



Rehearsal Break

Christopher Eanes, Editor eanesc@gmail.com

What's in a Name?

by Stuart Chapman Hill

What's in a name? We all have them. Maybe you wear comfortably the name you were given at birth, or maybe you have adopted a childhood nickname or other chosen handle. Perhaps you know the story of the beloved family member or literary character who is your namesake, or how your name's etymology reveals something your name-givers wished to carve into your identity. My name, Stuart, is related to the word "steward," or servant. I never had any say in the matter, but I always have felt some small sense of responsibility to that label—like an assignment I was given, a task designated for me.

Our experiences with our own names vary widely, of course, but names inevitably convey meanings and connotations. The names of our choirs are no exception. Every domain of choral music seems to have its go-to names: a Christian

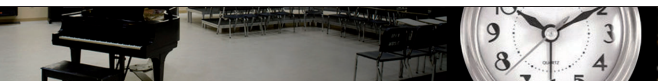
church may have a Chancel Choir or Sanctuary Choir, along with a Cherub Choir or Junior Choir for the younger set. High school and collegiate programs may have different ensembles whose names represent distinct functions or tiers. The word "chamber" often denotes the most selective group, though the ensemble's membership may be much larger than is traditionally associated with chamber music. Some school choirs, following their athletic counterparts, use "varsity" and "JV" to represent different levels of experience or achievement.

In part, a name reflects a brand—something professional performers know well. As an article on the *Strings* magazine website noted, a name "can shape an audience's perception of your group before a single note is played," and may even communicate "as much about you as your repertoire and reviews."¹ For genre- and

style-bending groups like Roomful of Teeth, a quirky, distinctive name seems to help communicate the ensemble's innovative musical goals. In an interview with *Cleveland Classical*, the ensemble's founder, Brad Wells, described wanting to "come up with a more rock and roll-sounding name for a classical ensemble... something in English that sounded casual and vivid."²

Not all of us are Roomful of Teeth, however, and naming our school, college, church, and community choirs may seem less about evoking enticing brands and more like taking care of perfunctory business or following tradition. Still, I would like to suggest that these names are important forms of *discourse*, or "language use as social practice."³

As music educator and choral conductor Brent C. Talbot has explained,



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discourse entails fully power-laden modes of communication that move back and forth between reflecting and constructing the social world. Language, from this view, is never neutral. It mediates and constructs our understanding of reality, reflects and shapes who we are, and is always caught up in social, political, economic, racial, sexual, gendered, religious, and cultural formations. Thus, when we speak and communicate we draw upon language to enact specific social activities and social identities within a specific time, circumstance, and place, making (sub)conscious decisions about what to include and not include based on complex relationships of power.⁴

An ensemble's name, as discourse, can communicate much about that ensemble's function, values, repertoire, membership, leadership and so forth. For example, a Varsity Choir may be part of a high school program in which each ensemble is indexed to a particular skill or experience level. Perhaps the use of "varsity" is meant to imply parity between music and athletics in terms of the support they should enjoy, or to draw students who are enthusiastic about school sports, but skeptical of school music, by hinting at the prestige and camaraderie of a varsity team. Alternately, some students might be deterred by the athletic connotation or the association with competition and rival-

ry. Whatever the creator's intent, Varsity Choir is, to borrow from Talbot, a means of "reflecting and constructing the social world"⁵ of the ensemble it represents.

How, then, do ensemble names help or hurt our efforts to establish strong musical identities or to foster connections with prospective singers and audience members? To put this question in context, let us consider some other important pieces of discourse: these purpose statements excerpted from ACDA's mission (emphases added):

- "To foster and promote choral singing, which will provide *artistic, cultural, and spiritual experiences* for the participants."
- "To foster and promote the organization and development of choral groups of *all types* in schools and colleges."
- "To foster and promote understanding of choral music as an important medium of *contemporary* artistic expression."⁶

Consider also some of the aims espoused by an important sibling organization, the National Association for Music Education (again, emphases added):

- "to conduct programs and activities to build a vital musical culture and an enlightened musical public for the *benefit and the general welfare of all persons*;"
- "to promote the involvement of persons of all ages in learning

music."⁷

A couple important threads bind these collected aims. First is the notion that musical activity and learning—broadly construed, including diverse forms of choral music-making—belong to all persons, and all should benefit. Following from that thread is a desire (or obligation) to share the wealth of these musical activities as extensively as possible and in diverse forms that reach, nurture, and sustain all persons. This seems to commit ensemble leaders to a wide sense of welcome, of which ensemble names may be a part.

Let me illustrate with the story of a recent experience with the choir I conduct, told both in my voice and in the voices of a few students I interviewed.⁸ Along the way, you will hear from Lexie and Miriam, both upper-level music majors, and Kelly, an education major who had been singing in the ensemble since her first semester in university.

A Name Change Story

In the fall of 2018, I began toying with (and my department chair encouraged) the idea of changing the name of the ensemble I conduct, which was then called Women's Chorus. Why change? First, I was keenly aware that our department served many students whose gender identities did not align with the male-female binary, and I worried about excluding some sopranos and altos from a treble choir with an explicitly gendered name. As Joshua Palkki has explained, en-

semble names can affect access and inclusion:

If conductor-teachers choose to stay with the “gendered choir” paradigm, however, they must find ways to be inclusive of trans singers. Ensemble name changes may be necessary. For example, several states have renamed their All-State women’s choirs as “treble choirs.”⁹

Additionally, the Women’s Chorus, as it was, had begun to grow in both membership and stature. The

singers’ sense of camaraderie and mission was livening. The choir was excelling musically and had been accepted for its first state conference performance. The time for a thoughtful rebranding seemed ripe.

I felt strongly, though, that this was not a decision my colleagues and I should make without student input. It was important that students help select a name that adequately reflected what the ensemble was becoming, so I called an open meeting for interested students to share their views about a possible new name for the choir. At that meeting, I laid my cards on the ta-

ble: foremost, I felt it was important to eliminate the explicit gender delineation in the name, which could be a barrier for some, and I wanted to seize the rebranding opportunity for an ensemble that was growing and thriving. I also tried to convey honestly that, while student input was an important part of the process, faculty would ultimately need to vet, approve, and own this curricular change.

As a male faculty member leading a group of mostly women, I held substantial privilege and power in this process, and I did step in occasionally to the guide the con-

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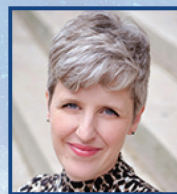
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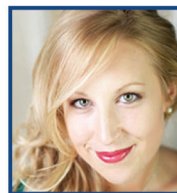
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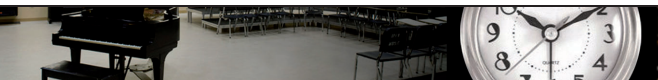
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versation and offer opinions along the way. Lexie, one of the students I interviewed, said I was “more of a mediator than a leader,” but also that I was “keeping [the students] on track with it.”¹⁰

Individual students had a variety of ideas and concerns, including different opinions on whether the world “treble” was an adequate substitute for “women’s,” thoughts about maintaining some sort of femininity and/or feminism in the ensemble’s identity, and some firmly-held convictions about certain non-negotiable points: one student, for example, who was opposed to perpetuating traditional norms of feminine beauty, insisted we not use the word “bella” in the name. As Kelly recalled, “We [had] to just take the word ‘women’ out of it but still respect the fact that it is a very feminine identity...like, ‘girl but

not,’ you know, or, like, ‘girl but not necessarily.’”

The conversation became a dialogue about the nature of gender. Some students were more comfortable with expansive notions of gender than others, and much of the meeting was spent clarifying terminology, concepts, and assumptions. We were pressed for time, and Miriam remembered the challenge of attempting this conversation at such a brisk pace:

It did feel rushed...Also, people were at different levels of vocabulary with what was going on? ...It seemed like there were a group of people who were really passionate and excited and this meant a lot to, and people that were interested, but didn’t know to have the tools necessarily to be, to

have [a] stake. And perhaps, had we had the time or the resources or whatever, at some point to give them those tools would’ve been an important [part] of the process.

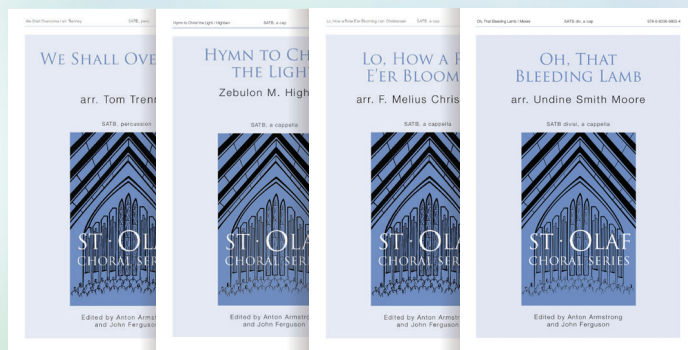
We agreed to hold a second meeting, which began with a review of some of the principles and initial name ideas from the first meeting. New ideas began to emerge, with one member offering “vermillion earth” as a possibility. The idea was intriguing—poetic and euphonic and distinct—but its connection to our identity was tenuous. I observed that vermillion is red, whereas our school colors are blue and gold, and there did not seem to be a specific reason to embrace red as a signature color for the ensemble. Still, this suggestion had opened the possibility of considering colors, specifically our school colors, as a way to go.

It was not long before someone discovered the adjective “aurous,” meaning “golden.” Lexie recounted,

I thought it would be really cool to see if there was a translation of [gold] in a different language...And so I think it was Latin—like a noun—of just being golden. That was “aurous.” And then we decided “aurous chorus” would probably not be the best choice of name [laughter].

The “aurous” conversation eventually led to Aurelia, a first name


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traditionally given to women whose meaning is, roughly, “golden one.”

Although there were some efforts to pair Aurelia with another word, I advocated for keeping it simple and using merely Aurelia, because (a) it had a distinct, signature quality; (b) as a name traditionally given to women, it bore a kind of femininity, but did not necessarily denote an exclusively female choir; and (c) “golden one” had a subtle but identifiable tie to our official school colors, giving it some staying power.

I recall an excitement percolating in the room and felt fairly sure we had stumbled upon our new name. Kelly remembered: “The look on your face was like, ‘That’s it,’ and we were all just like, Yeah, that’s the one. Like, we never really decided; it was just like, Yeah, that one. Like, okay, we’re done.”

In the meantime, I decided to investigate historical figures named Aurelia—including Saint Aurelia of Regensburg, who in the eleventh century disguised herself as a pilgrim and fled a marriage arranged against her will, and Aurelia Browder, a civil rights activist who was an important figure in the Montgomery bus boycotts. Discovering these brave ancestors felt too good to be true. I shared the name with my departmental colleagues, who officially approved, and though “Women’s Chorus” would remain in the catalog for the remainder of that academic year, we began using “Aurelia” in concert programs, including the special, glossy program we developed for our state conference performance—a document

that, for me, felt like an important part of our reinvention.

Miriam commented,

I don’t know if the feeling that we’ve sort of transitioned to “professionalism” is . . . on account of the name solely. But it’s interesting how, I think, when that all happened together, it felt like it gelled well, right? Like, we had this opportunity to showcase professionally [at our state conference] what we accomplished, and we had this new name that sort of felt our own.

I explained the chosen name in an email to ensemble members. Almost immediately, whenever I wrote mass messages to the choir, I used the greeting line “Golden ones,” which I hoped would help cement our adoption of, and even affection for, the new name. Lexie said, “I remember the first time you sent us an email and it was titled, like, ‘Golden ones,’ and I was like, *Oh, it’s happening*. This is a thing now.”

What’s in a Name?

This is just one ensemble’s story, but it provides examples of how discourse about choral ensembles—including their names—can make a difference. In analyzing the reflections of the students I interviewed, I am struck by their insights about how the change from Women’s Chorus to Aurelia influenced them, especially as regards the name’s association with pride, prestige, and

purpose, as well as its gender implications.

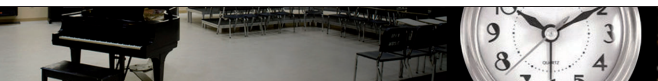
Pride, Prestige, Purpose

For Miriam, the new name “gelled well” because there was alignment between the ensemble’s musical achievements and the development of a new name and identity. Kelly, who had been in the ensemble for eight semesters, reflected,

I think it allows the choir to have more sophistication associated with it. You hear of a Women’s Chorus, and you’re like, Okay, they’re gonna sing about flowers. But if you hear the name Aurelia, you don’t have expectations...nobody else has that name.

Kelly’s comments about women’s choruses and flowers hint at notions of gender, which I discuss more specifically below, but also evoke entrenched thinking about treble choirs. Echoing Kelly’s aside, Lindsay Pope has written of being “disturbed to find that much of [treble] repertoire contained texts centered on unrequited love or picking/giving flowers”; further, Pope has observed

how often, in a co-ed institution, the women’s choir is regarded as a second-class citizen in a choral program. While I understand that this secondary status is not necessarily intentional, it is a seri-



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ous and ongoing problem.... Are we empowering [students] through language, programming, and healthy vocal development, for example, or are we furthering gender stereotypes that would make women believe they are indeed less capable, less productive, and less worthy of being recognized for quality work and outstanding effort?¹¹

For the students I interviewed, having a specific, purpose-driven name seemed to short-circuit this second-class-citizen dynamic. Kelly suggested that, “with a different name, it gives more personality and more identity for the people in it... [whereas] if you’re in something that’s the beginner group, people don’t care.”

Miriam, too, seemed drawn to the name’s specificity of meaning:

It’s a word with a definition, right?...There were other words that we threw around and we decided, actually, that definition doesn’t really match what we want to be...This is what [Aurelia] means, and these are the ways it’s been used culturally, and we want this word for that purpose versus a descriptor or a different word.

Part of the pride and prestige that students associated with Aurelia seemed to come from its “golden” meaning, which went beyond the convenience of connecting

with a school color. Lexie pointed to the royal aspect of gold, saying, “I would like this group to be associated with the color gold, because it has value and because it’s worth a lot. And I think that this group deserves value and worth.” Miriam noted gold’s “shininess” and took a broad view of what that could mean:

Well, it’s resilient, I think, in a way that a lot of comfortable, queer, feminist spaces feel. Right? The concept of resilience and of visibility when it’s safe and those sort of core components are really, I think, at the core of a lot of feminist, queer spaces.

These senses of royalty, value, worth, resiliency, and visibility all depart from the dynamic of treble choirs as second class citizens, though the notions of gender interwoven with these themes must be explored as well.

Gender

Pope wrote not only about the status of treble choruses, but also specifically about the status of women’s choruses and the “messages we are sending women”¹² with the status quo. At the same time, Pope acknowledged that not all treble singers identify as women, and it is important to be welcoming by using “language that is even more inclusive.”¹³ Remember that Palkki, too, suggested that “ensemble name changes may be necessary”¹⁴ in or-

der to be fully inclusive.

These matters of gender and inclusion were among the initial motivators for changing the name of the former Women’s Chorus. Miriam, who was able to “empathize and understand where discomfort would lie” with a name like Women’s Chorus, explained the need to reconcile the ensemble’s name with contemporary understandings of gender:

I think a name, on a pretty basic level—that’s your marketing, right? That’s how you’re being viewed as you’re putting your sort of content into the world. And so you have to consider how the world views that vocabulary now, how it might view that vocabulary in the future.

Lexie agreed, noting that the new name had “more of an open feel to when it comes to who is accepted into the group,” whereas “Women’s Chorus is pretty limiting.”

This was not an easy decision, however. As Palkki has acknowledged, single-gender choirs “have proven vital to identity development...for many singers,” and there are “many women who feel empowered through membership in a women’s ensemble with feminist roots.”¹⁵

As we considered our name change, it was clear that letting go of the female, the feminine, and/or the feminist was worrisome for some singers. One student wrote to me not to advocate against the

name change *per se*, but to make clear her sense of attachment to Women's Chorus as an identity—and her sense of pride at the accomplishments of the *women* in the ensemble.

For Lexie, there seemed to be some comfort in knowing that the name Aurelia retained a certain femininity. She said, "I remember that the draw was that Aurelia had a feminine ending, which kind of stuck with our feminist point of view of the ensemble." This point of view was crucial; Miriam highlighted the importance of not only the name itself, but also the discourse *about* the name:

There's no immediately gendered association with the word Aurelia, and yet we've found ways to imbue that with meaning...we found a way to make it purposely fit within a feminist-plus lens, but that's because we've done the work to talk about that.

For all the name accomplishes on its own, the ways people speak about the name and the ensemble also are powerful components of discourse. Still, the new name opened up new ways of conceiving of and talking about that ensemble's identity. The new name "mediates and constructs our understanding of reality, reflects and shapes who we are"¹⁶ in ways the previous name did not.

Considerations for Conductors

The name of the ensemble you conduct may be fairly low on the list of choral matters that consume your mind. After all, there are concerts to program, scores to study, voice placements to make, conducting gestures to refine. Still, I return to the sense of welcome I read in ACDA's and NAfME's mission statements. Incidentally, as I write it is audition season, and I am mindful of what students tell me in audition-day interviews about what their choral experiences have meant to them: for all the aesthetic joys of choral singing, they almost always pinpoint community and a sense of caring and belonging as central to their love of the art form.

Names may have more to do with belonging than we realize. In selecting group names, we "draw upon language to enact specific social activities and social identities within a specific time, circumstance, and place, *making (sub)conscious decisions about what to include and not include based on complex relationships of power.*"¹⁷ For the students I interviewed, changing our choir's name—and having the opportunity to help shape the process of doing so—was about more than mere language; it helped reconfigure ensemble identity, renew a sense of pride and purpose, and cement our commitment to inclusivity.¹⁸ Such is the potential power of language in practice.

Perhaps some reflection about the role of ensemble names is in order. I would never prescribe rules for what makes a good ensemble

name: ensembles that vary widely in values and approach cannot subscribe to a single set of rules. In the ACDA and NAfME mission statements, though, choral music

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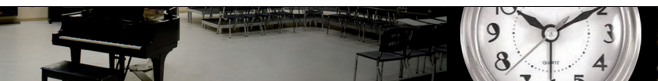


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is prized as an “important medium of *contemporary artistic* expression,”¹⁹ and a commitment is made to “build a vital musical culture... for the benefit and the general welfare of *all persons*.”²⁰ How do names contribute to maintaining choral music’s contemporary relevance, and how do names help ensure that choral music reaches and enriches the lives of all persons?

In closing, here are some questions conductors might consider as they reflect on the names of ensembles they lead:

- *Who are we?* Who are the current

and prospective members of this ensemble, and does our name signal to them that they belong? Who is our intended audience, and do they sense from our name that we have something to offer them? Despite all good intentions, is there anything about our name that fails to welcome singers, prospective singers, or audience members fully? For example, is this a gendered chorus or a voice-type chorus? Is an erudite Latin phrase a sleek nod to sophistication and quality, or might something more “casual and vivid,” as Brad Wells intended for Roomful of Teeth,²¹ cast a broader, more

welcoming net?²²

- *What are we about?* Even if you have never discussed them explicitly, your ensemble almost certainly has a definable set of values. Does the choir’s name reflect what it does especially well, what its function is in the broader choral ecosystem? For example, does “madrigals” accurately describe your musical prowess? Does “chamber” reflect the nature of your musical activity?

- *Where are we going?* I mean this both locally and universally: where is your ensemble going, and where is

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choral music going? Choral music rests on rich tradition, but ACDA's mission explicitly embraces contemporary practice. How do ensembles balance tradition and evolution? How does your name signal your contemporary place? For example, how does a new "choral collective," like the Young Professionals Choral Collective of Cincinnati,²³ differ from a long-established "choral society"?

In other words, what's in a name? For you and your ensemble, I cannot say for sure—but I do suggest that the question is worth asking. Our ensembles are more than their monikers, of course—but the names we bear are the doors into all the other things we are. 

Stuart Chapman Hill, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of music at Webster University.
stuchapmanhill@gmail.com

NOTES

¹ "Choosing an Ensemble Name," *Strings*, February 1, 2019, <https://stringsmagazine.com/choosing-an-ensemble-name/>

² Mike Tellin, "Roomful of Teeth at Cleveland Museum of Art: A Conversation with Brad Wells," *Cleveland Classical*, March 17, 2015, <https://clevelandclassical.com/roomful-of-teeth-at-cleveland-museum-of-art-a-conversation-with-founder-brad-wells/>

³ Brent C. Talbot, "Discourse Analysis," in *Music Therapy Research*, 3rd ed. (New Braunfels, TX: Barcelona Publishers, 2016),

510.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "About ACDA," <https://acda.org/ACDA/About-Root/About.aspx>

⁷ *2019 NAFME Constitution and Bylaws*, <https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2019/02/NAFME-2019-Constitution-and-Bylaws.pdf>

⁸ These interviews were conducted according to qualitative research protocols, and the study that informs this article was approved by my institution's Institutional Review Board. Each participant gave affirmative written consent to participate in the research; to protect their identities and privacy, pseudonyms replace these participants' real names throughout. These participants also were given the opportunity to review the audio recordings and transcripts of our conversations and to read this article in draft form.

⁹ Joshua Palkki, "Inclusivity in Action: Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom," *Choral Journal* 57, no. 11 (June/July 2017), 30.

¹⁰ To borrow from the literature on youth participation, this is what one model (Treseder's 1997 model) might have called either "assigned but informed" or "adult-initiated, shared decisions with [students]." For an overview, see Terry Barber, "Young People and Civic Participation: A conceptual review," *Youth & Policy* 96 (Summer 2007), 19–39.

¹¹ Lindsay S. Pope, "Sing Out Loud: Empowering Women's Choirs," *Choral Journal* 56, no. 5 (December 2015), 54.

¹² Ibid, 54.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Palkki, "Inclusivity in Action," 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29–30.

¹⁶ Talbot, "Discourse Analysis," 510.

¹⁷ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁸ I want to be clear about the complexity of inclusion—and to acknowledge that our choices come with consequences that can cut both ways. In committing to removing "women" from our name, we also committed to being an SSAA ensemble—which inevitably excludes women whose voices lie outside the ranges of our repertoire. A name change does not "fix" everything, and the work of making all feel included must be pursued on many fronts.

¹⁹ "About ACDA," emphasis added.

²⁰ *2019 NAFME Constitution and Bylaws*, emphasis added.

²¹ Tellin, "Roomful of Teeth."

²² Consider that one of the outcomes of Vatican II was to permit Mass to be celebrated in local tongues rather than Latin, allowing the rite to reach as many as possible, rather than stand apart.

²³ See www.yppccsing.org.