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Crescendo! The Newsletter of the Buffalo Gay
Men's Chorus

Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus

Fall 2013

Crescendo!, Autumn 2013

Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus

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“Hey, what’s a straight guy like you doing in a chorus like this?”



If you’ve heard that we have non-gay singers, you may have wondered this very thing. Perhaps this analogy will help: you don’t have to be Italian to sing opera anymore.

From the beginning, the Buffalo Gay Men’s Chorus decided that while we would be a gay-identified organization with a pro-gay mission, we would also be inclusive. When it came to our singers, instrumentalists, volunteers, employees, donors, vendors, and audience, we would not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

Jim Estep, our first president, recalls that our first artistic director, Barbara Wagner, a heterosexual woman, did not and would not ask auditioning men what their sexual orientation was because it had nothing to do with their singing voice.

The first major story to introduce the Chorus to the Buffalo community ran in the

Buffalo News on Jan. 15, 2002, with this excerpt:

Furthermore, it's whispered, two straight men have joined the choir's ranks. Chorus president Jim Estep emphasizes that the group is open to any male, regardless of orientation, who passes a rudimentary audition.

Buffalo’s gay+ chorus is a pioneering phenomenon within the larger GLBT choral movement. The high level of non-gay participation in the BGMC is unusual compared to our peers in the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA). Other conductors and artistic directors in GALA are often surprised that ours is heterosexual.

Given our history as a despised minority, groups like ours have doubled as a safe space for the GLBT community, a respite from the disdain of the larger world.

Our percentage of straight singers usually hovers around 10%, an amusing reversal of the statistic frequently cited as the incidence of GLBT people in the general population.

After joining, straight singers usually throw themselves into the life of the BGMC, making friends, joining us at Buffalo’s annual Gay Pride festival, volunteering for Chorus fundraisers and social events,

mentoring new members, and taking our mission to heart.

Four of them agreed to speak with us.



Today our longest-tenured non-gay singer is Vincent Kuntz [B1], a general contractor who has been with the chorus for 10 years.¹ Vince recalls:

I had wanted to sing with the Chorus since its inception but wasn't sure I was up to it. Jim Estep wasted no opportunity to encourage me to audition. Every time he saw me he would ask when I was going to sing. I had to audition even if it was just to get him to stop!

Vince’s first few seasons were challenging and not just for musical reasons.

I was not the first non-gay man to sing in the Chorus, but I believe I was the first to stick around for multiple seasons. For several years I was referred to as "the straight guy." My presence in the Chorus was, at first, not universally accepted by the singers. Some Chorus members were my friends from other circles, such as my church or another choir and accepted my presence at face value. Some speculated about my true orientation and what was my true purpose for joining the Chorus. A minority were openly hostile to my presence.

Vince credits Jason Ward [T2] for making a difference at a critical moment. It was Vince’s first-ever performance with the chorus. The singers were lining up to go on stage. Jason reached out to him and said, “I’m glad you’re here.” The

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, Vince is married to the author of this article

Kuntz family has also been supportive:

One of my sisters has been to nearly all our major concerts. The other sister has twice travelled from northwest Michigan to attend our concerts. My niece was in our audience at GALA 2012.

Today, Vince is just one of the guys.

I'm no longer known as 'the straight guy.' It is now normal for any man who isn't afraid of being perceived as gay to sing in the Chorus.



Brian Rotach [B2], a clergyman, has been with the Chorus for 8 years. He joined for the love of singing. He reports:

Because I can rarely go out after rehearsals getting to know the guys has been a very slow process. Also, accepting guys' decisions to leave the chorus has been difficult and painful.

Singing with us is an emotional experience, regardless of your orientation. Brian says:

Performances of treasured songs have had me in tears many times. Notes to me when I miss a rehearsal and a sincere welcome back when I return have touched me. The guys are so much more emotionally open than other men I've worked with through the years.

Joining the Chorus was a non-issue for Brian's family and friends:

No one who knows me well, including my church, has been surprised or judgmental.



Beginning his 3rd year with us, Zak Kineke [B1], a television news producer, joined because he missed singing after graduating from college. He learned about the Chorus from a news story at work. Zak was pleasantly surprised to discover:

How accepted I was like a member of the family, especially in a space where I could very well be seen as an outsider. I was never quite sure what's OK to joke about with

people, especially being straight and not wanting to offend, but as I've gotten more comfortable with everyone I found that some good-natured jokes don't make others see me as insensitive or bigoted.

His fondest Chorus experience was getting to ham it up as a hammer swinger in the *Anvil Chorus* in our Spring 2012 concert. When asked what question we should have asked for the purpose of this article, Zak offers:

Would you invite a straight friend to join the chorus with you? (I would). My family loved [that I joined] and has come to every show. My friends ask for my insights into the gay community, and my girlfriend tries to get all her friends to join me.



The newest singer who spoke with us is Bill Wachob, a retired senior assistant dean. He dislikes categorization:

I resist labeling. If you must use a description, perhaps "human being." I don't believe most types or labels do justice to describing the fullness and complexity of who we are. Though I do think that the button "straight, not narrow" is cute for people who might not normally identify themselves as "gay".

Bill joined the Chorus in January of 2013. A longtime member of another choral group, he decided to audition after seeing us perform:

[I] had attended several BGMC concerts over the past few years; admired the sound, repertoire, quality and spirit of the BGMC; wholeheartedly support the efforts to spread tolerance and acceptance for LGBT folks; and felt I would really enjoy being a part of the BGMC (which I do!). Also, I sing with another men's chorus which may be ending its time due to the advanced age and physical condition of its long time director, wanted to continue singing, and believed the BGMC would be an ideal chorus for me.

He found a welcoming place:

Nothing was very difficult. I tend to be shy in groups until I get to know people; but numerous BGMC members have been so warm and forthcoming that it wasn't long before I felt very comfortable and am making quite a

few friends. In some ways it feels like I've gained a whole extended family.

For a relatively new member, Bill has already collected many favorite moments:

Prior to joining: meeting and talking with Randy in the liquor store where I occasionally shop and recognized him from the 2012 Holiday concert. Subsequent to joining: the New Member welcome pot luck at Travis's home; the picnic at Pierre's; singing with Ralph and Len (new member as well); having lunch at Andy's with Andy and Travis; meeting BGMC members and getting to know them (too many to mention here) at various events including car pooling to the Rochester concert; the list of Ciaran quotes read at the annual picnic at Pierre's; and the learning I get from Ciaran at practically every rehearsal.



When founding member Roger Parris was asked for his thoughts about non-gay men in a gay chorus, he wrote:

It's amazing to see how far the minds and hearts of Americans have changed since we started singing in 2001. Our chorus has attracted so many open-hearted, open-minded men of all ages. It makes me happy to know that so many bisexual and straight men have joined the BGMC. Younger and older singing men of all orientations have stayed with the Chorus -- and we proudly hold on to our Chorus' name. It speaks well of the appeal of our group and of the quality of its male and female leaders. This diversity says a lot about the importance of men's friendships and about the value of working together in a singing community.

The BGMC has earned many awards and honors, but its quietest, most ground-breaking achievement may well be the committed brotherhood of gay and straight men who have discovered that they have nothing to fear from each other.



Cynthia Van Ness has been a chorus groupie since 2001.



President's Message

Gregory Ciupak, Baritone

It seems like only yesterday that we were planning for last year's holiday concert and the season is upon us once again. We came off of such an amazing year last year mostly due to the support of people like you.

This year we are setting a course for another great adventure in men's choral music as it relates to our lives as an LGBT community. In our holiday concert, *Our Favorite Things*, you will witness how family plays a pivotal part in our lives. It may not always be the traditional family that we see in Hallmark commercials but it is our family during the holidays. I think that you will embrace our poignant and heartfelt presentation of our favorite things. As always, the BGMC family is not complete without your support. You are as much a part of our lives as the brothers that we sing with. Like that special person you feel lifted by in your life, we are lifted and motivated by you, who show us year after year, concert after concert that you believe in our mission. In fact, during this holiday season we will be celebrating *you*, truly one of our favorite things!

In love and gratitude,
Greg



Artistic Director's Message

Ciaran Krueger

One of the big discussions within GALA is "What to do when being a gay chorus is accepted?" We live in a community that accepts and supports us. We live in a state that recognizes same sex marriage.

While there are still problems, these are incredible things that many other choruses lack. So what do we do now? Our mission already tells us. We support the community that supports us. We support organizations like Gay & Lesbian Youth Services (GLYS) because the battle against teen suicide and bullying is still important. We support causes where we can lend a voice of experience. We reach out to groups and communities that still need to hear our message of acceptance and pride.

These actions are things like riding and volunteering at the Ride for Roswell or joining our Adopt-a-Highway clean-up. It could be "No Shave November," or selling ornaments at our holiday concert and donating a portion of the proceeds to GLYS. It could be participating in the AIDS Walk or singing at Benedict House. There are countless ways we as an organization can make a difference beyond our concerts.

I make no secret of the passion I have for outreach to youth. I want to save lives and help kids be happy with who they are. Where do YOU want to make a difference? Whose life are you going to change for the better? Whose life will be changed because they see a chorus of 65 men standing proud together unafraid? Where can you help us make a difference?

Our organization is more than the notes on the page. I look forward to seeing you at our holiday concert, Dec. 13-15!

Please post this at your neighborhood store, library or church bulletin board

Friday, December 13 @ 8pm

THE RIVIERA THEATRE
67 WEBSTER STREET
NORTH TONAWANDA, NY 14120

Saturday, December 14 @ 8pm

UNIVERSITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
3330 MAIN STREET
BUFFALO, NY 14214

Sunday, December 15 @ 3pm

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
724 DELAWARE AVENUE
BUFFALO, NY 14209

**interpreted for the hearing impaired*

Tickets: \$20 General Admission
\$18 for Students/Seniors/Disabled

CIARAN KRUEGER *Artistic Director*
DEBI OVERTON-NILES *Accompanist*

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Grace Notes

Artistic Director **Ciaran Krueger** and his wife Lisa took a cruise to the Bahamas in August to celebrate their 5th wedding anniversary.

BGMC Director of Business and Communications **Christopher Reybrouck** [B2] started a new job at Evergreen Health Services as the Foundation Coordinator for the Evergreen Foundation, which raises money for programs and services at EHS.

In August, **Steve Bukowski** [B2] joined the client services division of Thinking Outside the Square, an exhibition design firm in Cheektowaga.

Rob Black [T1] has been leading architectural tours of the Lakeview Avenue historic district in Jamestown for three summers. All proceeds benefit the Fenton History Center in Chautauqua County.

Every Saturday at 9:45 AM, WGRZ airs a feature called *Unique Eats*, produced by **Zak Kineke** [B2]. Viewers can catch up on Zak's culinary adventures at local restaurants at www.wgrz.com/news/daybreak/uniqueeats/.

Joe Grieco [T2] and his partner Peter have a new apartment in the Elmwood village. In July, Joe became grandfather to Carmela.

While on assignment in the Baltimore area conducting systems and process training, **Timothy H. Mahiques** [B2], Senior Operations Manager-Sales for Ingram Micro Inc., prepared for our upcoming holiday concerts by joining weekly rehearsals via SKYPE.

Frank Canino, the director of Albert Invincible Theater, has invited **Travis Ballard** [B2] to be part of his core company of actors and readers.

Joey Sergiej [T2] has joined Yankee Candle in the Boulevard Mall as a sales associate.

The Erie County Bar Association recently hosted a talk by **Mark Peszko, Esq.** [T2] on the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to recognize same sex-marriage.

Hanford Searl, Jr. [T1] has been appointed editor-in-chief of *Glam Magazine* at glammagazine.org. He recently interviewed Dionne Warwick and Bernadette Peters.

We are SO online!



Find us on
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Join Our Flickr Group:
www.flickr.com/groups/bgmc/

Email us:

info@buffalogaymenschorus.org



Artistic Director: Ciaran Krueger
Accompanist: Debi Overton-Niles
Director of Business & Communications:
Christopher Reybrouck
Music Librarian: William Gardner
Ticket Sales: Susan Gruttadauria
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Jimmy Rigo
Cynthia Van Ness

Mission Statement:

The Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus is dedicated to producing vocal music of high quality in the rich tradition of men's choral singing. We sing to create harmony as we celebrate pride in the community and in ourselves. We seek through song not only to entertain, but to enlighten.



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