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Robin L. Perry

Publisher

Ann Meier Baker

Art Direction

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Jan-Marie Petersen

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CHORUS AMERICA
1156 15TH STREET, N.W., SUITE 310
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202/331-7577 FAX 202/331-7599
WWW.CHORUSAMERICA.ORG

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On the Cover: Sculpture in Boboli Gardens, Florence, Italy. ©Jupiter Images

SENSATIONAL SINGING SENIORS

Good for the Body, Good for the Soul

BY KELSEY MENEHAN

When Esther Watt moved to Willow Valley, a large retirement community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, she assumed her days as a music educator were behind her. For some 35 years, Watt had taught voice and piano and led choirs at all levels from kindergarten through grade 12 for the Ephrada Area School District 69. The last five years she was chair of the music department.

But once a music teacher, always a music teacher. In the spring of 2003, she sent a letter to the 2,300 residents of the sprawling life-care community—one of the largest in the nation—announcing that she was starting a choir. That first year, she got 48 singers. In June 2003 the Willow Valley Cultural Center Chorale put on its first concert at the community cultural center.

“I was very apprehensive about all of this,” Watt recalls. “We were entertaining older people and we could not just get up there and stiffly sing a concert. So we wanted to make it fun.”

The Manor Singers of the Manor at Yorktown, conducted by Helen Kemp.

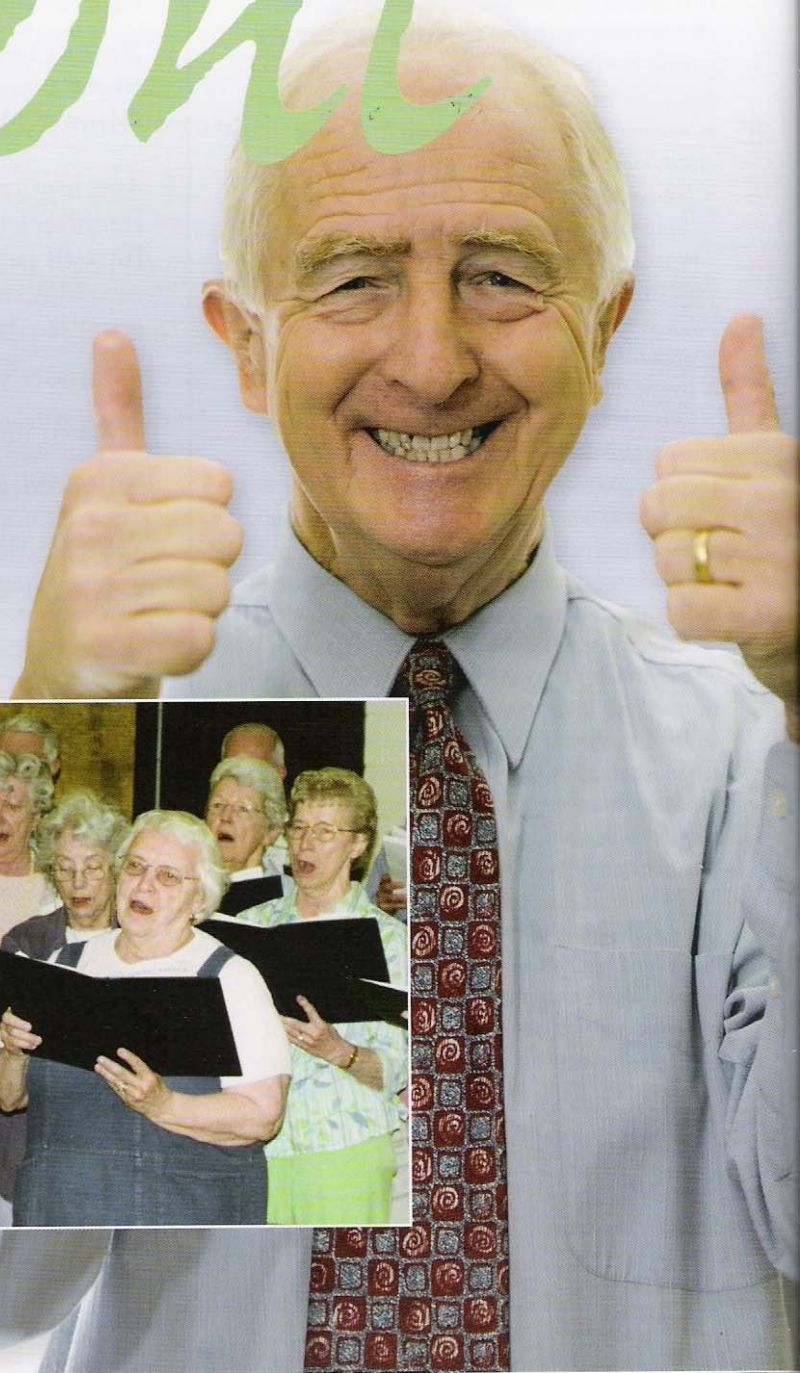




PHOTO: PAUL BRIDLE

Young @ Heart Chorus has performed in Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

She needn't have worried. The program's mix of popular and classical music was a crowd pleaser, and the 500-seat auditorium quickly filled. Thereafter, the Chorale's concerts—in the spring and at Christmas—were among the most anticipated and well-attended events in the complex.

Now 75-strong, the Chorale's singers range in age from 48 to 90 and include former music teachers, one former choral conductor, many who have sung in church choirs, and the rest simply people who enjoy singing. All concerts are videotaped and the holiday programs are aired on in-house televisions. For many of the bedridden residents in the care facility at Willow Valley, "That's their Christmas," says Watt.

How Can I Keep From Singing?

The Chorale is part of what appears to be a burgeoning movement of senior choruses across the country. The groups range from small pick-up groups that gather around the piano at the retirement center to church choirs especially for seniors to full-fledged choruses with ambitious programs and a regular concert season.

Some senior choruses have even gained a worldwide following. The Young @ Heart Chorus has taken stage shows and choruses on the road in Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States since 1983. A traveling group of 22 singers between the ages of 71 and 93 wowed the audience at a concert in the spring of 2007 at the Moore Theater at Dartmouth University.

"This is the moral of the story told by the Young @ Heart Chorus," reviewer Chris Barth wrote. "It is possible to age gracefully. It is possible to grow old without growing boring. It is possible to have white hair, a hearing aid, and a device that helps you breathe, and still disco dance while singing 'Staying Alive.'"

Young @ Heart was started by a group of people who lived in a senior housing project in Northampton, Massachusetts. And that's where many senior choruses start, often with a modest goal of "Let's get some folks together and see what happens."

Helen Kemp, 89, formerly a professor of voice and church music at Westminster Choir College, moved to the Manor at Yorktown, a retirement residence in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, several years ago. Not being in her own home anymore was a big shift for her, and she began looking for a way to become more a part of the community.

She found a group of 12 singers who rehearsed once a week and joined. They had no keyboard and the conductor could only come every other week. "After the first year, the leaders of the group asked me if I would consider directing the choir," Kemp recalls. "I had no idea of how to go about it. Our age group here is from 72 to 89."

Like Watts, Kemp had worked almost entirely with children during her long music education career—she has led children's choirs all over the world—but there was something very pleasing about working with seniors, she found.

"When you have a church choir, usually you have problems when people get into their 70s and their voices don't fit with the

relatively younger voices around them," she said. "But in this group, when they get together, I find it's very satisfying. They can make very beautiful music for who they are."

Meeting the Challenges Head On

As both Watts and Kemp discovered, leading a senior choir presents a different set of challenges than leading a children's choir. For one thing, some of the older choristers come to rehearsals in wheelchairs or with walkers. Several wear hearing aides. There are memory problems. Watts says she often has to remind choristers, "Don't schedule your doctors' appointments during Monday afternoon rehearsal time."

In Kemp's chorus, several singers have Alzheimer's disease. "One gentleman came and he is a fine musician, a trumpet player," says Kemp. "He said, 'I have Alzheimer's and cannot memorize.' I said, 'You read music. You don't have to memorize.' And he is a joy and a big help. Another gentleman is a bit farther along, but when he is in the choir he looks at me and is totally involved, even though after choir he may forget where he is."

Working around the limitations requires flexibility. Watts says she has foregone chorus rules such as "Miss three rehearsals and you're out." Some members of the chorus travel frequently, and others have physical limitations or medical problems that can keep them from attending regularly.

And Watts is unfailingly positive. "There's really no point in being otherwise," she says, and the singers have blossomed under that encouragement. As one tenor told her after rehearsal recently, "You're the first person who told me I sound good. I always thought I sounded awful."

But she has not let up on the goal of making beautiful music. "I tell them that I have my goals on this particular piece," Watts says. "We don't aspire to sing at Carnegie Hall, but we want to do our best. We have to work hard to get the sound."

Kemp says that her group likes to be challenged. She's not afraid to ask her singers to sit up straight, even if it's just moving an inch away from the back of the chair or even the wheelchair. "I always ►

ask, 'Am I working you too hard?' And you know what they say? 'No!' They love it. Whether they can do what I am asking them to do is another thing, but they are very willing.

"It's odd for me," she says, "because I am one of them. I know my limitations, what I can sing now compared to what I did as a professional singer. But I can make music."

The Health Benefits of Musicmaking

Making music—that is the key. There's a large body of research documenting the positive effects on mind and body of *listening* to music. But new studies are beginning to bear out the tremendous health benefits of being *actively engaged* in the creative arts.

In Washington, D.C. a group of seniors averaging 80 years old took part in a choral

program at The Levine School of Music beginning in December 2001. This was no summer sing, though previous experience was not required. The chorus prepared hard, under the direction of Jeanne Kelly, then director of the Levine School's Northern Virginia campus, and put on performances at the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage, among other venues.

After two years of measurement compared to a control group of similar individuals, the music participants:

WORKING SUCCESSFULLY WITH SENIOR CHORUSES

An Interview with Helen Kemp by Thomas Lloyd

Helen Kemp is emerita professor of voice and church music at Westminster Choir College, co-founder of the Choristers Guild with her late husband John Kemp, and holds honorary doctorates from Westminster Choir College and Shenandoah University. After directing children's choruses all over the world for over six decades, Kemp recently turned to directing senior singers, including the Manor Singers in the retirement community where she now lives, and a series of popular workshops with the recently established Singing for Seniors program of the Bucks County Choral Society. Artistic director Thomas Lloyd talked with Kemp about the joys and challenges of leading senior choruses.

Lloyd: At the workshop last week we did a simplified arrangement by Douglas Wagner of Mendelssohn's "How Lovely Are the Messengers" from *St. Paul*. I was amazed at how nice a legato they found without a lot of wobble. Where does that come from, do you think, because everyone assumes that's not possible?

Kemp: You can't assume that. That's why I don't assume. I try to think artistically like I would with a graduate student. You know, I want the same thing. And with that, I use the visuals I would use for children and count-singing for legato.

Lloyd: It's the same kind of thing you would do with other choirs and they are able to respond to it?

Kemp: Oh, absolutely. And a piece like the Mendelssohn involves every section in the choir. I look for repertoire where each section has a melodic phrase, so I can get that legato. If you want them to sing well, they've got to have something legato like that in the warm-ups, too. I do things like, "Sing To Me With Thine Eyes" and I have them do it in a couple keys. All of them sing the melody.



"I've never believed in talking down to children and I don't believe in that for seniors, either. You've got to build them up and give them what they need."

Lloyd: Has it been hard to find good arrangements like this, with voicings that work for seniors? Do SAB arrangements normally work well?

Kemp: The only [problem] with SAB is the bass part. They try to put it in the middle range, so it's too low for some of the tenors and too high for some of the basses.

Lloyd: We've talked about how people are not really writing music with senior choirs in mind, because it's only been somewhat recently that there have been so many senior choirs.

Kemp: Yes, what needs to be done is to make some adjustments for the more limited range of the senior voice. Douglas Wagner has done a good job of that with the Mendelssohn, even if he didn't have seniors in mind. Now purists will not

like that kind of rearranging, but why not have something beautiful for them [seniors]? Unless we get some music especially composed, which might be coming.

Lloyd: Engaging seniors *actively* in the music, rather than just trying to get them as an audience, seems like a more holistic way of going about it.

Kemp: Holistic is a good word here. I've never seen people enjoy singing in a choir more than these people. You can see it in their faces when they sit up straight and their eyes light up. And it also can be beautiful. Now we're not talking about going to Carnegie Hall—we're talking about the fulfillment of doing this and giving it as a gift to your community. It's a whole different attitude. It is not for professional criticism vocally—I don't have this in my mind. I think, "What are they doing that is wonderful right here?"

Lloyd: It is a fine line that you're able to bridge—challenging them and showing them what more they can do, which they really seem to want.

Kemp: You know, I've never believed in talking down to children and I don't believe in that for seniors, either. You've got to build them up and give them what they need. And you will find people who may have sung in college or skipped a generation while they were having kids. There are many different situations where they think, "Oh, I'd like to come back and sing again." And many of them improve greatly.

Lloyd: So you can hear an audible improvement?

Kemp: Oh yes, I can hear it when they sing. As they say, "You don't stop singing because you grow old; you grow old because you stop singing."

For more information on the Bucks County Choral Society's "Singing for Seniors" program and photos from workshops with Helen Kemp, go to www.buckschoral.org/events_singing-for-seniors.pl



The Senior Singers Chorale of Washington, D.C. participated in a choral program at The Levine School of Music as part of a study on the effects of being actively engaged in the creative arts.

- Reported better health and fewer falls
- Showed a slower rate of increase in doctor visits
- Increased medication usage at a significantly lower rate
- Showed greater improvements in depression, loneliness, and morale
- Increased social interaction, while non-participants decreased interaction

The study, commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts, also looked at the same factors in a second group involved in visual arts, theater, writing, and jewelry-making at the Brooklyn, New York center Elders Share the Arts, and in a third group working with textiles, painting, mask-making, Chinese brush painting, and poetry at the Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts in San Francisco.

“What’s significant is that the musicmaking seniors actually showed significant improvement in categories such as falls, social interaction, and overall health, where we might have expected only to slow the decline in these areas,” noted Gene Cohen, the study’s director.

Cohen’s research confirms that old age, once considered a period of decline and difficulty, is actually a period of creativity and new potential in the human lifespan. He says that old age does not cause medical, emotional, and social problems, but these problems can be controlled with interventions that should include active participation in music and the arts.

Even elders with considerable impairment can experience benefits, as Anthony Hyatt, a violinist and dancer, discovered when he went into senior centers under the auspices of Arts for the Aging (AFTA). The Washington, D.C. group provides artistic outreach to seniors with physical or psychological impairments and helps staff at senior centers create art activities that foster participation and enjoyment.

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Elderhostel Choral Music Workshops

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Singing for Seniors, Bucks County Choral Society

www.buckschoral.org/events_singing-for-seniors.pl
The program hosts an annual workshop for individual senior singers and an annual festival in which senior choirs present their own programs and rehearse and perform a new piece together. Pending grant funding, the Choral Society hopes to send its member singers into senior communities to support the start-up of senior choruses.

Arts for the Aging (AFTA)

<http://aftaarts.org/music.htm>

The organization provides artistic outreach services to psychologically and physically impaired seniors in senior daycare centers and not-for-profit nursing homes in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. AFTA's mission is to work closely with these senior centers and foster participation in creative and stimulating art activities, allowing seniors to enjoy an enhanced and healthy aging process as well as feel a deep sense of accomplishment and enjoyment.

Creativity and Aging Study

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/CnA-Rep4-30-06.pdf>

A report on the results of the Creativity and Aging Study, which documents the important benefits for the elderly of participating in arts programs.

National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA)

<http://www.creativeaging.org/>

The NCCA promotes networking, training, and advocacy in the burgeoning field of creative aging. Each year, the NCCA provides thousands of professionals in health care, social work, and the arts with the theoretical framework and hands-on skills they need to implement sustained, quality creative programs for older people. The NCCA also publishes and distributes training manuals, manages an Arts & Aging Directory, and publishes an e-newsletter. Finally, the NCCA provides training and technical assistance to emerging organizations in this field.

The Creative Aging Initiative

www.nationalguild.org

A multi-year project of the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, the Initiative provides information and training to foster start-up and development of participatory arts programs for older adults. In January 2008, the Guild will publish *Creativity Matters, The Arts and Aging Toolkit*, a resource guide for practitioners in the arts and elder services industries. To request a copy, contact the Guild at 212-268-3337 or guildinfo@nationalguild.org.

Sensational Singing Seniors

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"When I play familiar music, people naturally start to sing," Hyatt says. "My objective is for people to participate however they can. My measure of success is to look around and see people actively engaged with musicmaking and doing that for themselves."

At one session at a senior center in Washington's Chinatown neighborhood, the attendees, mostly first-generation immigrants, asked Hyatt to play "America the Beautiful" on his violin. Then they asked him to play it again. Soon the group was translating the familiar American song into their own languages, which included several Chinese dialects, Tagalog (Philippines), and Arabic.

"I got all teared up," Hyatt recalled. "I thought, 'This is amazing, with the context of the world as it is, to have this little project happening here.' There's something that transcends culture and language, where the music is able to connect with the people and the healing benefits are there."

AFTA measures the success of its workshops by the response of the participants, not by hard science. Anecdotal observations from program directors and AFTA staff during and after classes include improvements in alertness, verbalization and socialization skills, lessening of anxiety, passivity, and agitation, and occasional stimulation of short-term memory. Many senior center staff members have indicated that these benefits often continue for hours or even days after the art classes take place.

Organizations Providing More Arts Opportunities for Seniors

The accumulation of research is good news—not only for those elders with serious impairments and those trying to help them, but for the Baby Boomers just beginning to move into their retirement years and wanting to stay as healthy and vital as possible. And organizations are responding.

Across the country there has been a proliferation of festivals and workshops especially for senior singers. For instance, vocalists who are at least 55 years old can fine-tune their talent at one of dozens of Elderhostel Choral Music Workshops, conducted by a leading choral conductor and held in various locations around the country.

The Berkshire Choral Festival offers a Singing for a Lifetime workshop—open to all ages, but required for all participants over age 70—aimed at helping singers keep their voices in shape across the lifespan. "A lot of seniors feared that at some point they were going to have to give up singing, which they love so much," says Kathy FitzGibbon, head of the faculty at the Festival. "That, of course, was a bad option for them, and they find that there really are ways that they can maintain their vocal health."

In Kemp's hometown of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, the Bucks County Choral Society recently launched a Singing for Seniors program in the community to actively engage the growing senior segment of their audience not just to buy tickets but to become actively involved in singing



The first Singing for Seniors Choir Festival hosted by the Bucks County Choral Society in April 2006 brought together 112 singers from six senior choral groups in the Bucks County area. The workshops were led by BCCS artistic director Thomas Lloyd, pictured, and conductor, composer, and clinician Helen Kemp.

themselves. Kemp led the first several choral workshops. "She was usually both the oldest and the sharpest one in the room at these events," said Thomas Lloyd, artistic director of the Choral Society.

But Kemp says it's not something special that she is doing that makes a difference. "There's something about singing," she says. "It's your own instrument, it's out of you. There are not many things that seniors can do like that. Also, it's individual, each one is responsible, and it's in community."

A Holding Community

For older choristers, singing has given them connections to others that they might not have found outside a chorus. Watts's retirement community encompasses several "campuses," making it difficult to interact with people outside your immediate complex. "By having this choral group, people get to know each other all over the community," Watts says, "not just in one building or at dinner everyday."

That community was particularly meaningful to Watts when she lost her husband in the spring of 2007. For a while, she turned the chorus over to her choral conductor member. But she couldn't stay away long. "Some days the chorus was a reason to get out of bed in the morning," she said. "I would think, 'Well, here I am, 76 years old and still able to do what I love.'"

Kemp says that after an hour and a half of singing together, her choristers don't want to leave. "At the end, they're still wanting to talk about the music," she says. "Even the shyest of them. That is both mental and what I call the spirit, or the affective, feeling level."

"I pay attention to that because I think those are some of the big reasons for having them continue this music making," she says. "They're breathing, they're speaking the poetry, they're actively doing something, not just listening to a tape recording of a good choir."

"They're making their own music," she says. "I don't think there is any substitute for that." ■

Kelsey Menehan is a writer, choral singer, psychotherapist, and frequent contributor to the Voice. She lives in Washington, D.C.

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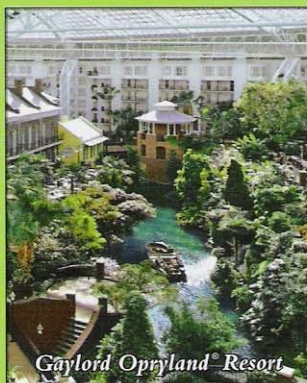
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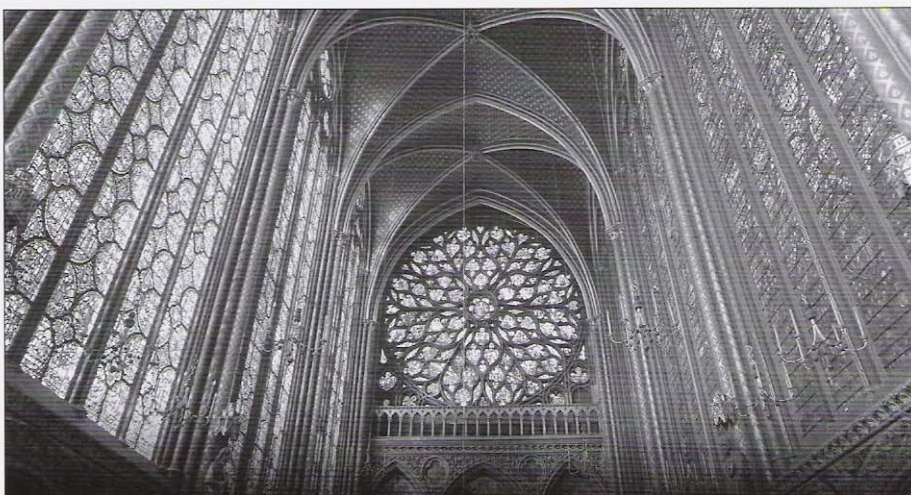
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