



# A NEW CAREER PATH FOR SINGERS

*A growing number of singers are knitting together careers by traveling from city to city to perform with professional choral ensembles. Here's how this model works for them—and how it affects the choral field.*

BY KATHRYN MUELLER

In mid-December Cory Klose found himself in a familiar position: on the road again. He and a car full of singers from the Skylark Vocal Ensemble were in the middle of a seven-concert run, spanning Atlanta, Charlotte, Charleston, and the Boston area. And that was only part of his mid-winter odyssey. During December and January, Klose also sang with The Thirteen in Washington DC, Ensemble Bricolage in Pennsylvania, and Tucson's True Concord Voices and Orchestra. He made it home to Santa Fe just long enough to sing Christmas services at his church job and spend the holidays with his husband and dog. After a week there, he was off again.

"Being away is hard," Klose says. He makes the sacrifice because he finds traveling enjoyable, and because traveling makes his singing career possible. A tenor who earned his bachelor's degree at Montclair State University, Klose represents a new breed of choral singer. As groups like Skylark and The Thirteen join the ranks of established choruses like Conspirare, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, and Seraphic Fire, a circuit of professional choral singers has emerged. Klose and a growing number of musicians like him now find themselves able to follow an entirely new career path. They form an elite group of highly trained performers who have crafted careers singing with professional ensembles around the United States.

"The rate at which these ensembles are sprouting throughout the country implies that audiences are searching for professional-quality choral music in their communities," according to Kyle Nielsen, a DMA candidate at the University of Miami Frost School of Music. In May he's publishing his dissertation on the potential for growth and stability of the project-based professional chorus model.

The oldest of these groups—the Santa Fe Desert Chorale and Conspirare—were ►



## A New Career Path for Singers

founded in the 1980s and 1990s. In the early 2000s Seraphic Fire and True Concord (then Tucson Chamber Artists) began. Over the past decade, a host of new choirs, including Skylark Ensemble, Spire Chamber Ensemble, and ensemble viii, appeared on the scene. There are currently at least 25 American choral ensembles that bring in some or all of their members from out of town.

Klose got his start as an itinerant ensemble singer in 2013. He says the singers and directors who make professional choral music “have created the space for something like this to be a legitimate career option for someone like me who is passionate about ensemble work. The fact that I can make that a huge part of my life’s work, especially at a high caliber and paid, is amazing.”

A look inside this newly created space reveals that the musicians and choruses pioneering the “fly-in model,” as Nielsen calls it, believe the approach promises significant benefits—not only for individual singers and ensembles, but for the choral music field as a whole.



## The Model

New York, Boston, and Los Angeles have long been home to top-rate professional choruses filled with resident singers, but in places like Tucson, where Eric Holtan founded True ►

*Members of Seraphic Fire, in concert at South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center*



Gitanjali Mathur (center), Esteli Gomez (right), and other members of Conspirare traveled to Goshen, Indiana, to record the 2015 album *Pablo Neruda: The Poet Sings*.

©BRIAN YODER SCHLABACH

## A New Career Path for Singers

Concord Voices and Orchestra in 2004, “there simply isn’t a deep pool of professional choral singers. I’ll hire first any local singers who meet our qualifications,” Holtan says, and that’s how he started. But by 2008, with both aspirations and budget rising, he brought in his first out-of-town singer, and has since then gradually increased the proportion of traveling singers as his budget has grown.

When Craig Hella Johnson founded Conspirare in Austin, Texas, 24 years ago, he had a European model in mind. He had spent a year and a half working with conductor Helmuth Rilling in Europe, where Rilling’s singers would come in on trains from all over the continent. “I witnessed what wonderful results yielded from that model,” Johnson says. “It was

a way to set a very high standard musically, to be able to draw from a wonderful collection of very high-level vocal artists, and also I think there was a freshness in the coming together.”

From a financial standpoint, Nielsen says, “the beauty of the fly-in model lies in the low risk-high reward nature of the model.” Because these ensembles are small and performances require little equipment, production costs can be kept relatively low. “So you put a concert on for a few thousand dollars and pay your artists, and you’ve got world-class music.” Experience has shown the investment can yield rewards. In Miami, Seraphic Fire reports a nearly 60 percent increase in private giving in the last three years, while in Austin, Conspirare has seen its donor base grow by over 300 percent in recent years.

## The Singers

As the fly-in model has spread, the singers who travel the professional choral circuit have formed a loose national network. They aren’t sure how large it is, but they do know they’ll see familiar faces at every stop; membership overlaps considerably from group to group, although no two choruses have the same roster. The size of the rosters ranges from 30 to 90 singers.

Soprano Gitanjali Mathur “stumbled” into the world of professional choral singing. When she moved to Austin in 2002 and got a job as a church section leader, “I didn’t know that it existed,” she says. But after Google searching ►

## A New Career Path for Singers

led her to Conspirare and other Austin ensembles, she began to make connections that helped her career grow. Now she travels from Austin to sing with Seraphic Fire, True Concord, Spire Chamber Ensemble, Vox Humana, and Bach Collegium San Diego. “A lot of my out-of-town gigs came up because someone heard about me and contacted me,” she says. Her path is typical; most traveling ensemble singers began as choral musicians, received advanced training in the vocal arts (hers was at Indiana University), and wandered their way back to ensemble singing as they built their careers.

“There is so much training and individual artistry in these ensembles, and such a wealth of personal history,” observes California-born soprano Estelí Gomez. After receiving degrees from Yale and McGill, she is singing with Conspirare, Seraphic Fire, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Spire Chamber Ensemble, Clarion Ensemble, and Roomful of Teeth. “Rather than being rooted in similar experiences like, say, a college choir,” she says, “there’s such a broad wealth of diversity to draw from, and that diversity really benefits all of these ensembles.”

To be selected for any of these ensembles, impeccable musicianship—intonation, rhythm, music-learning and sight-reading skills—is a prerequisite. According to Patrick Dupré Quigley,



**“The rate at which these ensembles are sprouting throughout the country implies that audiences are searching for professional-quality choral music in their communities.”** —*Kyle Nielsen*

founder and artistic director of Seraphic Fire, “the people who do this for a living have such a rock solid technique that they can go between Brahms and Palestrina and be absolutely convincing.” Joshua Habermann, music director of the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, echoes the need for flexibility along with skill: “We are a group that does the whole repertoire. So you have to be able to sing without vibrato, you have to sing with vibrato, you should be comfortable going back and forth from solo to ensemble singing.”

Along with “the right voice,” Habermann says he’s always looking for “the right mind and the right heart.” Because of the intense rehearsal process, short preparation time, and close quarters, professional ensemble singers need to be good colleagues. For the Minneapolis-based Apollo Master Chorale’s first project in 2014, former artistic director Sean Vogt “researched personality as much as I researched sound files, musicality, background, and degree. The person matters ►

*Eric Holtan (center) founded True Concord in Tucson in 2004.*



©DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI



©GRETEN HELENE

Members of the Lorelei Ensemble, in concert in Boston during the 2015 Chorus America Conference

## A New Career Path for Singers

as much to me as the musicianship." Klose describes the imperative more succinctly: He and his fellow singers have to "coexist in a way that doesn't make you want to kill each other."

### The Lifestyle

Klose has found that his life as a traveling singer follows a recurring pattern. He plans his comings and goings well in advance, plotting out the jigsaw puzzle of his next season's schedule using a calendar with three different color codes for potential gigs. In his decision-making he weighs factors including the length of gig, distance from home, and pay scale, which can range

from several hundred dollars for a few days away to over \$1,000 for a full week. At the time of each engagement, before he leaves home, he prepares the music (sent to him in advance) so he and his colleagues can work quickly once they gather in the same city. (He doesn't have to worry about housing;

the ensembles take care of that, along with his travel expenses.) After just a few days of rehearsing five or six hours per day, they begin singing concerts, usually performing the same repertoire several times over the course of a weekend. After the last concert Klose and his colleagues fly home, or on to their next gigs.

The directors of these choruses are willing to help their singers work through the scheduling puzzle. In some cases they talk to each other

about scheduling, but more often they lean on their singers to help them avoid conflicts. "I have to know what other things are happening," says Matthew Guard, artistic director of the Skylark Vocal Ensemble, founded five years ago in Atlanta and now claiming significant ties to the Boston area. "I try to learn as early as possible and to schedule around the things that affect disproportionately more people in the group. I really want our artists to succeed, and part of that is the incredible challenge of stringing together a living through multiple gigs."

To supplement what they earn on the professional choral circuit, many ensemble singers also do solo work with community, university, and symphony choirs, which often pay higher fees. As a bonus, Klose believes his choral work has made him a better soloist. It's taught him to sing with a variety of vocal colors, and it's made him more sensitive to the relationship between ensemble and soloist.

The need to be flexible extends into these singers' personal lives. Mathur has found "this style of job works well because I am someone who has bursts of energy and I want to do things and feel useful and creative, and then I just want some time off." But when it comes to her home life, "it's not as easy," Mathur admits. She says the people around her can find it difficult to adjust to her "erratic" schedule. It's a common issue. Traveling choral singers tend to be single, or to have very supportive families.

It also helps to be inventive about creating work-life balance. For Klose, it's a matter of putting limits on his travel. He and his husband agree that he'll try to spend no more than 16 weeks per year on the road. They are also planning to relocate from Santa Fe to a city with a bigger airport and more local opportunities. Mathur has a husband and small child, so ►



**"This style of job works well because I am someone who has bursts of energy and I want to do things and feel useful and creative, and then I just want some time off."**

*—Gitanjali Mathur*

## A New Career Path for Singers

excellent babysitters and a supportive spouse have been key, as has creating a regimented and scheduled lifestyle for her son.

Gomez has taken a different approach: This is her sixth season living on the road, without an apartment or home base. During her limited time between gigs she spends time with her family in California or visits friends and seeks auditions and recitals in their area.

Looking to the future, many of these musicians envision that over time they'll change the balance of ensemble singing versus solo work, teaching, and non-musical endeavors (Klose, for example, has a graphic design business). Thinking ahead to that day, Gomez has added part-time teaching to the mix. "Not only do I love teaching and the different lens through which it allows me to view the art form," she says, "I get to give back to my singing community, while enjoying the comforts of a life not entirely on the road. I can see myself continuing to travel and perform for a long time, but not this full-time until retirement."

For now, though, these itinerant choral singers find they can compensate by sharing their vocation and passion with a professional "family." "It can be hard to be away from home for a while," Mathur says, "but it makes it so much easier when you're with people who you love and who care for you."

## Connecting to the Community

The fly-in model may be a boon to this cadre of top-level singers and the ensembles that hire them, but can the same be said for the communities these choruses call home? Will the result be so much homogeneity that an audience in Tucson couldn't distinguish its professional chorus from a similar one in Boston?

"As singers we talk about this a lot," says Klose, "this weirdness that it's basically the same roster of singers with different people in front of them." Gomez and other singers feel that each group has its own sound and personality, shaped by the director. "It's amazing to go around to these different ensembles and see almost the exact same people gig to gig, and then to hear a very different sound" in each place, she says. From the director's standpoint, Vogt agrees: "It's like giving a bunch of different artists the same colors and the same size



**"It's very important for us to be ambassadors, because we don't live there. Our singers have to be chosen very carefully to be the right kind of people to do that."**

*—Joshua Habermann*

canvas and saying, 'OK, create.' It's going to be a different product by the very nature of the person that's leading the group."

For professional choirs like Conspirare, says Johnson, the main task is "to bring our passion for the music itself to the community, and to develop a following of people who are interested in the music and really want to engage there." But along with an engaging and recognizable artistic personality, audiences appreciate seeing faces they recognize, which adds another responsibility to the chorus member's job description. Singers from out of town are expected to make friends during their visits.

"It's very important for us to be ambassadors, because we don't live there," says Habermann. "Our singers have to be chosen very carefully to be the right kind of people to do that," whether that means interacting with the public in stores and restaurants, or singing in the Desert Chorale's many outreach performances in public spaces, homeless shelters, corporate meeting rooms, and communities of faith. In Austin, Johnson has found housing singers with local host families creates deep connections between singers and the community. Many of Conspirare's members have been singing with the ensemble for so long that "after years now people treat these singers as if they were local," he says.

## A "Great Flowering"

"I feel hope for the world because of this group of singers that is traveling about," says Johnson. "Every time they leave here, I know they're going and being their generous, extraordinary selves in another city." Beth Willer, founder and artistic director of the Boston-based Lorelei Ensemble, shares the conviction, adding that the singers who are

part of this expanding community possess a "fearlessness and open-mindedness that are going to help us move the art forward."

In particular, Willer says, "we want to inspire the creation of new repertoire." Indeed, some of today's most prominent composers are writing for vocal ensembles, and earning attention for it. As an example Conspirare's Johnson points to the 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winner, Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*, written for Roomful of Teeth. The work of professional choruses has helped "raise the choral flag," says the Desert Chorale's Habermann. He believes choral music is beginning to find itself on a more equal footing with opera and orchestral repertoire, where performances by professionals have long been the norm.

For Klose and singers like him, the trend represents a sea change. A few years ago he couldn't imagine a place for himself in the opera world, which was then the only venue for a classical singing career. Now, young singers currently in training have another option. And word is spreading. At a recent post-concert Q&A session with a college choir, Klose found himself "so surprised" at how many of the students "understood the legitimacy of the career of ensemble singing that has popped up and blossomed over the last decade in America."

Kyle Nielsen believes there is a future for professional choral organizations and the extraordinary singers who populate them. "There are challenges facing project-based professional choirs," he says, "but based on the history of more established fly-in choirs, this trend will continue as long as founders and boards organize their specific model around the needs of their market." The Desert Chorale's Habermann is even more optimistic: "I think when we look back on this period 50 years from now, we're going to say this was a great flowering of professional vocal ensembles in the United States." ■

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



© Chorus America. This article is reprinted from the Spring 2017 issue of *The Voice*. For more resources about choruses and choral singers, visit [www.chorusamerica.org](http://www.chorusamerica.org).