Where the Amateur Singer Is King

By LESLIE RUBINSTEIN

Matt Anders, a 17-year-old tenor from Baltimore, journeyed 388 miles to sing "Messiah" at Avery Fisher Hall last week. Fred Jacobson, a bass, jogged down Fifth Avenue for "Messiah" at the Church of the Heavenly Rest. And a soprano from Philadelphia, Shellie Camo, sloshed through icy snow to sing "Judas Maccabaeus" at the 92d Street Y. Altogether, thousands of New York's amateur singers are now recovering from the many sing-alongs during these past weeks of festivities. They are part of a tradition of community singing that has long flourished here.

"We're a bunch of fanatics," says Reuben Abel, a sing-along regular for three decades. Regulars calmly grapple with the complexities of Baroque oratorios, struggling to keep up with the coloratura, stumbling through intricate vocal scores. And they pay money to sing, as well.

They are a disparate crew, these sing-along choristers, diverse in background and talent. Few aspire to vocal stardom; some are incapable of reading music. "For 19 years now, I haven't read a note," admits John Rothschild, a steel importer. "But I know when to sing up and when to sing down."

What unites these aficionados is unabashed enthusiasm. They believe, like Aristotle, that "song is man's greatest joy." There are men in parkas, women in sables and teen-agers in sneakers. And there is more than one "town and country soprano" on the scene — to quote humorist George Ade, "the kind often used for augmenting grief at a funeral."

"I think 25 percent of my sing-alongers had a sticky time with the high G of 'wretched,'" Amy Kaiser said recently. "But 'Judas Maccabaeus,' our recent Chanukah oratorio, was a big hit. About 80 showed up." Miss Kaiser, who is director of the 92d Street Y Chorale, the Y Symphonic Workshop, the Y Amateur Chorus and the chorus at Mannes College of Music, continued: "I've been holding sing-alongs for 16 years. The sense of participation is a profound experience to most people. The singing in 'Judas Maccabaeus' was sloppy, of course, but exhilarating. My own purpose was to give a fine idea of the piece, to create a shape." As to repertory, she said, "I opt for works not typically Christian, such as 'Elijah,' 'Israel in Egypt,' Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and so forth. But the open sings are non-denominational."

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Sing-alongs in New York are traceable to the summer of 1916. The New York Times called the first such experience, a gathering of 20,000 strong in Central Park, "a new form of educational experiment." Due to the efforts of a charismatic baritone, Henry Horner Barnhart — who, at age 29, developed the reputation as "The Billy Sunday of Choral Singing" (named for the popular revivalist) — this type of community enterprise changed the face of choral music performances in the 20th century.

Tess Steinholk

Participants in a "Messiah" sing-along at the Church of the Heavenly Rest

In 1915, The New York Sun reported that through Barnhart's tireless energies, "the community sing movement" was "sweeping the country." His most theatrical venture was a "Sound and Light Festival" in Central Park. An architect named Claude Bragdon lighted a section of the park imaginatively, and a trained nucleus of 1,000 voices blended with a sing-along audience of 20,000.

"Don't be afraid you will sing off-key," Barnhart would cry out, "crowds of people always sing in harmony." By dint of what The Times called "sheer dynamic force and personal magnetism," he cajoled thousands of novices into singing vocal works ranging from "Annie Laurie" to Wagner's "Pilgrims Chorus."

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"Make the people sing together and they will work together and think together," advised the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music in a small beige booklet. Eventually, radio played a vital role in helping "mass sings" — as they were called — to become national fads. As many as 1,200 people gathered in the studios of shows like WABC's "Come On, Let's Sing" and WMCA's "Let's Sing Again."

In 1934, the first Community Song Fest was held in Washington Square with 400 attending. The Villager described "dark faced shopkeepers from Sullivan Street happily singing with fancy residents of Lower Fifth Avenue." As was customary, there were rules: "No fees, no collections, no voice tests, no musical requirements and no obligations."

In the late 1940's, Paul Boepple, then conductor of the Dessoff Choirs, started Summer Sings on Monday nights in May and June. It cost 50 cents to join, and 150 signed up. "He was a tyrant," says Naomi Birnbach. "He was the Toscanini of chorus masters."

Eventually Summer Sings expanded to July and August and filled the Community Church on East 35th Street. Guest conductors included Virgil Thomson, Alan Hovhaness, Alexander Schneider, Kurt Adler and others. "Once 812 people came for Stokowski leading Orff's 'Carmina Burana,'" recalls Steve Michelman, then administrator of the Sings. "I remember the maestro barking at an intense student in the front row, who didn't even bother to hold a score. 'This is for singers only,' he admonished, 'if you want to listen you'd better head for the balcony.'"

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The Dessoff Sings disbanded in the late 1960's, but the New York Choral Society Summer Sings, which started in 1961 under the direction of Martin Josman, continue to this day. Held at CAMI Hall, they attract up to 200 people twice weekly, June through August. For a modest fee scores are provided and refreshments served. Guest conductors lead masterpieces of choral literature, and the warhorses repeated every summer include Mozart's Requiem, Bach's Mass in B minor, Beethoven's Missa Solemnis and Handel's "Messiah." Other summer sings exist, including those sponsored by David Randolph's Masterwork Music and Art Foundation in Morristown, N.J. There, traditional choral music is mixed with such offbeat works as Scott Joplin's "Treemonisha" and Eskil Hamberg's "Missa d'oggi."

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Mr. Josman, producer of the "Messiah Sing In" at Avery Fisher Hall last week, has expanded his concept to Denver and Philadelphia. Performances are sponsored by the National Choral Council. "I want to glamorize choral singing," he admits. Mr. Josman employs a publicist, professional soloists and 20 well-known conductors to lead the 20 "Messiah" choruses and speak briefly between sections. The accompaniment is played on an electronic organ.

"There's no such thing as not being able to carry a tune," insists Charles Dodsley Walker, choral director and organist of the Church of the Heavenly Rest. "For three years, 'Messiah' has packed the place with over 1,000 people." He acknowledges that amateurs have difficulties with appoggiaturas, problematic tessitura, coping with diction and dynamics. But Mr. Walker is unfazed. "I don't aim for the subtleties," he says, "the object is to have a good time."

"This church used to be very toney," he continues, "but now everybody comes; some even wheel in baby carriages. Our sing-alongs are filled with surprises. In fact, once I heard a dog bark in the middle of Bach's St. Matthew Passion."

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Mr. Walker's amiable view is sharply at odds with that of George Bernard Shaw who, when a music critic, wrote that "Hell is a place filled with musical amateurs." What distinguishes the sing-along crowd is that very spirit Shaw decried — amateurism in the pure sense. "It is singing for the love of it," says David Randolph.

David Amram, the composer, has been one of the conductors at the Lincoln Center Sing-In for 10 years now, and he remembers a formal performance of "Messiah" at a small, out-of-the-way church in Brooklyn. "I toyed with inviting the audience to join in singing the 'Hallalujah Chorus' but didn't know how they would respond," he says. "I took the plunge. Suddenly I heard a chorus of spontaneous voices singing like angels. And, what's more, a particular soprano stopped me in my tracks. I discovered later that the gorgeous voice belonged to Leontyne Price. Now I inevitably ask the audience to stand up and join in. You never know what might happen." ■

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