

# A Wide *New* World

## Professional Choral Singing

BY KATHRYN MUELLER

*Singers sometimes resent the college requirement to sing in a choir while getting their education.  
But choral singing has a lot to offer, including post-graduation job opportunities.*



Seraphic Fire and Firebird Chamber Orchestra

photo courtesy Seraphic Fire



Millions of Americans sing in choirs. Most of us began our singing lives in school or church choirs. In choir we gained musical literacy, were introduced to classical repertoire, and fell in love with performing. Usually singers leave choral music behind when they begin their professional lives, but what if you could instead build your career on a variety of paying, musically rewarding choral singing?

Welcome to the world of professional choral work. According to Chorus America, at least 100 choruses in the U.S. report paying some or all of their singers. Whether you sing exclusively as an ensemble singer or mix choral and solo work, you'll find that choral gigs provide benefits including paid performance opportunities, a medium for enhancing your musical skills, and a professional network of colleagues and conductors.

Like most singers, I didn't know much about the professional choral world when I was a student, but I happily stumbled into it. My church choir director recommended that I audition for the Handel and Haydn Society Chorus as a way to sing professionally right out of college. In that group I gained experience and contacts, and then continued to sing with professional ensembles in each new city I moved to. I don't know if I would have a career now if I hadn't been working as a choral singer during those post-college years, honing my

Emily Marvosh (right) and Tucson Chamber Artists



photo by Larry Hanelin

musical skills and expanding my musical network instead of waiting for my solo voice to be completely polished.

Each singer has a different avenue into professional choral work. Contralto Emily Marvosh sings with the Handel and Haydn Society, Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, Marsh Chapel Choir and Collegium, Seraphic Fire, and Lorelei Ensemble. She describes her choral career's three-pronged begin-

ning: "I auditioned live for my first paying church job. My first summer festival used tape auditions, including demonstration of vibrato modification and articulated singing at a designated tempo. And one of the first chamber ensembles to hire me did so on a recommendation, without hearing me; a conductor suggested me as a last-minute replacement, and my job during that week was to make sure I got hired back!"

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Founder and conductor Patrick Dupré Quigley with Seraphic Fire



photo by Lisa Abitbol



Patrick Muehleise (center) and Tucson Chamber Artists

photo by Larry Hanelin

Tenor Patrick Muehleise's first professional choral experience was during college. "I studied at Western Michigan University and, because our choral director was Dr. James Bass (the chorus master of Seraphic Fire), we collaborated with Seraphic Fire to record Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*. Throughout the recording process and an international tour, I got to know several members of the professional ensemble. A couple months after our tour, I received a phone call from Seraphic Fire asking if I could send in a couple recordings. I immediately went home and sent in my most recent recordings and was offered a contract the next day." Since then, Muehleise has also sung with Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Spire Chamber Ensemble, Tucson Chamber Artists, and the Santa Fe Opera Chorus.

### Surveying the Field

The professional choral community encompasses a range of ensembles. There are groups that perform with a regular core of local singers, such as the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, and the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers in Minneapolis. Some of them specialize in a particular repertoire, such as early music or new music, while others present concert seasons that span the full range of choral music. In this category are also more modestly funded professional and semiprofessional local groups that provide opportunities for young singers to acquire the experience they need to move on to higher-profile ensembles.



“Professional choral singing offers many advantages, chief among them the diversity of experiences and the ongoing musical training. Under the rigorous demands of choral work, singers learn how to learn music quickly.”

Many symphony choruses and community choruses have a paid core of professional singers—examples include the Chicago Symphony Chorus and the Washington Chorus in D.C. Additional important sources of regular income for singers are churches with either fully professional choirs, like New York’s Trinity Wall Street, or paid section leaders, such as at Boston University’s Marsh Chapel.

There are also choirs that draw upon a pool of singers from across the country. These ensembles have a roster of singers and draw a slightly different group of musicians for each concert, depending

on the repertoire and singer availability. With these gigs, the artists fly into town for an intense week or festival season of rehearsals and concerts and then fly home again. Miami’s Seraphic Fire, Austin’s Conspirare, and Santa Fe Desert Chorale are three such organizations. These all-star groups are made up of some of the country’s most experienced choral singers, many of whom also have solo careers.

Lastly, there are choral ensembles that are full-time jobs for their members. These include the all-male choirs Chanticleer and Cantus, some opera choruses such as at the Metropolitan Opera

and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the top military ensembles like the U.S. Navy Band Sea Chanters Chorus and the U.S. Air Force Band Singing Sergeants. (Cindy Sadler wrote in more detail about the latter two types of opportunities in her article “The Day Job Dilemma” in the May issue of *CS*.) Admission to these choirs is highly competitive but offers the chance to make a living from singing without having to piece together different freelance gigs or to have a day job.

Baritone Dashon Burton had the rare opportunity to launch his career singing in one of these full-time ensembles. While a senior at Oberlin, he saw a poster for Chanticleer and decided to audition. During his Chanticleer audition, he asked the members of the group if there were other groups doing the same thing; they mentioned Cantus among others. “My audition for Chanticleer didn’t end up the way I originally hoped it might, but I was honored and thrilled to join

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“While a professional singer can have a satisfying career composed entirely of ensemble singing, choral work can also further a solo career, in terms of musical skills enhanced and networking connections made.”

Cantus when they offered an invitation,” Burton says. For four years he had a full-time job singing with Cantus, which he describes as a group of soloists in which “everyone is able to be as invested as possible in the music.” Now Burton sings with Conspirare, Roomful of Teeth, the Carmel Bach Festival Chorale, Seraphic Fire, and Trinity Wall Street.

#### Why Go Pro Choir?

Professional choral singing offers many advantages, chief among them the diversity of experiences and the ongoing musical training. Under the rigorous demands of choral work, singers

learn how to learn music quickly. “My sight-reading skills are constantly being honed,” Marvosh says. “I have learned to absorb and interpret a huge amount of repertoire in a short amount of time.” Beyond sight-reading, professional choral musicians have excellent intonation and the ability to blend and make a variety of sounds. “Every choral gig advances my sight-reading, musicianship skills, languages and diction, and my knowledge of different musical periods and styles,” according to Muehleise. In using these skills, Burton says, “It’s wonderful to have different kinds of colors” to draw upon. “It takes a different kind of

aptitude to blend or make a color a conductor wants,” he adds. “These shifts help my solo singing too, to understand what sounds good in my voice and what will carry.”

Singing the great works with a professional choir is an excellent way to become familiar with repertoire and to learn the entire arc of an oratorio rather than only your voice part’s arias. I particularly love to sing Bach’s *St. John Passion* because I’ve sung it so many times as a chorister that I can completely immerse myself in the drama of the work as I await my solo turns. As a member of a high-level ensemble, you get to sing

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under the baton of famous conductors and to share the stage with star soloists, to watch them in rehearsals and performances while collecting inspiration for your own performing. Choral singing also offers a break from the pressure of being in the vocal spotlight as a soloist, the camaraderie that comes from making music as part of an ensemble, and the lasting friendships that develop among colleagues. "My colleagues are an endless resource for repertoire suggestions or as potential partners in other artistic ventures," says Marvosh.

While a professional singer can have a satisfying career composed entirely of ensemble singing, choral work can also further a solo career, in terms of musical skills enhanced and networking connections made. I can trace almost every solo gig I've sung to a contact I originally made during a choral gig.

Burton notes that his choral singing has taught him to be a flexible musician. "There's often very little time in the sole orchestral rehearsal to change the conductor's opinions, so you need to be able to use all of the tools in your toolbox immediately." As a soloist he has performed with Philharmonia Baroque, the Cleveland Orchestra, and in Europe with Le Concert Lorrain. He also thinks his choral experience has helped him to be "a pleasant musician," something that is important on any gig when you work intensively with others.

"Because choral singing makes us more aware of our place in an ensemble, I also find it easier [as a soloist] to relate to instrumentalists, to think of them as collaborators instead of accompanists, and to recognize when the most interesting line in the music isn't mine but in the horns or winds," says Marvosh, who has soloed with the Handel and Haydn Society and Brookline Symphony and is also a frequent *Messiah* soloist.


Embarking now on his solo career, Muehleise says, "Choral singing has helped my solo singing by boosting my confidence as a musician and professional, reducing my preparation time when

learning new repertoire, and increasing my professional contacts." He adds that ensemble work "has also allowed me to perform full time while my voice is still developing and growing, which is one of the most difficult aspects of being a young singer."

One more note about professional choral singing: you can combine it with a nonmusical career if you prefer not to be a full-time musician. Gigging part time as a choral singer allows you to be a professional musician, performing at the highest levels of artistry, without giving up the security of a "regular" job in another field. Professional ensembles with a local core of singers tend to have most of their rehearsals in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate work schedules. Many members of high-level church choirs have day jobs outside of singing. If you can arrange to telecommute some weeks of the year or have enough vacation time to use it for gigs,

you can even be a member of one of the choirs with a national roster and travel to perform with colleagues from around the country.

Now you're fired up and ready to explore the world of ensemble singing. But what skills and experience do you need and how do you get into a professional choral group? Next month I'll write more about how to find work as a professional choral singer.

*Soprano Kathryn Mueller travels the country as an ensemble member of Seraphic Fire and Tucson Chamber Artists and as a soloist with groups including American Bach Soloists, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Santa Fe Pro Musica, and the Phoenix Symphony. She happily lives and teaches in Raleigh, N.C., and blogs at [sopranointheair.com](http://sopranointheair.com). More information is also at [kathrynmueller.com](http://kathrynmueller.com).* 



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