

BOOK REVIEWS

Singing Out: GALA Choruses and Social Change

By Heather MacLachlan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.

Allison McCracken

American Studies, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA

Email: amccra1@depaul.edu

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Since the 1970s, gay and lesbian choruses have provided much-needed spaces for people to find community, express themselves artistically and emotionally, and publicly represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights movement through their performances. These choruses initially took root independently around the United States and Canada, coming together as an organization in 1982 as GALA (the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses). There are currently more than 200 GALA choruses internationally, with several thousand members. They are representative of many community-built, alternative institutions developed during the years following Stonewall, such as the Gay Games and Metropolitan Community Churches.

In her thoughtful, compelling, and well-researched study, musicologist and ethnographer Heather MacLachlan (who self-identifies as straight, cis, and Christian) seeks to understand GALA's "unique culture" as a singing organization with roots in the Western community choir tradition and the LGBT rights movement. In particular, she is interested in evaluating the efficacy of GALA's mission to "change the world through song," and frames each chapter in ways that addresses different aspects of this topic. MacLachlan analyzes these choruses' repertoires, musical interpretations, and performance practices; the intense community feelings they engender in members; their "homonormative" demographics, internal gender divides, and diversifying efforts; and their various interpretations of GALA's mission. Although MacLachlan provides some historical context for the LGBT movement and some integration of queer theoretical frameworks (notably José Muñoz's concept of disidentification as a subversive performance strategy),¹ the bulk of MacLachlan's evidence comes from her own lived experience as a choir director and participant, as a GALA audience member and observer (she attended 8 years of GALA performances, including the major choral festivals that occur every 4 years), and, most importantly, as an ethnographer who conducted in-depth interviews with ninety-seven GALA artistic directors and choristers.

As MacLachlan notes, GALA choruses have been under studied by scholars and remain largely unmentioned in music schools and university music departments, despite their significant presence within their communities and the growing influence of their performance practices (especially showmanship) on non-GALA choirs. Indeed, MacLachlan's book seems tailor-made to appeal to music department undergraduates in particular, with her emphasis on first-person observation and accessible writing. MacLachlan's monograph joins the well-received study of queer choruses written by cultural studies scholar and queer GALA performer, Julia Balén, *A Queerly Joyful Noise: Choral Musicking for Social Justice*.² Although both scholars frame their books through a social justice lens and rely heavily on interviews, they are revealing for the way in which their specific positionalities and disciplines result in different assessments of the same subject. Balén's study is more celebratory and grounded in queer theory, especially recent feminist and queer musicology. She also offers a broader perspective on gay

¹José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

²Julia Balén, *A Queerly Joyful Noise: Choral Musicking for Social Justice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

history and queer choral movements, emphasizes the pleasure and erotics of singing in a queer community, and situates queer choirs within the context of singing in other social movements.

By comparison, MacLachlan's outsider approach is more dispassionate and journalistic; she lets the interviewees speak for themselves, and offers less commentary and attention to gay and lesbian cultural history. MacLachlan instead draws on her own areas of expertise, offering extensive discussions of GALA's community-specific song choices, interpretations, and distinctive performance practices. She also productively underlines how their members' sense of mission and ministry, as well as their repertoire of sacred music, draw from Western Christian traditions. For example, she points to the many interviewees who grew up in Evangelical churches and feel at home in GALA's choruses. Perhaps the most significant difference in MacLachlan's work lies in the fact that, unlike Balén, she does not take the queer-identification and social justice aspects of these choirs as a given, instead offering a nuanced assessment that reflects the social hierarchies, divisions, and varying missions among GALA choirs.

MacLachlan's analysis utilizes an intersectional framework that she applies from the top-down, making clear how these groups have best served the interests of the white, cis-male, middle-class members who have largely dominated them in terms of their numbers, social prestige, visibility, and fundraising. She therefore points out how homogeneity, homonormativity, and "integrationist" rather than "liberationist" politics (186–88) have shaped GALA's mission (and its efficacy) as a social movement. Notably, MacLachlan eschews not only queer theory in her framing, but pointedly rejects the use of the word "queer" to describe GALA choruses because so few of her interviewees self-identify this way (only four of the ninety-seven), and some actively oppose a word they regard as either a slur or not representative of their assimilationist politics.

MacLachlan's careful reportage and discussion of this internal hierarchy is welcome, although unsurprising. The major national gay and lesbian organizations that took shape in the 1970s and 1980s—most notably the Human Rights Campaign—reflect these same social hierarchies and have generally been invested in the assimilationist ("we're human too") identity politics that shaped the national movement in the 1990s and 2000s. In this regard, MacLachlan's findings are perhaps most valuable in her revelation of the organization's internal politics, particularly the different cultures of men and women's choirs (she spends less time on the "mixed choirs") in terms of their administration—women are more consensus oriented, men more authoritative and hierarchal—and their approach to and practice of mission politics. Women and queer-identified chorus members are refreshingly direct in their criticism of the GALA administration as sexist, despite its leaders' attempts to promote women's choruses in various ways; they note how men's choirs dominate the choral scene and are invariably privileged as a result, and their members, as audiences, are often disinterested in attending women's performances (69–73). MacLachlan's study affirms the gendered fissures between these two communities that have always existed, and her analysis provides an enlightening case study of exactly how such hierarchies operate in one prominent LGBT organization.

MacLachlan's work also usefully outlines the challenges to diversifying these choirs with Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), working-class, and transgender performers (Chapter 3). Among these, she lists the nature of the Western (white) Choir tradition that uplifts sacred and art music (which must be performed as written), the costs of membership, the geographic locations of rehearsal spaces in largely white, middle-class areas, and the reluctance of some in non-white communities to affiliate themselves publicly with the white-associated identifiers "gay" or "lesbian." Although these choirs have had some success with attracting transgender performers in recent years, MacLachlan also highlights how GALA's gendered performance traditions and practices—the need to "blend" and be vocally and visibly homogenous—has been especially challenging. Accordingly, her discussion of the adaptive strategies some have utilized (particularly for trans women), is illuminating.

Although MacLachlan is critical of the social hierarchies and exclusionary aspects of these choirs, her project also emphasizes their tremendous value for many GALA members. Her book is full of testimonials regarding the healing and community support members have felt, and the opportunities these choirs have presented for them to come out to family, friends, and co-workers. In terms of their "mission" to influence social change through performance, MacLachlan also offers compelling

discussions about the various ways members have interpreted and acted on it, which is dependent on the choir's financial resources, its community profile, the desires of its artistic director, and the kinds of outreach members choose (Chapters 6 and 8). Thus, well-funded, high-profile choruses such as the Men's Chorus of Washington D.C. book big gigs with national impact—including Obama's 2013 inauguration and the Kennedy Center—whereas smaller choruses such as St. Paul Minnesota's OneVoice Mixed Chorus focus their outreach locally, working with public schools for example. In this regard, MacLachlan leaves it to the reader to assess the efficacy of these performances' fulfillment of the GALA mission, which makes sense given their diversity. She ultimately points to the value of these choirs as community-building spaces and in the way they “foster positive attitudes towards LGBT people among the general population” (224).

This conclusion certainly seems reasonable, although I believe this study could have been organized differently in ways that would have enriched it. As conceptualized, the social movement/social justice framework is somewhat limited because MacLachlan focuses primarily on applying it to current contexts rather than providing more historical viewpoints. Although there has always been a division between centrist, assimilationist or “integrationist” gay and lesbian people and more progressive, activist queer people (confusingly, MacLachlan refers to this group as “gay liberationist” throughout [186], instead of marking the historical shift to “Queer” as the progressive political nomenclature in the 1990s), these choirs meant something different in the 1980s and 1990s than they have since. Many of the original members first joined them in an atmosphere of intense anti-gay discrimination and hostility—particularly within the context of the AIDS crisis—and, as such, the act of joining and publicly performing was politically charged and risky *in itself* in a way it is generally not today (although such hostilities are clearly increasing in some U.S. locations). Although MacLachlan briefly acknowledges this historical context, she does not explore it in depth. This seems like a missed opportunity given that she had access to such a broad array of interview subjects who could have provided their lived experience of this era. More memory-based testimonials of these early years and attention to the particular challenges these choirs faced would have enhanced MacLachlan's analysis and provided a valuable archive of this organization as a part of the history of queer elders within the gay and lesbian movement.

Likewise, MacLachlan might have addressed more aspects of social justice work among GALA choirs by offering a bottom-up analysis that acknowledged their social hierarchies but shifted attention to feminist/lesbian “women's” choirs, mixed choruses, BIPOC choirs (including gospel choirs), transgender choirs, and the second generation of mixed youth choirs (like the Gay, Lesbian and Supportive Singers youth choir of Surrey, British Columbia), that are more inclusive and reject fixed, commodifiable labels. As a queer historian and teacher, what was most remarkable and inspiring to me was learning how these choirs are providing vital, in-person opportunities for LGBT/queer expressive performance for young people today, particularly in schools, where any exposure to queer history or role models is minimal, nonexistent, or openly under attack; I would have valued hearing more about their particular approaches and impact in these spaces. In doing such work, these choirs continue to provide vital embodied evidence of a queer choral history and tradition from which today's queer youth can learn, critique, and transform.

Allison McCracken is associate professor and director of American Studies at DePaul University. Her work focuses on the intersections of gender, sexuality, media, and U.S. cultural history. Her works include the monograph, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2015), the edited collection, *A Tumblr Book* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), and the chapter, “There's a Rainbow on the River: The Affordances of Boy Soprano Bobby Breen in 1930s Hollywood,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2021).