

How Can Volunteer Choruses NAVIGATE RE-AUDITIONS SMOOTHLY?

Asking your chorus members to re-audition may be the single greatest test of the notion that choruses can create outstanding art and at the same time create meaningful community. Artistic leaders, managers, and singers who have experienced re-auditioning in volunteer choruses large and small talk about its benefits and pitfalls, and explain how they have managed this delicate process.

BY KATHRYN MUELLER

In the aftermath, says Robert Russell, some singers called it the “alto massacre.” His Choral Art Society of Portland, Maine, a “mixed chorus of skilled volunteers,” instituted re-auditions 30 years ago, about a decade into his tenure. Russell felt the alto section had gotten too large, populated by lyric voices who couldn’t comfortably sing the high notes, and he had true mezzos on the waiting list. After the re-auditions, eight altos were asked not to return. Many tears were shed, and for several years afterward singers half seriously referred to those first re-auditions with terms like “blood letting.”

Russell understands the pain that resulted. Introducing re-auditions “will change your relationship to your singers,” he cautions.

“When you’ve socialized with a singer and then have to ask that singer to leave your choir, it’s as if the singer says, ‘I thought you were my friend, and is this what friends do to friends?’” Nonetheless, he stood firm, knowing that he had the full support of the board (a board committee had spent an entire year considering the pros and cons of re-auditions) and that singers had been kept informed about the plan. After the eight altos were let go, Russell recalls someone asking, “Can’t you keep them all?” And I said, “Well, yes I could, and that would completely defeat the purpose of what we just decided that we wanted to do.” Although the change caused some pain at first, Russell and the board felt they had made the best decision for the long-term health of their ensemble, now known as ChoralArt.

Still, if introducing re-auditions can be so traumatic that it evokes the description “massacre,” why do it?

According to Chorus America’s recent Chorus Operations Survey Report, 40 percent of the 75 volunteer choruses that responded hold re-auditions. For a volunteer chorus, the rationale for re-auditioning singers depends on the needs and mission of the group. “If the priority is getting together and having a good time, then no, maybe re-auditioning isn’t that important,” says Wes Everett, a singer and board member of the Concert Singers of Cary (North Carolina). “If the mission is to provide the best quality of music that you can, and to be able to do the most challenging music that you can and do it well, and have top-notch collaborations, then I think people understand that’s the primary thing. And the other stuff is secondary.” That’s how Russell sees it too: “The social experience is, of course, important, but the best experience for these singers is when we get the music right.”

Connecting With Each Singer, or “Cleaning House”?

It’s important to distinguish between two types of re-auditions for volunteer choruses. Some conductors hear every singer for purely informational purposes, with no intent to ask anyone to leave. This often happens when a new music director comes on board. When Brett Karlin took over the Master Chorale of South Florida six years



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Malcolm Merriweather leads The Dessoff Choirs in a November 2017 performance at the Riverside Church in New York.

ago, he heard all members of the group, and he will do the same this fall as he adds the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay to his docket. “It was very important to me not only to hear the voices and make sure they’re properly voiced,” he says, “but to make a personal connection with the singer, because every other time I’m in the same room with a singer, I’m in the room with over a hundred of their colleagues.”

In the more controversial type of re-audition, the singer’s membership status is at stake. When it follows the arrival of a new director, singers may see this approach as “cleaning house.” Paul Rardin, who directs the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, views this type of re-audition in a positive light: as “a symbol of recommitment to the ensemble.” And he feels the people he’s turning away deserve to know that everyone’s “earning their seat every year.”

The need for re-auditions can be greater for ensembles that collaborate with professional orchestras. Magen Solomon is artistic director of the San Francisco Bach Choir. In her former positions with the Stockton

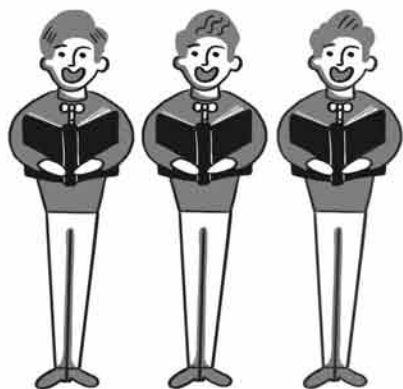
Chorale and the Oakland Symphony Chorus, she felt she had an obligation to provide a prepared chorus. “So I was a bit stuck between the needs of a community chorus—just to make everyone have a good place to sing and a place to learn—and the need to present a high-quality product to my colleagues.” Solomon believes re-auditions also demonstrate her responsibility to members of the chorus itself: “If one person is dragging down the section I’m not being fair to the other 19 people in the section.”

Scheduling and Structuring

Re-auditions can happen on a variety of schedules. ChoralArt hears all singers every two years (alternating between the symphonic Masterworks and the 45-voice Singers ensembles). So does the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. For his first two years as music director of The Dessoff Choirs in New York, Malcolm Merriweather heard everyone; going forward he’ll hear half the choir each year.

When Nathan Leaf took over the Concert Singers of Cary last fall he brought back re-auditions, which had been on hiatus for several years. *[Editor’s note: Leaf is married to the author of this article.]* He decided to hear sopranos and basses one year, altos and tenors the next, aiming to make the process feel “less oppressive.” In the future he intends to hold them every four or five years, possibly a section each year. “I think there’s a balance between maintaining artistic standards, which everyone appreciates,” he says, “while also maintaining a sense of comfort and a sense of belonging for individual members.”

Some groups hold re-auditions, but not for the whole ensemble. In his 20 years at the helm of the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus, Reuben Reynolds has heard everyone twice: when he first came to the group, and again 10 years later. Now his music section representatives let him know when a section member is having a problem, and he re-auditions only those singers. With 200 people in the ensemble, he doesn’t have ►



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Conductor Paul Rardin speaks to the audience at Philadelphia's Church of the Holy Trinity during a 2015 concert by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia.

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the time to listen to everyone individually, so he says his section reps "really work as my right hand in the section." After initially hearing all singers, Karlin now re-auditions only the members he's concerned about. He communicates with them individually, aiming to keep the process private.

The format of a re-audition varies from chorus to chorus. Sometimes only the music director is in the room, but there may also be a pianist, an assistant director, or a board member. Most re-auditions include *vocalises* and ear-training exercises. Usually the singers bring in prepared pieces of music—a solo song or choral excerpt they've worked on alone, or a selection from the past season's repertoire.

Sight reading might be a feature, depending on the needs of the group. Karlin and Leaf require it. Merriweather does too, "because a very important aspect of being in The Desoff Choirs is music literacy and being able to keep up with the very best readers in the group." Reynolds doesn't include sight reading in his auditions or re-auditions. And Rardin removed it this year because, he says, "I decided that for the amount of angst it was causing [my singers], it wasn't teaching me enough about how well they read and how well they could contribute."

Minimizing the Fear Factor

Re-auditions are scary for singers, but there are things a chorus can do to make them less so. "I really try to make it a positive experience," Merriweather explains, "because as soon as you say audition, people get nervous." Looked at in an affirmative way, re-auditions provide a chance to make connections and help the singers improve vocally. Merriweather doesn't even use the term re-auditions; he calls them re-hearings, and he tries to make them into mini voice lessons.

Solomon places such emphasis on the voice lesson aspect that some of her singers even record their re-auditions so they can listen to her feedback again later. And the process has become a way for her to learn whether the instructions she's giving the full choir are making sense, and to personalize her instruction. "It gives me a chance to say, 'Susie Pickles, when I say, 'Sopranos, you're flat,' this does not apply to you because you have a tendency to sing sharp.'"

While most choruses expect their singers to prepare themselves for their own re-auditions, especially if the repertoire they'll be singing is from the past season, some ensembles have done audition workshops, or recommend someone in the community who offers preparation help. When Karlin started at the Master Chorale of South Florida, singers were

nervous about re-auditioning so he sent them online music theory and sight-reading resources, and also linked them to relaxation and meditation techniques. For any chorus, clearly laying out expectations and giving singers time to prepare are key. As Rardin says, “You want your singers to have resources to succeed, and that meant in our case information in advance.”

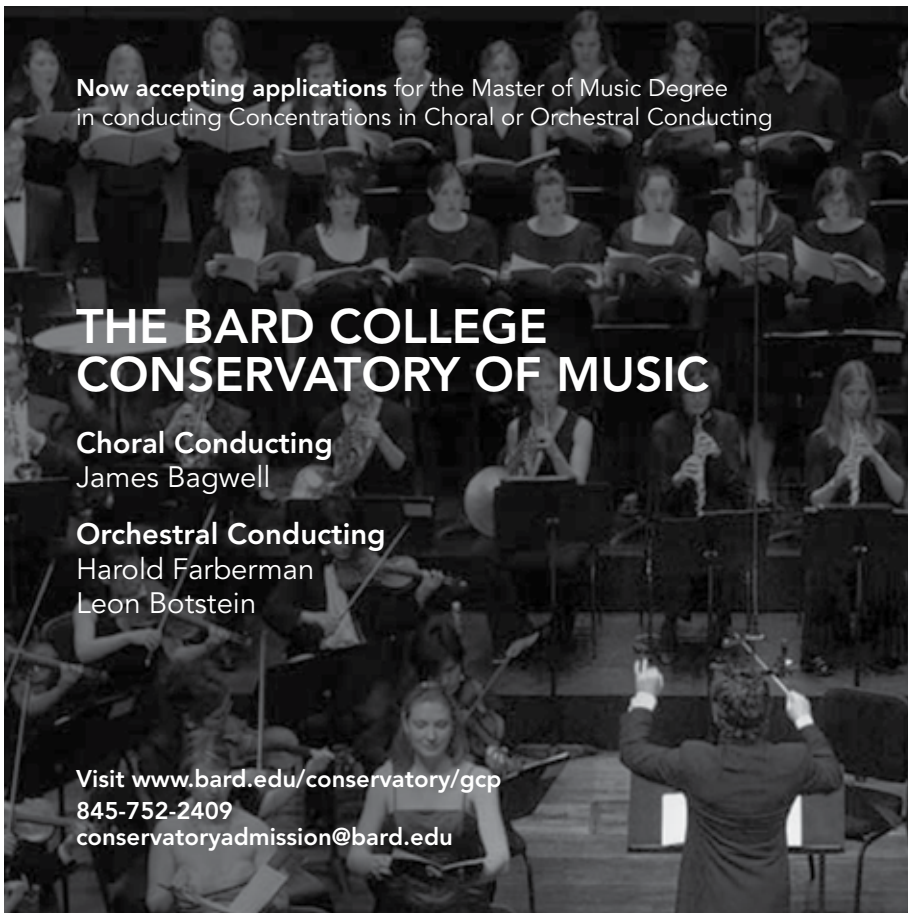
There is an inherent weirdness in making volunteer singers, many with no solo experience, sing a solo audition. Nancy Farrand has sung more than 35 choral auditions over the years, and her favorites were during her 10 years with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, which then auditioned and re-auditioned singers in double octets. “I loved that kind of an audition,” she says, “because that’s the reality of singing in choral work. If you’re going to audition for a solo, be a solo auditioner. But if you’re going to audition for a group, audition as a group.”

The Hardest Part

Asking a singer to leave as the result of an unsuccessful re-audition is no fun. Fortunately some singers will self-select out, rather than put themselves through the re-audition process. When it’s time to ask a singer to leave, a chorus has a range of options. Singers may be asked to resign immediately, or they can be given a grace year before leaving the chorus. Rardin has rarely removed a singer; instead he asks 10–15 percent of his singers each year to re-audition again in one year, rather than two. If Solomon hears singers with issues, she usually gives them a “stern warning” for next year and notes for what to work on. Some directors will ask singers simply to take a break from the ensemble, inviting them to try again in a few months or a year. Of course, some of them don’t re-audition, but Merriweather says “the community aspect and the mental emotional health of the community is important to me, so I didn’t want to go around kicking people out.”

Delivering such sensitive news isn’t easy, no matter the mode of communication. Because the voice is literally a part of a singer, singer Nancy Farrand says “it really does feel like a personal affront if I am not favorably tested.” Acknowledging this reality, Karlin advises, “Make sure that the tenor, no pun intended, of the communication is as sensitive as possible without belittling chorus members or babying them.”

Solomon, Merriweather, and Reynolds recommend personal phone calls or in-person ►




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chats. But Leaf and Russell favor email, in order to let singers digest the information in private and on their own time. Rardin actually emails each of his singers, whatever the result of their audition, providing specific notes from their re-auditions. “The logic there is people want to be treated like a person, not like a member of a section,” he explains. “Whether or not they choose to act on it, I hope that they get the message that their voice is important to the ensemble, the overall sound of the group is important to me and I assume to them as well. I think that builds a trust there.”

Cutting a singer gets even thornier when the person being asked to leave is a board member or donor, but it’s important that chorus members feel there’s a level playing field for all singers. Karlin is careful not to set any precedent of “unfairness or favoritism” in his choirs. And having every singer—board member or not—go into the re-hearing “on equal ground,” Merriweather says, contributes to the integrity of individual members and of the board.

Finding the Right Space in the Chorus’s Culture

When instituting re-auditions, clear communication with board members and singers is crucial. Merriweather stresses the importance of having full board support and adds that “the great thing about a board in a volunteer choir is it’s a great cross-section of the actual choir, and you’ll get a good understanding of how the community will react to such an endeavor.” When Karlin first broached the topic at the Master Chorale of South Florida, some board members who were also part of the chorus worried re-auditions would frighten and drive away singers, so at a board retreat he initiated an “open dialogue, in person, where all those people could articulate their concerns.” He was able to sway them to his view that he needed to hear all his singers in order to do the job they’d hired him for: “to present an ensemble of high artistic caliber.”

Even with careful communication, negative reactions are bound to happen from time to time. It’s important to keep the focus on the health and musical integrity of the singer and of the group, Merriweather says, “because it’s not a personal attack.” Pondering what he’d do if he ever had to ask multiple singers to leave



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An ensemble from the San Francisco Bach Choir, conducted by Magen Solomon, performs in October 2017 at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco.

at one time, Rardin says it would be important to “get out in front of it and to own it” with a communication to the whole choir, including some facts about the recent re-auditions. “I’d want to do this very sensitively but at the same time err on the side of too much information,” he says, “to minimize rumors happening.” He keeps written records from the re-auditions so that he can make a valid musical case for his decisions.

Re-auditioning is a practice that takes time to settle into the culture of a chorus. Thinking back to her early days at each of her ensembles, Solomon remembers that “everyone is very unhappy the first year. They’re mildly unhappy the second year, and then after that they’re really glad I do it.” Everett’s experiences as a member of Concert Singers of Cary bear that out. He says bringing back re-auditions “may have helped raise the bar. For folks that had gotten complacent it reinforced the idea that you don’t just show up. You’ve got to be able to sing.”

After all this discussion of re-auditions, it’s important to consider the alternative: not holding them. When Emily Isaacson came to Brunswick, Maine’s Oratorio Chorale six years ago, the group had not historically re-auditioned members, and she decided to keep it that way. “I feel like in most community choruses there’s this divide between we either aim for excellence or we aim for community building and you can’t have both,” she says, “and I think that’s ridiculous.” She’s decided she can raise the level of the group by challenging her singers and holding rigorous auditions for new members. If you are leaning toward implementing a re-audition

process, Leaf suggests you “know how strongly you feel about it. If you run into opposition and everyone’s opposed to you doing it, that might be a really, really big challenge. You might either reconsider whether you can do it without re-auditions, or if you can’t, whether that’s the right choir for you to be leading.”

For a volunteer chorus, there is no single right answer to how to organize re-auditions or even whether to hold them. It’s a topic that bears careful consideration, discussion with the board and other leadership, and clear communication with members. For Bob Russell, instituting re-auditions 30 years ago was the right decision. He feels he has the support of the board and the singers to hold re-auditions, and no one would favor continuing the practice “if it did not produce results.” The re-auditions signal to the choral community of Southern Maine that every two years “the playing field is leveled,” he says, “and if you are new to the community you have as equal a shot at singing with this group as the established members.” Most of the singers have stayed with the group, he adds, “because these are the expectations, they know the drill, and they are also the best singers. It has made us a better musical ensemble.”

When handled well, re-auditions serve, as Merriweather says, “to communicate that I care about the standard, and I care about the integrity of each singer.” And that’s something every volunteer singer wants to hear. ■

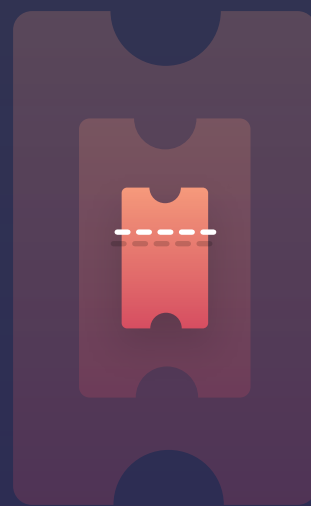
Kathryn Mueller is a writer and GRAMMY-nominated soprano. She lives in Raleigh and teaches voice at East Carolina University.



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