Women's Chorus, 2025).

Desert Voices expressed similar values in its more succinct mission of "Fostering Community Through Song" (Desert Voices, 2019). Founded in 1988, Desert Voices has always been a mixed choir and described itself as "Tucson's premier gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and ally chorus" (Desert Voices, 2019). The choir welcomed all singers, with only a voice check to determine the appropriate vocal part. The result was a truly mixed choir, where the parts of soprano, alto, tenor, bass are divided by vocal range rather than by gender. Unlike the Phoenix Women's Chorus, Desert Voices did not have much information about its history available on its website. Instead, the history of the choir lived in the memory of current singers, who occasionally told stories of early days at choir events. In some of my first rehearsals with Desert Voices, I spoke with women who remembered finding the chorus in the 1980s and finally feeling safe enough to come out of the closet. I learned

more history while singing at the Tucson AIDS Walk, my first performance with the choir. The event included a display of the AIDS Quilt, and some choir members reflected on early experiences between speakers. As with many GALA choruses, Desert Voices had its roots in the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the choir formed in part to show solidarity with and provide comfort to the LGBTQ+ community. As community members unfolded and displayed the AIDS Quilt, my fellow singers recalled days singing at the bedsides and funerals of friends and community members. These community memories carried the history of the chorus, and they were reminders that while LGBTQ+ choruses are often joyful expressions of pride, many formed as a response to tragedy.

The music of GALA choruses has often served the larger purpose of building community for LGBTQ+ singers, an approach that was illustrated in the mission statements of both Phoenix Women's Chorus ("Empowering all women through music") and Desert Voices ("Fostering community through song"). Both choirs supported a diverse group of singers, from professional singers to people who have never sung in public. While both choirs strove to make beautiful music, that goal never surpassed the desire to cultivate a warm and welcoming community, regardless of the musical ability, age, race, gender, or sexuality of any of their members.

Survey and Interview Results

The first four questions of the survey focused on how much the singers knew about their choir history and how they learned this information. Singers tended to fall into one of three groups. New singers usually knew very little about the early history of the choir. Members who had been with the choir for a few years knew the general story but usually lacked knowledge of specific events. Finally, long-time singers who had belonged to the choir for many years often experienced the history of the choir themselves and told detailed stories. This breakdown reflected an oral tradition, with experienced singers passing the history on to new members when they joined.

In the first group, most singers, 25 out of 40, had been with their choir for five years or less, and they tend to know relatively little about their choir history. As one singer wrote, "I know that Desert Voices, like most other GALA choruses, came into being largely in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis as a show of solidarity and to increase the visibility of the gay rights movement, which had been damaged because of stigma resultant from the pandemic. As to the specifics of who early members and directors were, sadly, I know very little." This was a common theme among new singers; many admitted that they knew almost nothing about their choir history, while others could only speak to the general themes. When asked how they knew this history, a few mentioned learning about their choir online, but the majority said they learned through conversations with choir members.

The second group of singers, 8 out of 40, had been part of their choir for more than ten years, and 4 of these individuals for more than twenty years. These long-time singers knew much more about the early history of their choir from personal experience, and one wrote about how they knew "some of the founding mothers, participated in shaping the chorus to what it is today, lived through some early struggles and challenges, sang in early concerts, [and] participated in various grassroots fundraising efforts."

The third and smallest group fell between the first two groups: experienced singers who have been with their choir for between 5 and 10 years and know about their history through a combination of personal experience and conversations with choir members. These results were consistent with my own experiences in each of these choirs. When I first joined, I knew very little about the history and founding of either Phoenix Women's Chorus or Desert Voices. I learned this history through conversations with my fellow choir members, especially by speaking with singers who have been with the group for many years. In this oral tradition, memories and stories of the choir are passed from singer to singer.

Many choir members mentioned a desire to capture this oral tradition in a choir archive. The second section of the survey asked singers about the types of stories, experiences, and activities they believed were most essential to their choir. Concerts and rehearsals ranked highest, with 36 out of 40 people saying they were central to the choir. One person described rehearsals with Phoenix Women's Chorus as "womanchurch – church whittled down to the best parts – the music and the community." When writing about Desert Voices rehearsals, another person responded, "It is a rich experience to go through the processing of building a repertoire with such diverse, accepting, and loving people." Outreach events were also important to choir members, and 30 people answered that they were central chorus activities. Singers wrote about their experiences working with Habitat for Humanity, the Tucson AIDS Walk, and collaborations with other GALA choirs.

In addition to performances, rehearsals, and outreach events, singers also wanted to preserve the founding story of the chorus. Thirty-eight participants expressed a desire to document the early days of the choir and how it has grown over time. Another 27 said they would be interested in member profiles, especially for founding members and directors. Some members mentioned a desire for singers to write a "testimonial about how being in the choir has affected their life." Others mentioned audience experiences; Phoenix Women's Chorus collects audience comments from each concert, and these comments, positive or negative, are documented and saved after each performance.

The final section of the survey asked about the materials, physical or digital, that singers would want to see in an archive. The singers unanimously said that any archive must include recordings of concerts. As one singer said, "Recordings in some capacity must be a part of the archive. Nothing can really capture the feeling of being on stage, the Sunday matinee buzz. But we are here because of the sound we create together." All 40 singers also wanted photos to be part of the archive, and one singer clarified, "Especially backstage pictures, because they capture the joy that everyone has, all dressed up." Concert ephemera also ranked very high, with 34 people listing concert programs and 27 listing posters. A few singers even mentioned t-shirts, stage props, and concert tickets. Many singers also listed oral histories and video interviews as important parts of an archive.

From Community Memory to Community Archives

LBGTQ+ choirs unite people "to challenge social injustices, creating a sense of community and strengthening their shared vision for a better world" (Balén, 2017, p. 33). In this way, community has often been the primary focus for LGBTQ+ choirs. Because of this community focus, an LGBTQ+ chorus archive would fit comfortably within the framework of community archives. A community archives structure would also grant the chorus power over its records and materials, allowing the choir "to exercise some control over its representation and the construction of its collective and public memory" (Flinn et al, 2009, p. 83).

Any materials for the archives would be created, collected, and described by singers in the chorus. Many chorus members, myself included, have professional backgrounds in information science, history, community organizing, or other related areas. These professional skills would complement our roles in the community and benefit any archives the choirs may build (Bettine and Mattock, 2019, p. 695). As I discussed the possibility for archival collection with the chorus, I found that every singer marked their time in the chorus in a different way. Some singers collected posters and programs from every concert in which they participated. Other members faithfully recorded each concert for themselves and took pictures at performances and rehearsals. One of my fellow choir members had every piece of merchandise the choir has ever produced, including t-shirts, hats, and pins. Others have been singing with the choir for 25 years and personally experienced the early history of the choir. As a result, the chorus archives already existed in some form, scattered throughout chorus members' garages, closets, and memories. This community collection reflected the tradition of "apartment archives" within

the large community archives practice, as seen with the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Sexual Minority Archives.

My historical research, survey, and interview began the work of identifying the key activities, stories, and materials that singers wanted represented in an archival collection. By analyzing these responses and grouping related answers, an image of an LGBTQ+ chorus archive began to appear. Singers wanted concerts to feature prominently in the archive, and most suggested materials related to performances. Suggestions included recordings of both rehearsals and concerts, ephemera such as programs and posters, and photographs of singers both on- and back-stage. Some singers suggested saving props and costumes from different performances. This feedback from singers outlined some possible series for a chorus archive, including Audio/Visual Materials, Concert Programs, Posters, Photographs, and Stage Objects. Singers also indicated a desire to preserve their choruses' founding stories in an archive, which could create series devoted to Oral Histories, Member Profiles, and Community Impact.

This survey began investigating the possibility of creating a chorus archive, but as a research project it was limited in its scope. First, the digital survey restricted the information I could collect, as not all singers participated. Second, this research only included two of the four choruses in Arizona. Third, this project did not include any gay men's choruses, though they made up the majority of LGBTQ+ choruses at the time. To address these limitations, I hope to expand my future research to include in-person conversations with all four GALA choruses in Arizona. Not only will this expansion include more singers and choirs in the study, but it will also allow singers to collaborate and exchange ideas amongst themselves. These conversations will produce more in-depth results which will enable the design of a collection policy that addresses the needs of all four choruses.

My future research will also evaluate the possibility of partnership with the Arizona Queer Archives (AQA), an LGBTQ+ community archive located in Tucson, Arizona. While Phoenix Women's Chorus, Desert Voices, and the AQA have all expressed interest in this partnership, many questions need to be answered before an LGBTQ+ chorus archive can be established. For example, how will materials be transferred from the choruses to the archives? What materials, if any, will remain within the chorus? Will materials be digitized to be accessible online? How will this collection remain accessible to the chorus members? While many questions remain, this research explored the first steps towards establishing LGBTQ+ chorus archives. I hope it also created a model for other choirs who wish to preserve community memories by creating community archives.

Conclusion

When discussing the culture of LGBTQ+ choruses, Strachan wrote, "In the choral setting, each voice matters. The presence or absence of a single voice changes the overall ensemble sound" (2006, p. 259). LGBTQ+ choruses have had a profound impact on singers and audiences for over 50 years, yet their voices have remained largely absent from archival institutions. I hoped to address this silence by investigating ways to establish an archive for two GALA choruses in Arizona. In this article, I reviewed the history of GALA choruses, discussed examples of LGBTQ+ community archives, and identified some of the key stories, activities, and materials choruses would want represented in an archive. As a result, this study began the first steps towards ensuring that the voices of GALA choruses are preserved in the archival record.

As this work progresses in my choruses, I encourage other GALA choirs to consider forming their own archives, whether hosted within the chorus or in partnership with LGBTQ+ community archives. The attached survey can be used to start discussions with your singers as you begin to imagine how your history could be recorded and shared. Because each GALA choir has unique characteristics, choirs can easily adapt the survey to suit their needs. Beginning this discussion with Desert Voices has been transformational. As we considered possibilities for

a Desert Voices collection with the Arizona Queer Archives, we started a new practice of collecting and sharing oral histories about the chorus. In both rehearsals and concerts, we invited singers to share their stories, speak about LGBTQ+ history, and discuss queer music. It celebrated the stories of older singers, taught new singers and audiences our history, and allowed us to collect that history to eventually share with the Arizona Queer Archives. This oral history practice quickly became a beloved tradition, and it has been a source of deeper connections and community building.

Today's political climate has offered new sources of urgency to preserve and protect LGBTQ+ history. Look to the way that the U.S. Park Service has removed all references to trans people from the Stonewall Inn, a site whose significance was inextricably tied to transwomen like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (National Park Service, 2025). Restricting federal funding, punishing organizations with DEIA missions, and eliminating legal protections for the LGBTQ+ community have all had a chilling effect that can discourage both individuals and organizations from collecting, preserving, and sharing queer histories. These threats demand immediate resistance. They must be answered by the emphatic refusal to be silent, to forget, and to fade from memory. The LGBTQ+ community must loudly and joyfully take up space in the historical record, and LGBTQ+ choirs should raise their voices to answer this call.

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Appendices A and B can be found <u>here</u>

Sustaining Queer Choruses: Organizational Resilience through Governance, Equity, and Capacity

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Abstract

Organizational resilience is a central concern for queer choruses. A review of the literature on nonprofit leadership, diversity practices, and community arts organizations has shown that resilient systems develop through coordinated governance structures, cultures of equity and belonging, and strong operational capacity. Governance contributed to resilience by establishing structures that distribute responsibility, support accountability, and sustain continuity. Equity and belonging influenced organizational stability through practices that strengthen psychological safety, representation, and collaborative participation. Operational capacity further supported resilience by providing documentation, administrative tools, and financial systems that enable reliable functioning. Examining governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity offered insight into how queer choruses maintained cohesion and mission alignment across changing conditions. Based on this literature review, I offer organizational practices for queer chorus directors and boards that support long-term participation and artistic continuity in community-based LGBTQ+ ensembles and outline directions for future research.

Keywords

Introduction

Queer choruses rely on shared artistic identity, volunteer engagement, and community connection to sustain their work across changing social and organizational pressures. Researchers have found that nonprofit leadership and community arts organizations develop resilience when structures support continuity, shared responsibility, and clear organizational practices (Adams, 2010; Charles & Sloan, 2024). Scholars have further demonstrated that participation is strengthened when systems align values, communication, and expectations across diverse communities (Ostrower, 2008; Alberdi & Mulcahy, 2008; Cuyler, 2008). Understanding how queer choruses maintain stability requires attention to the internal conditions that shape decision-making, community experience, and administrative functioning. This literature review framed organizational resilience as a set of practices that support mission alignment and collective identity during periods of change.

The perspectives presented in this article were informed by experience in nonprofit leadership, academic training in organizational psychology and public administration, and long-term engagement in queer choral communities. The literature review was grounded in more than a decade of service on the board of Empire City Men's Chorus, including ten years as treasurer, which provided sustained exposure to the organizational, financial, and cultural dynamics influencing community-based arts groups. This experience offered practical context for examining how organizational structures, cultural practices, and community values shaped resilience in volunteer-led arts organizations. This background shaped the interpretive lens through which I developed the observations and recommendations presented here.

In this literature review, I examined organizational resilience in queer choruses through three interconnected areas: governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity. Prior research on nonprofit and community-based organizations has shown that governance practices, equity-focused cultures, and administrative capacity shape the internal functioning and stability of small volunteer-led groups (Ostrower, 2008). Focusing on governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity clarified how internal practices influenced community experience, participation, and organizational continuity. Based on this literature review, I developed an analytic approach for examining how queer choruses sustained stability, cultivated shared purpose, and adapted to common challenges in volunteer-driven arts organizations.

Governance

Sustainable leadership and strong governance are essential for the long-term health of LGBTQIA+ choruses. Many queer choruses depend on a small number of volunteers who carry significant administrative and relational responsibilities, often without formal structures to guide their work. Charles and Sloan (2024) found that accountability in arts organizations rests too heavily on individuals rather than shared processes. Furthermore, Bass and Riggio (2006) noted that leadership capacity grows when organizations cultivate systems that encourage shared responsibility, skill development, and healthy decision-making practices. Based on this literature, I concluded that formalizing governance systems strengthened leadership sustainability in queer choruses, providing a foundation for examining governance practices that support continuity and shared leadership.

Governance practices that reduce burnout and encourage succession planning support leadership sustainability in queer choruses. Adams (2010) found that leaders from marginalized communities were often overextended because they held both professional and cultural responsibilities, particularly in identity-based arts settings. Charles and Sloan (2024) highlighted that financial and organizational accountability improved when board members provided consistent support through clear expectations, documentation, and shared responsibility. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) demonstrated that inclusive leadership practices fostered psychological safety, enabling members to contribute openly and to view learning as part of organizational growth. Applied to queer choral organizations, governance practices supporting shared responsibility and psychological safety could help maintain stability and momentum as membership and leadership change over time.

Volunteer-led organizations that maintained accurate records, consistent communication patterns, and transparent policies developed more stable foundations that were less vulnerable to leadership transitions or unexpected challenges. Adams (2010) emphasized that written processes helped prevent the loss of organizational knowledge, a common issue in groups with high volunteer turnover. Pless and Maak (2004) found that integrating diverse perspectives into leadership processes strengthened accountability and supported organizational climates in which participation was valued. In queer choral organizations, shared leadership structures and psychologically safe environments could enable volunteers, board members, and artistic staff to participate more effectively by recognizing diverse perspectives and treating errors as opportunities for learning.

Effective boards approach governance as an ongoing process that responds to community needs, organizational growth, and changing social conditions. Queer choruses operate within dynamic cultural environments in which membership demographics, artistic goals, and community expectations shift over time. Boards that emphasize reflection and adjustment in their governance practices support long-term sustainability by responding deliberately rather than reactively. In queer choral organizations, board members and organizational leaders can align leadership practices with evolving mission priorities and community values through this adaptive approach. Governance practices that support continuity and responsiveness also shape the

organizational conditions under which equity and belonging develop, making equity and belonging the next area of organizational resilience to examine.

Equity and Belonging as Resilience

Equity and belonging are essential concerns for LGBTQIA+ choruses. Researchers studying queer choral communities and nonprofit organizations have emphasized that participants value environments in which they feel included, supported, and recognized as full members of the community (MacLachlan, 2020; Balén, 2017; Bernstein et al., 2016). Balén (2017) noted that queer choruses often reflect broader social inequities, including racism, classism, and transphobia. Organizational research has further shown that diversity alone does not produce inclusion unless governance and leadership practices enable voice, participation, and shared decision-making (Buse et al., 2014; Bernstein et al., 2016). For these reasons, governance practices that intentionally cultivate equity and belonging play a critical role in sustaining inclusive participation and leadership pathways within queer choral organizations.

Surface-level inclusion does not create the same conditions as structural equity. Bernstein et al. (2016) argued that representation and visibility alone do not ensure meaningful participation or shared leadership when organizational practices fail to distribute voice and decision-making authority. Similarly, Buse et al. (2014) demonstrated that diversity initiatives improve governance outcomes only when leaders adopt inclusion behaviors that enable marginalized members to influence decisions. Belonging depends on whether members feel empowered to contribute to artistic and organizational choices, particularly when their perspectives or identities differ from established norms. In community arts organizations, Cuyler (2008) discussed how participation strengthens when systems distribute responsibility and authority more evenly across members. As MacLachlan (2020) observed, outward commitments to diversity can mask persistent internal inequities in representation and decision-making, which weaken participation and organizational cohesion over time. Collectively, the scholarship indicates that leadership and governance practices enabling meaningful participation, shared authority, and sustained engagement across difference support the development of equity and belonging.

Belonging also develops through relational and psychological dynamics that shape how members experience the ensemble. Scholars examining community music and volunteer organizations defined belonging as an organizational condition in which members experienced mutual recognition, meaningful participation, and shared responsibility through sustained engagement in collective practice (Holly, 2016; Bryer, 2019). In queer choruses, community music spaces provided opportunities for identity affirmation, interpersonal connection, and shared purpose, which strengthened belonging when members felt recognized and respected (Balén, 2017; MacLachlan, 2020). Relational and psychological conditions within organizations also supported psychological safety, which researchers associated with healthier group functioning and more constructive engagement in mission-driven organizations (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Research rooted in Self-Determination Theory further emphasized that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness strengthened motivation and long-term participation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2023; Forest et al., 2023). Across this scholarship, belonging emerged as a core organizational condition shaping participation, engagement, and continuity in volunteer-driven ensembles.

Equity further required structural attention to the policies, practices, and norms that guided decision-making and power within organizations. Scholars examining culturally diverse arts organizations emphasized that equity was practiced consistently only when organizational structures aligned with stated institutional values, rather than functioning solely at the level of rhetoric (Ostrower, 2008; Alberdi & Mulcahy, 2008). When organizations

lacked mechanisms for structural accountability, they often reproduced the very exclusions they sought to challenge. Balén (2017) and MacLachlan (2020) observed that inequities in leadership access, rehearsal environments, and participation expectations frequently undermined stated commitments to justice within queer choral communities. Across these studies, equity emerged as a structural condition dependent on how organizations aligned governance practices with stated commitments to justice and inclusion.

When leaders and members of queer choruses integrate equity into an organization's foundational practices, they strengthen organizational resilience by fostering commitment to dignity, accountability, and collective growth. Balén (2017) documented how inequities in participation and leadership within queer choral communities undermine sustained engagement, particularly for singers marginalized by race, gender identity, or access. MacLachlan (2020) similarly observed that outward commitments to inclusion often fail to translate into equitable participation when internal practices do not align with stated values. Research on community arts organizations showed that participation and continuity increase when leadership structures distribute responsibility and voice more evenly across members (Cuyler, 2008). Organizational scholars further associated inclusive leadership practices and psychological safety with sustained engagement and healthier group functioning in mission-driven organizations (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Through such practices, queer choruses cultivate communities capable of sustaining cohesion while navigating internal challenges and external change.

Operational Capacity

Operational capacity determines whether community-based arts organizations can sustain their work through change and transition. Ostrower (2008) described operational capacity as encompassing the systems, tools, and administrative structures that supported day-to-day organizational functioning in arts organizations. Kim and Bradach (2012) found that nonprofits sustained effectiveness over time by investing in administrative processes that supported coordination, communication, and financial stability. Lecy and Searing (2014) similarly showed that chronic underinvestment in core administrative functions weakened organizational continuity and constrained long-term capacity. In this sense, operational capacity functions as a foundational dimension of organizational resilience by supporting continuity across leadership transitions and changing organizational conditions.

Operational capacity extends beyond financial resources to include the administrative systems, communication tools, and organizational processes required for consistent functioning. Queer choruses relied heavily on volunteer labor to sustain rehearsals, communications, and artistic work, and such responsibilities proved difficult to maintain without clear and dependable systems. Kim and Bradach (2012) found that nonprofits became more stable when leaders strengthened back-office processes, expanded administrative capacity, and developed repeatable systems that reduced dependence on any single volunteer or leader. Lecy and Searing (2014) similarly showed that weak investment in core administrative functions limited organizations' ability to manage transitions and sustain long-term operations. These findings identified operational capacity as a critical factor in maintaining organizational stability as leadership, membership, and programming evolved.

Staffing structures, including both volunteer and paid roles, represent an important component of operational capacity in queer choruses. Many ensembles relied heavily on volunteers to manage essential administrative and relational tasks, often concentrating multiple responsibilities in a small number of individuals, a pattern that Lecy and Searing (2014) associated with organizational vulnerability during periods of turnover or burnout. Their analysis of nonprofit capacity further showed that chronic underinvestment in administrative infrastructure placed sustained strain on volunteer labor and weakened operational stability. Kim and Bradach (2012) found that organizations strengthened continuity when leaders made strategic investments in administrative capacity,

including paid staff roles, that were aligned with available financial resources. In queer choruses, staffing approaches that balance volunteer commitment with appropriately resourced administrative support may help preserve institutional memory and support leadership transitions over time.

Operational capacity ultimately reflects a queer chorus's organizational values. Ostrower (2008) showed that investments in administrative systems, documentation, and coordination practices signal how organizations prioritize accountability, continuity, and mission alignment in arts settings. Kim and Bradach (2012) found that nonprofit organizations strengthened long-term outcomes when leaders aligned resources with mission priorities, clarified operational expectations, and developed systems that supported consistent performance. Lecy and Searing (2014) similarly documented how sustained attention to administrative infrastructure reduced organizational fragility by supporting continuity beyond individual leaders or volunteers. In queer choruses, investments in documentation, communication infrastructure, and administrative processes provide practical foundations for sustaining mission-driven work across leadership and membership transitions. The interaction of governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity points toward several areas where future research can strengthen understanding of resilience in queer choruses.

Call for Future Research

Many LGBTQIA+ choruses operate in environments shaped by economic pressures, volunteer turnover, and evolving community expectations. Building on existing research on nonprofit and arts organizations, future research can deepen understanding of how queer choruses sustain themselves over time. Rather than treating resilience only as a response to disruption, scholars can examine resilience as an ongoing organizational practice shaped by identity, community, and artistic purpose. This perspective situates queer choruses within broader conversations about how community-based arts organizations navigate change while remaining grounded in mission and values (Adams, 2010).

Future research can also examine how queer choruses build and maintain governance structures that support stability over time. Ostrower's (2008) work on arts governance highlighted the importance of role clarity, shared responsibility, and participation in sustaining organizational functioning. Extending this line of inquiry, scholars could explore how board composition, leadership pathways, and decision-making practices influence continuity, conflict resolution, and organizational well-being in queer choral organizations. Such work would clarify how governance practices operate within identity-based arts communities where leadership and membership are closely intertwined.

Additional research can focus on volunteer motivation and participation in ensembles that rely heavily on unpaid labor. Lecy and Searing (2014) demonstrated how underinvestment in administrative infrastructure placed sustained strain on volunteer labor in nonprofit organizations. Future studies could examine how queer choruses structure roles, distribute responsibilities, and support leadership development in ways that sustain engagement and preserve institutional memory across membership cycles. This research would deepen understanding of how operational capacity develops in volunteer-driven arts organizations.

There is also a need for research examining how organizational practices shape equity and belonging in queer choruses. Scholarship on queer choral communities documented how access to voice, representation, and leadership opportunities influenced participation and community experience (Balén, 2017). Future research could investigate how rehearsal environments, governance practices, and internal policies shape experiences of belonging across differences of race, gender identity, class, and ability. Such work would strengthen understanding of how equity and belonging function as organizational conditions that support resilience.

Future research can further explore how governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity interact to produce distinctive patterns of resilience in queer choruses. Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2005) emphasized that resilience emerges from the interaction of organizational systems rather than from isolated practices. Applying this perspective to queer choral organizations would support a more integrated understanding of how community-based arts groups sustain musical, relational, and organizational commitments over time. This work would also contribute to arts management scholarship by highlighting how organizations rooted in marginalized identities develop resilient practices aligned with shared values and long-term aspirations.

Conclusion: Sustaining the Song

Queer choruses function as spaces of connection, affirmation, and shared purpose and as platforms for social justice and hope within their communities. Belonging is supported when members are invited to participate fully and are recognized in their dignity and wholeness. Organizational practices that sustained stability, clarity, and inclusion shaped how queer choruses adapted over time, alongside artistic commitments that brought singers together in common purpose. Structural and cultural factors supported the capacity of ensembles to respond to changing circumstances.

Sustaining a queer chorus has involved ongoing attention to leadership, community experience, and administrative systems. Volunteer leaders, artistic directors, singers, and supporters have worked together to maintain conditions that enabled artistic and organizational life to flourish. Internal collaboration required intentionality, distributed responsibility, and practices that supported clear communication and consistent functioning. Such work expressed a shared commitment to nurturing organizational environments that sustained both mission and music.

In periods shaped by shifting cultural, economic, and social landscapes, organizational resilience has taken on particular significance for LGBTQIA+ ensembles. Queer choruses have demonstrated how community arts organizations respond to uncertainty with creativity and alignment. Within queer choral organizations, resilience appeared as a collective process grounded in purpose and accountability, sustained through connection, shared values, and responsiveness to change. Sustained connection, shared values, and responsiveness to change position queer choruses as important examples of how identity-based community organizations navigate change.

The history of queer choruses has included decades of community-building, advocacy, and care, and those experiences continue to inform present work. As ensembles evolved, organizational stability depended on the strengthening of governance, the cultivation of equity and belonging, and the reinforcement of operational capacity. Each of these dimensions supported continuity, participation, and mission alignment by shaping internal structures and cultural practices that guided ensemble life. Sustained attention to governance, equity and belonging, and operational capacity supported continuity across organizational transitions.

In this article, I have argued that organizational resilience reflects the values an ensemble chooses to cultivate. Investments in governance structures, attention to equity and belonging, and efforts to build operational capacity reinforced dignity, community, and shared purpose within queer choral organizations. Such investments position LGBTQIA+ choruses to remain vital spaces of connection, creativity, and community expression.

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Songs of Gays: A Case Study of the London Gay Men's Chorus Social Movement

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Abstract

The LGBTQ+ choral movement began in 1975 and has expanded to nearly 400 choirs around the world (GALA Choruses 2021). In the nearly half-century since their inception, LGBTQ+ choirs have participated in political activism to varying degrees. This research explored whether the act of music*king*, the all-encompassing nature of creating music termed by Small (1998), leveraged relationships, political opportunities, emotions, and situational framing to create and sustain a social movement. This research was comprised of interviews of past and current members of the London Gay Men's Chorus (LGMC), formed in 1991. Engaging traditional social movement literature, performance literature, and gender and sexuality literature to inform both the methodology and the analysis, I sought to understand why gay men joined a choir without a political intent, but then emerged as insurgents towards creating and sustaining a social movement. How do musicking and identity combine as catalyst for collective action? How do chorus member relationships manifest bonds of solidarity that create kindling for group identity, group activity, and political activism? Ultimately, participants intimated that a shared marginalized identity created both a physical and emotional vulnerability framed around heteronormativity. I found that these vulnerabilities were harnessed and selectively shared via the act of musicking to foment a collective identity that ultimately sought a change in opinions for both the members and the audience.

Keywords
London Gay Men's Chorus, LGBTQ+ choral movement, sustainability, political activism, identity, solidarity

Introduction

On June 13, 2016, the heart of London's LGBTQ+ neighborhood was filled with an estimated fifteen thousand people at a vigil for the victims at the LGBTQ+ Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida (The Guardian, 2016; see Figure 1). After a moment of silence, members of the London Gay Men's Chorus (LGMC) sang Bridge Over Troubled Water by Simon and Garfunkel as a protest against homophobia. Yet, 48 hours earlier, the LGMC had been performing their celebratory 25th anniversary concert. Founded in 1991, the LGMC was an amateur chorus – a hobby or pastime opportunity for primarily gay men to regularly sing together outside of their professional lives. This raised the question of why an amateur chorus had suddenly taken center stage at the vigil for the Pulse victims.

Small (1998) posited that the act of musicking best described the complexity of the intricate series of relationships that creating music involved "and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part..." (Small, 1998, p. 13). I considered LGMC in terms of musicking – the relationships, the rehearsals, the trips, the concerts, and the never-ending etcetera involved in the all-encompassing nature of making music. I considered whether musicking created, developed, and sustained, as several participants noted, the desire to be "part of something bigger," even though that was never the original intention. I further explored whether musicking and identity combined as a catalyst for collective action; whether musicking created the conditions for members of the LGMC to attempt to influence public opinion related to sexuality-based oppression; and whether the LGMC constituted a social movement at all.

Social movements have commonly centered around traditional forms of contentious collective action and aggressive confrontation (e.g., protests, marches, boycotts, sit-ins). In this present study, I have posited that musicking in the LGMC has harnessed both an implicit and explicit heteronormative vulnerability that incited this movement via intentional, inclusive, and resonant framing. Musicking then evolved into a mechanism for collective action, resource mobilization, and sustained activity because its creation was borne from, and continuously based in, this vulnerability. In an effort to communally redistribute control of societal cultural patterns, musicking was additionally used as a means of framing support for the movement's mission by being selectively shared as an unthreatening form of soft diplomacy via musicking as protest. I have concluded that musicking did create the conditions for social movements because musicking was predicated not on aggressive confrontation but instead on harmonious shared humanity.

Firgure 1: London Gay Men's Chorus (center in blue)   The Guardian, 2016
Orlando Pulse Vigil
Old Compton Street, London
13 June 2016

Review of Literature

Striking the Right Chord: A Harmonious Approach to Social Movements

"A social movement is a loosely organized, sustained effort to promote or resist change in society that relies at least in part on noninstitutionalized forms of collective action" (McAdam and Boudet, 2012, p.56). This foundational definition contained three main points that transformed collective action into a movement. First, the sustained effort of collective action was essential because it set it apart from singular moments in time and instead demonstrated a consistent and intentional endeavor. Second, its relationship to societal change had to challenge or champion systems, traditions, or societally accepted ways of being. Finally, noninstitutionalized methods of collective action were essential because they represented agency in spite of formalized societal structures and demonstrated a purposive choice to change one's own life outcomes (Touraine, 1985). This baseline definition allowed for a more measured approach to understanding social movements via three relevant categories: resource mobilization, political opportunities, and emotional and framing techniques.

McCarthy and Zald (1977) examined the resources engaged for social movement campaigns via what they termed *resource mobilization.* This branch primarily considered the use of material, organizational, structural, network, cultural, and human resources that contributed to social movement campaigns and contended that human resource mobilization required a dense network in order to support recruitment and quotidian activity (Granovetter, 1973; McAdam, 1996; della Porta, 2015). Granovetter, in particular, noted the existence of strong ties and weak ties, which played different roles in promoting and sustaining collective action. Counterintuitively, Granovetter concluded that while strong ties might introduce insurgents to a campaign, weak ties enabled both the motivation to join collective action and the safety in numbers required to engage in it. Echoed by Tufekci (2017), weak ties became fundamental to collective action because they expanded networks, provided a diversity of skills, and rapidly grew the number of insurgents.

Researchers have defined political process theory as the political environment in which movements have formed through three main elements (Tilly, 1995; McAdam, 1999; Kriesi, 2008). First, an insurgent consciousness develops within a group that believes it has suffered a grave injustice (Marx, 2000; Thompson, 2013 [1963]; McAdam, 1999). This consciousness brings about mobilizing means and methods described in resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Finally, political opportunities emerge. Tilly (1995), McAdam (1996), and Tarrow (2011) described these opportunities in terms that included catalytic events, relationships with elites, degrees of repression, shared learning among movements, and changes in public opinion.

To capture these human complications, scholars have explored culturally resonant framing devices that serve both as stimulus and support for sustained insurgent consciousness and mobilization. Benford and Snow (2000) described frames as contextual "processual phenomena that implied agency and contention at the level of reality construction" (p. 614) and categorized frames according to problem identification, flexibility, inclusivity, and resonance. These framing devices helped to diagnose problems, inculcate the importance of frames, define inclusion, and motivate insurgency. Within these frames, insurgents developed urgency, attachment, and familiar narratives that contextualized their involvement (Polletta, 2006). Framing was therefore essential for personalizing grievances, removing abstraction, and presenting issues to adversaries (Ryan and Gamson, 2008).

Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2004) argued that emotions are central to human action and therefore play an important role in collective action. Anger and discontent were often associated with movement emergence. The authors, however, also examined joy, particularly the joy of unexpected victory, as a source of cognitive liberation that encouraged continued participation. Emotions functioned alongside framing processes to support recruitment, mobilization, continuity, and demobilization (Jasper, 2009). Joy also contributed to communal belonging through Turner's concept of communitas, which fosters collective identity and duty (Turner, 2012).

McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) combined these three branches into an amalgamated framework that allows scholars to analyze overlapping dimensions of social movements. Tarrow (2011) illustrated this intersection (see Figure 2). This blended approach remained useful because it connected theoretical structure with the lived stakes of movements, particularly as articulated in "new" social movement scholarship. Touraine (1985) defined social movements as those whose stake was "the social control of the main cultural patterns" (pp. 754–755). Touraine emphasized normativity and hegemony rather than mechanics alone. Analysis of movement missions further enabled consideration of collective identity and how identities have interacted in pursuit of those missions. Melucci (1996) defined collective identity as an interactive and shared process constructed through repeated relational activation. These frameworks were essential because social movements were modes of human agency and therefore required attention to both process and people.
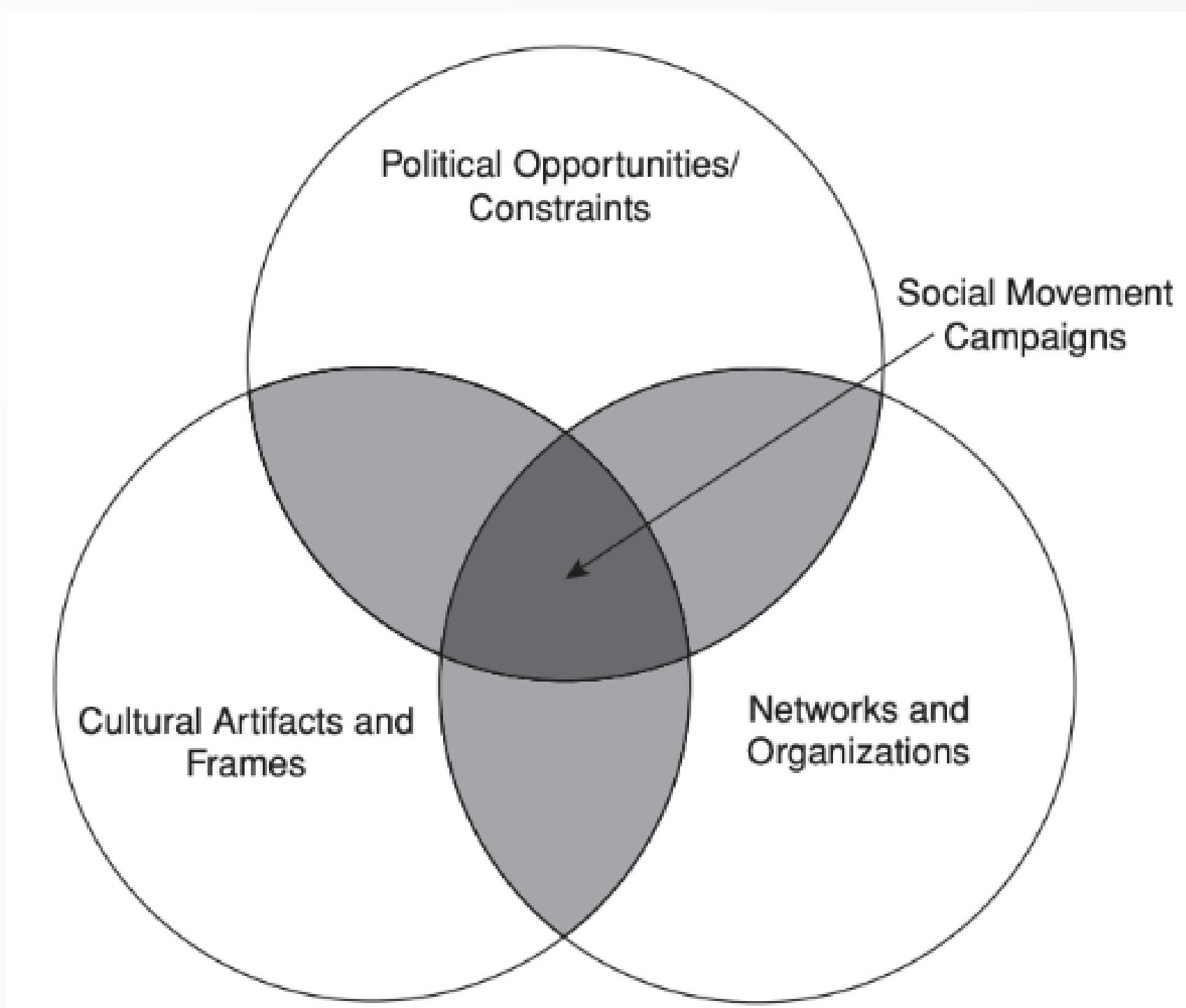
Figure 2: The Intersecting Elements of Social Movements

Music in Protest Versus Musicking as Protest

Scholars have largely focused on music used within protest contexts (Rosenthal and Flacks, 2011; Street, 2012; Bobetsky, 2014; Garvin, 2016). There was comparatively less literature on musicking as protest, where musicking itself constituted the primary form of collective action. Musicking as protest aligns with Small's (1998) definition of musicking, in which he emphasized interactions, relationships, and supporting activities within a musical activity. Paretskaya's (2015) analysis of the Solidarity Sing Along demonstrated this approach but focused on labor conflict rather than cultural patterns or identity. Roy (2010) argued that the sociologically interesting question concerned how musical meaning was achieved. Eyerman (2002) further demonstrated how choral musicking functioned as identity-based mobilization by fostering belonging, visibility, continuity, and resilience. Through musicking as protest, movements have created meaning via resonant frames that shaped recruitment, mobilization, and mission.

Methodology
Recruitment and Sampling

I chose the LGMC for a few key reasons: motivationally, as former Chairman and a current member of the group, I experienced first hand the personal shift from social group to political activity. As Maso (2003) mentions, researchers should carry "necessary subjectivity" that provides not only the passion for the work but also the initial impetus for the research questions. I therefore became interested in the causal conditions for this transformation and the resulting sociological value in explaining social movement activity. Practically, I chose this group because I had unique access to participants only available to current and past members. This allowed for exclusive research opportunities and data sources that may have been difficult for external researchers to access. As the LGMC is an autonomous bounded group, the process of finding volunteers was relatively straightforward. To minimise personal bias, I attempted to ensure that neutrality was infused throughout the entire project. I recruited volunteers through an internal email system and via a members-only Facebook group. This prevented

reliance solely on participants with whom I had a personal relationship and broadened potential participants from my personal contacts to all living past and present members (Taylor, 2011). This also allowed me to engage with multiple perspectives against my biases and preconceived impressions (Labaree, 2002). The final participant group (*N* = 15) included five singing members, five non-singing members (known as semitones), and five former members (known as alumni). While the singing members and semitones were randomly sampled, I systematically sampled the alumni to round out the entire participant group (Luker, 2008).

Research Design and Analytical Approach

I engaged in a singular movement case study for this research, as is the common primary analysis for social movement scholarship (McAdam & Boudet, 2012). Though the LGMC was the bounded group of the study, the ontological unit of analysis was the individual actor (Mason 2002). I chose interviews as the sole method of gathering data because, epistemologically, I sought opinions, feelings, individually created meanings, and a personal understanding of how musicking had transformed (or not) participants' originally solely social mode of participation in the chorus to one with political intent (Mason 2002). An interview allows participants to speak for themselves and "allows for and encourages…comparison across contexts, situations, and kinds of people" (Lamont & Swidler 2014, p. 158) – which is particularly relevant for marginalised communities (Alcoff, 1991). I therefore present an interpretation and analysis of what participants think is relevant to the questions as per their own personal experiences (Becker, 1996). As the number of past and present members is extensive, a positivist representative sample was neither achievable nor a goal. Instead, I chose to engage in what Small (2009) identified as a case model in which, by design, each participant is considered an individual case – the compilation of which would provide a window into a subset of LGMC members.

Of particular note to this project is my positionality as former Chairman of the LGMC. This granted me an opportunity to become, as Collins (1986) termed an *outsider-within*. "Outsiders within occupy a special place – they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see" (Collins, 1986, p. 29). This identity granted me exclusive benefits because it allowed me to conduct research by leveraging established trust by virtue of our shared identities and membership in the chorus (Ergun & Erdemir, 2009). This positionality, however, carried the potential for inhibited responses of participants because of my previous role as Chairman and personal bias towards reproducing my views in the final analysis (Labaree, 2002). To counterbalance these concerns, I approached the design and analysis inductively by creating research and interview questions for which there could be a range of answers (Luker, 2008). Additionally, the interviews – ranging from 44 to 78 minutes – were semi-structured to allow for a wide range of topics and in-depth responses (Luker, 2008; Weiss, 1994). I transcribed the interviews and coded them using an inductive coding technique that both reduced and complicated themes and sub-themes for each topic area (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The three main themes were: joining the chorus (insurgent consciousness), agreeing to participate in political elements of the chorus (collective action), and staying (or not) with the chorus (mobilisation and demobilisation). I then complicated the data by considering musicking's role within each of these areas. This complication of data enabled me to layer my analysis in consideration of networks, emotions, and cultural frames towards collective action.

Ethical Considerations

Blee and Currier (2011) described a best-practice ethical approach as one that considers ethics proactively. Accordingly, I first tried to minimize the difference between me and the participants by focusing on my role as a current member and not focusing on my previous role of Chairman. This helped to level the interviewer/interviewee dynamic as a means of providing a comfortable and balanced interaction (McCorkel &

Myers, 2003). Additionally, I anticipated that, by recounting personal stories, participants might display intense emotions, experience distress, or reveal intimate information involving mutual connections. I therefore stressed before and during the interviews that participants only needed to answer that with which they felt comfortable. This helped to inculcate trust with the participant, to ensure that the participant was at the heart of the interaction, and to prevent devolution of the interview into gossip. All video and audio files were stored on a private Dropbox to which I have sole access. To preserve confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms and any potentially indefinable information has been cleared for use by the participant(s). All participants were required to complete a consent form that detailed the aims of the research, requested permission to record the interview, and explained how the material would be used.

Findings and Analysis

Harnessing Vulnerability Through Musicking: Political Opportunities

According to a first-hand written account from LGMC founding member Robert Offord (2017), the LGMC began within the setting of a social group called London Friend. In the late 1980s, both the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the Section 28 law were significant sources of trauma for the gay community. Section 28 stated that a local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship (Great Britain. Local Government Act, 1988).

This law effectively bifurcated society and created a legal hierarchy of sexuality during a time of widespread societal homophobia (Burridge, 2004). The combination of these crises forced a vulnerability unto the UK's LGBTQ+ population that was comprised of both exogenous and endogenous factors. Ultimately, this social group developed a consciousness of shared threats corresponding to their identity as gay men and allowed founding members to harness their shared vulnerable identities as an injustice frame. This injustice framing incited a continued consciousness that empowered collective action (Marx, 2000; Thompson, 2013 [1963]; McAdam, 1999).

In this new movement, the actors chose musicking to be the method for creating the conditions enabling societal and political change. As Offord stated:

> I could clearly see that an in-yer-face gay choir could challenge so much of the fear and prejudice that [was] being whipped up […] It would be a direct, non-violent, cultural attack against the very heart of all the problems concerning our acceptance (Offord, 2017, pp. 12–13).

Participant Harvey, who joined in 1998, similarly noted the societal vulnerability of gay men at the time. The mere act, he said, of being out and performing as a gay group was deeply divisive and political: "we were all highly culturally politically charged 'cause that was the environment. We were in an embattled situation… especially during AIDS" (Interview 1). Participant Oscar, who joined in 2011, also described LGMC's reaction to the AIDS crisis: "we established our duty right there and then" (Interview 1).

Sharing Vulnerability Through Musicking: Inclusion and Emotional Framing

Participants expressed that the chorus's commitment to musical inclusivity was a main factor in their longevity with the organisation. Several participants highlighted the chorus's "no audition for joining" policy. As participant Andrew noted, "not everybody in the chorus is a fantastic technical singer… It's about the enjoyment and the passion for singing" (Interview 1).

As with Eyerman's (2002) intervention, musicking created a shared safe space framed by belonging, equality,

and connection within LGMC. Participant Oscar explained that he wanted to pass along "what the chorus has given me...the ability to be able to be absolutely proud of who I am." All participants described intense positive emotional charge from their experiences, including acceptance, joy, pride, and passion (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2004). Participants also described musicking as emotionally exposing and vulnerable. Participants frequently cited songs associated with the Pulse vigil, particularly *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Participant Keith described his experience: "there's something in the lyrics… showing support to people who had been lost to no fault of their own… it hits deeply within your heart and your gut" (Interview 1).

Keith expressed that the song framed both his identity as a gay man and the vulnerability of his community, personalising grievance and strengthening solidarity (Ryan & Gamson 2008). Resonant framing and emotion were also central to how the chorus garnered audience support. Participants described musicking as a way to share vulnerability through "soft diplomacy." Participant Peter explained, "with a performance like the choir you can very easily and readily give people a sense of identity and fellowship with you" (Interview 1). This allowed the chorus to expand its external network of allies through shared humanity and compassion (Eyerman, 2002; Jasper, 2009; Touraine, 1985).

Human Resource Mobilisation Through Musicking: Identities and Brotherhood

Collaborative musicking required singers to synchronise closely, producing intimacy with profound consequences. Participant Ian described encountering diverse forms of gay identity that challenged his stereotypes: "I saw so many different types of gay people… It was like a big education for me" (Interview 1). The chorus facilitated intergenerational, interracial, and interclass relationships rooted in shared heteronormative vulnerability (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Participant Terrence noted that members were never asked if they were gay upon joining; it was assumed. This eliminated the need for continual coming out and provided refuge from heteronormative expectations (Rubin, 1984). Participant Mikael noted that he "never felt connection anywhere in [his] life until [he] joined the chorus" (Interview 1).

Repeated rehearsals created dense networks of weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). Accountability and mutual reliance emerged through performance. As participant Graham stated, "if I do something wrong… I'm going to let everyone else down" (Interview 1). Some weak ties developed into strong ties, forming what participants described as a brotherhood.

Coda: Conclusion

My research questions addressed whether musicking could create and sustain a social movement and whether the LGMC could be considered a social movement. Using McAdam and Boudet's (2012) definition of social movements as informal networks seeking societal change, I believe the LGMC clearly fit this characterization. The LGMC functioned as a social movement, and its engagement in musicking as protest was the means through which it manifested as such. Musicking was unambiguously the central activity of both the insurgents and the organization.

Across all participant accounts, musicking created the conditions through which participants formed and strengthened weak and strong ties around a shared heteronormative vulnerability that constituted the basis of a collective identity. This collective and shared vulnerable identity was repeatedly harnessed and mobilized into collective action in response to political opportunities—initially via informal networks and subsequently through the chorus's formal organizational structure. Additionally, the vulnerability inherent in making music created bonds of kinship, solidarity, and trust, which fostered emotional investment in both the organization and fellow members and thereby promoted sustained collective action.

This same vulnerability was also shared with intended allies—audience members—whereby musicking itself became a tool for emotional framing through injustice and human vulnerability frames. Chorus members participated in political activities aimed at societal change because their strong and weak ties were sufficiently robust and resilient to mobilize individuals, and thus the group. These opportunities were framed by members themselves or by leadership as relevant to personal identity, musical enjoyment, engagement with social networks, and, in some cases, a perceived duty. All relationships, outreach events, concerts, marches, and performances were possible because the group's primary activity was to meet regularly to sing, not in spite of that activity.

Musicking therefore created and sustained a social movement by providing both the means and the ends of the campaign, the emotional framing necessary for resonance, and the primary mechanism for mobilization. Unexpectedly, in seeking to redistribute control of societal cultural patterns, the central locus of social change manifested not only in the audience but also within the chorus itself. Members were compelled to confront their own biases, rendering them unintended targets of the campaign against stigmatization. Social change did not flow unidirectionally from LGMC members to outsiders; rather, internal bonds produced mutual understanding, strong relationships, and widespread acceptance of differences beyond sexuality. It was this multidirectional creation of allies, empathy, and acceptance that ultimately solidified the LGMC as a social movement.

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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 (Westrate 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 finding 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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Submission Guidelines

The Journal of Queer Choral Studies (JOQCS), the official publication of GALA Choruses, is a peer-reviewed professional journal for articles by scholars, practitioners, and writers who have an important story to tell about their choral experiences.

JOQCS…
- *disseminates information about new and unseen developments in the field of queer choral studies*
- *strengthens mutual understanding among academics and practitioners*
- *establishes a forum through which authors may help to improve and increase the theory and practice of choral studies*

Three types of submissions are described below. All types of submissions are valued by the JOQCS:

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Scholarly articles maintain full academic standards. Original research articles should document new findings, data, insights, and conclusions. Purpose, problem, and research questions should be included.

Definition and Characteristics:

- *Original research articles using APA format with proper citations and methodology*
- *Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, historical, and narrative inquiry are welcome*
- *Require academic rigor with title, byline, abstract, bio, and keywords*
- *Should include intro (with purpose/problems/research questions), review of literature, methodology, results, and discussion sections*
- *Literature reviews are also welcome under this category*
- *Approx. 3000-6000 words*

Article Example: <u>Taylor and Calaham (2024)</u>

PRACTITIONER ARTICLE

A practitioner article is defined as academic work that combines scholarly research with practical application in choral settings. These articles will use APA format and include proper citations, methodology sections, and theoretical foundations while connecting research to real-world practice.

Definition and Characteristics:

- *Academic rigor with proper citations and methodology*
- *Research that points to or informs practical applications*
- *Required to have title, byline, abstract, bio, and keywords*
- *Must demonstrate connection between scholarly work and choral practice*
- *Approx. 1000-3000 words*

Article Example: <u>Southerland (2018)</u>

SPOTLIGHT ARTICLE

"Spotlights" from the field which are written in a more journalistic way. For this, reviewers will check that manuscripts are formatted according to the journal guidelines. A Spotlight is a more narrative-focused article with these distinctions:

Definition and Characteristics:

- *No academic style requirements*
- *More storytelling-oriented, like choir experience vignettes*
- *Don't require extensive citations or theoretical foundations*
- *Could be simple narratives about choir experiences (like effects of a spiritual-themed concert)*
- *Designated as "choir experience spotlights" rather than traditional research*
- *Limited to two per journal issue*
- *Approx. 1000-3000 words*

Article Example: <u>Vanderburgh (2015)</u>

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Before submitting their articles for consideration, authors will complete the JOQCS Submission Form to indicate which style of submission describes their article of the Reviewer Process they prefer to participate in. They will submit the article title, all authors' names, a short abstract (250–500 pp.) with keywords, and any acknowledgements. Authors may choose which type of reviewer process they prefer to participate in.
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Process 1 (double-anonymous peer review): This option is offered to meet the standards of many academic institutions. Submit articles with a separate cover page with the article's title, all authors' identifying and contact information, and brief biographies (100–250 words) for each of the authors with emails; also include any acknowledgements. On a new page, provide an abbreviated title running head for the article. Do not include any author identifying information in the body of the article, other than on the separate title page. Two peer reviewers will independently receive the article without the author's information and without knowing the identity of the other reviewer. Each reviewer will recommend accepting the article for publication, accepting with revisions, or rejecting the article. Once the author(s) has made any changes to the satisfaction of the two peer reviewers, the manuscript will be sent to the Founding Editor-in-Chief for final determination.

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A Time for Love: 21st Century Marriage Ceremonies in the LGBTQIA+ Community

Call for Participants!

With the recent 10th anniversary of the Obergefell decision, now is the time to celebrate, reflect, and aid in its continued defense. We each have a part to play, so you are invited to share the story of your marriage as a way to mark this important milestone. By filling out the linked survey below, you will be contributing to a study of 21st century marriage ceremonies in the LGBTQIA+ community. An accurate description of these ceremonies will provide resources for those considering marriage, encouragement for those whose marriages were affected by prejudice, and data to support future advocacy. Sharing your story now may well help someone else have a story of their own to share at the next anniversary.

Please consider being a part of this important work. Thank you! The submission window is currently open and closes August 10, 2026
Scan the QR code below or visit https://forms.gle/p6oR31BzpJsc2Hhk9 to participate!

David Walters, Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus