

BERKELEY COMMUNITY CHORUS & ORCHESTRA

1966–2016

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Basses and Altos, BCCO Spring Concert, Hertz Hall, Berkeley, California, 2017
Photo by Bill Hocker

I
BCCO CELEBRATES FIFTY YEARS

by Karen Davison, Chair, BCCO 50th Committee

Although BCCO's 50th anniversary would not take place until 2016, in early 2013 the board began to plan for it. BCCO had a rich history and so much to celebrate. It was extraordinary that this volunteer-led organization continued to thrive after fifty years. Ming Luke, our music director, had been with us for almost two years, and he was enthusiastic and eager to do something beyond the usual. So we decided to go all in, with special concert programming and activities for chorus members as well as for the larger community. The anniversary was an audacious and daunting undertaking, requiring substantial additional fundraising, but in true BCCO fashion, the board and chorus members came up with many exciting ideas—almost all new to the organization—and soon a small army of volunteers began to realize them. In 2015, the City of Berkeley issued a proclamation celebrating BCCO on its 50th anniversary. A logo for the anniversary was created by Melissa Miyamoto-Mills.

Of course the anniversary year revolved around two special concert series. Our January 2016 concerts honored BCCO's history, with pieces chosen to represent the eras of the first two music directors, Eugene Jones and Arlene Sagan. To honor Eugene Jones, BCCO's founder, we performed portions of Handel's *Messiah,* which, during his tenure, BCCO had performed every December, with Gene himself singing one of the bass solos. To honor Arlene, we performed portions of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem,* a piece that spoke to Arlene's humanistic nature. Although Ming conducted the rest of the program, the Brahms was conducted by Joe Liebling, the

former conductor of the Oakland Symphony Chorus and a much-beloved friend of BCCO. Joe had led us in workshops when Arlene was music director, and when Arlene was unable to conduct toward the end of her tenure, we performed the Brahms under him. In tribute to Arlene, we also sang Sibelius's *Finlandia* as a sing-along with the audience. It had been a ritual for Arlene to end her concerts with a short piece that the audience could join in on, and the piece was always a testament to social justice or peace. Ming had the opportunity to choose a work from our past that he particularly wanted to conduct, and he chose Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms.* The concert also included a new work commissioned by BCCO, *I Think I Shall Praise It,* by local composer Kurt Erickson with Heidi Moss the soprano soloist. To honor organizations we were affiliated with, there were short performances by the Berkeley Community Chamber Singers, a small group of BCCO members, led by Derek Tam; the Berkeley High School Concert Chorale, led by Steffanie Schaeffer; and the Berkeley Women's Community Chorus, led by Debra Golata. The concert series began with the video "The Spirit of BCCO," a lively retrospective by Nancy Sue Brink, which highlighted BCCO's three music directors and our guiding philosophy that everyone can make music.

The second concert series, which took place in June 2016, was Britten's *War Requiem.* A challenging work musically and in content, it required a full orchestra *and* a chamber orchestra, three soloists (Carrie Hennessey, soprano; Brian Thorsett, tenor; Efraín Solís, baritone), and, traditionally, a boys' chorus, but we delighted to instead invite the San Francisco Girls Chorus (conducted by Anne Katherine Hege). Britten, a pacifist and conscientious objector, wrote the requiem to mark the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, which had been destroyed in a bombing raid in World War II. Interweaving the texts of the Latin requiem mass with the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who died in action in World War I exactly one week before the end of the war, Britten created a profoundly moving and disturbing work. The epigraph to the piece, taken from Owen, is:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The poetry is in the pity . . .
All a poet can do today is warn . . .

Ming saw the *War Requiem* as an opportunity to showcase what the chorus was capable of, what the fifty years had led up to. It was also an opportunity for the board

to offer further enrichment on the requiem's themes and music. Each of the three concerts was preceded by a talk with a different speaker at each concert (John Prescott, Marika Kuzma, or Jon Bailey). For those of us who attended all three, it was a wonderful opportunity to hear multiple perspectives on the same work. In the lobby of Hertz Hall was artwork by two veterans who had served in the Iraq War, Drew Cameron and Ehren Tool. Drew is a founding member of the Combat Paper Project, which transforms military uniforms into handmade paper, and Ehren is a ceramicist who makes cups embellished with images of war. BCCO also sponsored lectures for the chorus and the general public and sponsored writing workshops for veterans and their friends and families. This kind of outreach was entirely new to BCCO, and the effort was led by Nancy Sue Brink and Julie Thi Underhill. The workshops were held at the Berkeley Public Library, The Musical Offering, and University Press Books. Lecturers included C. D. Blanton, John Prescott, Eric Falci, Jon Bailey, and Adam Hochschild. The poets, writers, and artists participating included Susan Griffin, Ryan Holleran, Amber Hoy, Aaron Hughes, Joe Lamb, Martin Lesinski, Aimee Phan, Ted Sexauer, and Emily Yates. Participating organizations included Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace; Warrior Writers; and Combat Paper Project. In our concert program, we provided resources for further reflection on the *War Requiem,* Britten, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and other World War I poets, and World War I in general.



The 50th anniversary also inspired an effort, led by Betty Pigford, to create an archive of documents, recordings, and photographs related to BCCO. Some of it is currently housed at UC Berkeley's Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library. Chorus members Eileen Flanagan, Johanna Clark, and Catherine Atcheson were invited to write a history of BCCO, and to that end, they met with and interviewed many BCCO chorus and orchestra members.

The 50th anniversary was also the occasion for a significant new venture that continues today, StoryChorus. Created by Nancy Sue Brink, it is an extraordinary compendium

Ming at the grill—picnic celebrating BCCO 50th anniversary, fall 2015, Kennedy Grove
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius



of videos, writings, interviews, and recordings that capture the unique BCCO experience. It can be found at storychorus.org.

Other events of the anniversary year included a picnic for chorus members at Kennedy Grove; a community sing led by Ming and open to the public, where we learned a portion of Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*; a flash mob at a somewhat rainy Downtown Berkeley Farmers' Market, where we strolled in to sing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*; and a joyful reception at the Berkeley Faculty Club following our last performance of the *War Requiem.*

The success of the anniversary year was a testament to our extraordinary volunteer-driven organization and to the enthusiastic efforts of its anniversary planning committee, which included Linda Berti, Nancy Sue Brink, Marjorie Cox, Joanna Davenport, Karen Davison, Christian Fritze, Veronika Fukson, Denise Hart, Ken Lindahl, Ming Luke, Linda Morris, Betty Pigford, Patti Powers-Risius, Mary Rogier, and Ruth White. But none of the events planned could have been successful without the enthusiastic support and participation of the full BCCO community.

Flash mob at Berkeley Farmer's Market surprises shoppers with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, spring 2016
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius



II
CREATING HISTORY: PROCESS

In spring 2015, as part of the 50th anniversary celebration of Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra, Catherine Atcheson, Johanna Clark, and Eileen Flanagan were asked to write a history of BCCO. Catherine, Johanna and Eileen are all longtime singers with BCCO, and all three have served on the BCCO board. Johanna and Eileen are both past presidents of the board of BCCO. The three were tasked with writing an internal document to trace the history and growth of BCCO as an institution.

To gather information, and honor our shared history, participants from various eras of BCCO history were invited to a series of meetings. Twelve meetings were held between April 3, 2015, and May 27, 2016 and at each meeting there were anywhere from three to sixteen participants. Some participants were singers who had been with BCCO for a long time; others had been quite involved in BCCO, but were no longer current members. The first four meetings (April 3, 2015–May 22, 2015) focused on the era when Eugene Jones was music director (1966–1988), as well as on the early years of Arlene Sagan's tenure at the helm of BCCO (roughly 1989–2000). Starting in July 2015 the meetings focused on four-year increments, or the

period of time of two BCCO presidents of the board. Between July 2015 and May 2016 there were seven meetings focused on 2000–2016.

A total of forty-six current and former singers participated in these meetings which generally lasted for about two hours each. Many people attended more than one meeting. This was because many of the participants were either singers or board members for more than the four-year increments that were the focus of particular meetings. For this reason, the aggregate number of people at all meetings (ninety-two) was larger than the forty-six separate attendees. Of the forty-six attendees, thirty were either past or current board members, and ten participants were former or current presidents of the board. Most of these meetings were recorded and transcribed. In order to encourage candor, participants were advised that although there would be audio recordings and transcriptions of the meetings, no specific quotes would be attributed to specific individuals without consent.

These meetings were all held at Johanna Clark's home in North Berkeley. Since Johanna had frequently hosted sectionals, board meetings and twenty-one (!) cast parties, it was a familiar and comfortable setting for many of us, conducive to sharing memories and insights.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with key people from the early days of BCCO. Those included Barbara Lanier, who was a singer and active participant from 1974 to 1984; Greg Hoff, who was a singer from 1978 to 1983, and the first president of the board of directors; and Vangie Buell, who was president of the board when Eugene Jones retired and Arlene Sagan was hired. An additional reference was a video tape made in approximately 2002 of a group interview with Margaret McKibbon, Bill and Vangie Buell, and Clair Rothenberg which primarily focused on the 1984 tour to England. The history section of the BCCO StoryChorus was also used as a resource, as well as notes and files of several longtime board members. Additional references are board minutes, Chorus Notes and original copies of surveys taken of BCCO singers over many years, as well as newspaper articles written about BCCO. Two other important resources were a history written by Frances Whitney in 1991, a narrative covering the first 25 years of BCCO; and also *The Transition to a New Music Director: A chronology of the BCCO Transition Committee, May 2009–December 2011,* by Nancy Wolfe.



This history has been written principally by Eileen Flanagan. Additionally, various chorus members have contributed their reflections about particular BCCO activities and projects over the years. Madeleine Gordon writes about the Berkeley Community Chamber Chorus; Nancy Wolfe writes about recitals; Johanna Clark contributed her thoughts on sectionals, All-Days and cast parties: Stan Dewey and Jarred Miyamoto-Mills reflect on the Phantom fundraisers; Sherry Smith writes about retreats, especially the Untalent Shows; Patti Powers-Risius shares about the volunteer of the semester award; and Linda Berti writes about the European tours.

This project has had the benefit of input from various readers: many thanks to Johanna Clark, Catherine Atcheson, Patti Powers-Risius, Karen Davison, Jarred Miyamoto-Mills and Stan Dewey. The photographs have been contributed by Ruth White, Johanna Clark, Patti Powers-Risius and Bill Hocker. Finally, we are very grateful to Elaine Hooker for her expert editing.

Eileen Flanagan, Johanna Clark and Catherine Atcheson are asked to write about 50 years of BCCO history, spring 2015.
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius



III
A FLASH OF LIGHT CAME TO ME

Eugene Jones, Music Diretor, 1966–1988

"I take people with zero proficiency.... The joy to me is seeing them develop whatever they have, be it ever so small or ever so great, into something they can share. We require no auditions, just the desire and love to sing. There's a feeling of love that grows with the group." –Eugene Jones, as quoted in the *Berkeley Gazette and Independent*, June 7, 1978, in an article by Gordon Raddue

By the time Gordon Raddue profiled the Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra in the *Berkeley Gazette and Independent* in June of 1978, BCCO was a well-established Berkeley institution. At that point BCCO was one hundred members strong, and was about to perform Bach's *Mass in B minor* at the Berkeley Community Theater, with an expected 1500–2000 audience members in attendance. Chorus members had just come from their third annual retreat at Asilomar in preparation for the upcoming concert. By then, BCCO was well into the tradition of being a nonaudition community chorus presenting free concerts of classical choral masterworks, a tradition that, these more than fifty years later, continues to be the core mission of the Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra.

In 1965, prior to starting BCCO, Jones had been teaching folk singing classes with senior citizens when, as he states in the 1978 *Berkeley Gazette and Independent* article, "a flash of light came to me" that this work could be "more than just an evening class." Jones began realizing his vision for a community chorus when four students gathered for his course offered through Berkeley Adult School, and held at Berkeley High School. Many years later, in 1988, when Jones conducted his last concert with BCCO, one of those four original singers, Frances Lozier, by then in her mid-80s, joined Eugene Jones on stage to share in the ovation. "Over the years," Jones noted in the 1978 article, "we've been able to establish what our real credo is: total com-

munity service from our innermost selves, being able to involve the listener as well as the participant."

In the mid-1960s when Eugene Jones organized that first Berkeley Adult School class, it was a radical idea that a nonaudition community chorus would perform free concerts of classical masterworks. Mardi Sicular, a bass player who has been performing with BCCO since the 1960s, describes that era as a time of great idealism as well as turmoil and conflict, and that Eugene Jones wanted to be part of that spirit. BCCO had plans to perform in People's Park at the time when there was significant controversy about that block in Berkeley. That performance never came to pass because the university had put a chain link fence around the park, and National Guardsmen were posted there. When, in the ensuing chaos, James Rector was killed in the clashes with the National Guard, BCCO performed a requiem in his honor. As Sicular states, "BCCO came out of that spirit of community, of hope, of reaching out to people and making things open and free and inclusive."

Eugene Jones was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1925. He was raised in Washington, D.C., where, according to Gordon Raddue in his *Berkeley Independent and Gazette* article, at age five Jones was "exposed to his father's Elk's marching band." Jones taught himself to play the clarinet and he played in his high school marching band and symphony orchestra. (Laddue notes: Jones was eventually expelled from the symphony because, as Jones recounted, "I was hearing more stuff than was in the music.")

Jones was a Navy veteran who had been stationed in the South Pacific during World War II. He considered becoming a professional boxer, and while in the Navy he won a heavyweight boxing championship. However, after the war, Jones settled in Oakland, California, and became a firefighter, one of the first African American firefighters in the Oakland Fire Department. Chorus members recount anecdotes Jones shared about his experiences of discrimination in the OFD, such as being left in a burning building by himself. He also slept in a dorm by himself, separate from the white firemen, until finally a white firefighter, Larry Ross (whose daughter would later be part of BCCO), joined Jones in the segregated dorm.

At age 25 he began formal training as a singer. In 1963 Jones won the Merola Opera Audition with the San Francisco Opera, and he continued to make his living as a firefighter. When Jones auditioned the first time for Kurt Herbert Adler with the San Francisco Spring Opera, Adler him told he was a bass not a baritone and, according

to Jones, for him to "go home and learn to sing like a bass and come back to see me." Jones followed up and was eventually hired by Adler. Jones performed with the Oakland Light Opera, the Oakland Municipal Chorus, the San Francisco and Carmel Bach festivals and with the Oakland and Monterey symphony orchestras. Jones' biggest success as a singer, and his favorite role, was as Stephen Kumalo, in a production by the Straw Hatters in 1959, of Kurt Weil's *Lost in the Stars* based on the Alan Paton novel about racial discrimination in South Africa. The show was so popular that it was extended for eighteen additional performances.

Eugene Jones is revered by many. He is described as an outgoing man with a large personality, and with strong feelings about justice and equality. Jones is described as charismatic, powerful, and inspirational. Several chorus members saw him as someone who could transcend anything, embrace people and accept shortcomings. He was also a devout Catholic, and he is remembered fondly by one singer for coming to her Passover seder and singing "Go down Moses." Several singers describe him as someone who could really get to the emotion of a piece. A singer with experience with several choral conductors describes him as not technically the finest conductor, but he was the best at getting emotion out of the chorus. Many concur that "when he was on, he was the most fun to sing with."

Between 1966 and 1978 the chorus steadily expanded. After starting with just four singers, by the time the chorus performed Handel's *Messiah* for the first time in fall 1967, there were sixty singers. According to the history written by Frances Whitney which covered BCCO's first 25 years, during this time, there were often as many as 125 singers and forty orchestra members. Along with Bach's *Mass in B minor*, repertoire included Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Performing the *Messiah* every fall became a tradition. Often chorus members would take the solos, and Jones would also solo, putting down his baton and turning to face the audience. He is fondly remembered for his renditions of "Behold, I tell you a mystery" and "The trumpet shall sound," in the yearly *Messiah* performances.

Many singers from this era describe their experience with BCCO as very positive socially. The group was more racially diverse than at any other time in BCCO's history. There were people of all ages, but also many people in their 20s and 30s who not only sang together twice a week, but would also socialize together. Wine and beer were served at the breaks and singers often went out together after rehearsals. Many singers went camping together over Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends.



Several individuals who joined met their spouses in BCCO. One singer reports he believes his first child was conceived at one of the yearly retreats at Asilomar. Many lifelong relationships were formed among these participants in BCCO.

During this period the chorus rehearsed on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the orchestra rehearsed on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Rehearsals were held at Berkeley High School. As a class under the auspices of Berkeley Adult School singers didn't pay any tuition, but bought their own music. Eugene Jones and an accompanist were paid, and Eugene had assistants, notably Lynn Posner and Savannah Ross.

Several traditions were adopted during this era. BCCO singers always sang at the Solano Stroll, a tradition that continued until 2015. During the Christmas season, singers would carol throughout Berkeley. In the 1970s and 1980s at the request of the Berkeley Co-op, Eugene Jones would bring singers from BCCO for the Co-op's Black History celebration. Singers also made visits to senior centers and convalescent hospitals doing outreach that later became part of the mission of the Berkeley Community Chamber Singers. Over the years BCCO has been known for fabulous

Eugene Jones conducts BCCO, date unknown

potlucks and the potluck tradition within BCCO has its roots in this era. After each performance, singers would gather at a chorus member's home for a potluck which also involved listening to the tapes from the concert they had just performed.

In 1975 the group had its first retreat at Asilomar. The two-and-a-half-day retreat was always held on the weekend of Mother's Day because that's when space at Asilomar was available. During the retreat there was singing all the time—rehearsals during the day, and then gathering in the evening for more singing. The retreat was the culmination of the season, with concerts held just after the retreat ended. Gordon Raddue quotes Jones saying that it was "totally impossible to go through without coming back inspired."

Raddue's 1981 piece in the *Berkeley Gazette and Independent* is titled "After crisis, BCCO stronger than ever." The crisis for BCCO was that California voters passed Proposition 13 in 1978, which restructured tax revenues and resulted in a dramatic loss of revenue for public entities. Consequently, the Berkeley Unified School District eliminated funding for BCCO. Along with elimination of funding, the chorus lost rehearsal and performance space in Berkeley High School and the Berkeley Community Theater. BCCO was able to find alternate rehearsal space in a church in Oakland, and maintained membership and the schedule of free concerts. Within a year BCCO had registered as a nonprofit with the State of California. Greg Hoff, BCCO's first board president, related that the first board meeting was held in what was then the King's X bar in Oakland. Soon thereafter Peralta Community College District's Vista College funded BCCO. Rehearsals moved to Jefferson School in Berkeley, where the chorus met once a week separately, as did the orchestra, and on a third night they rehearsed together.

During the 1983-84 season the chorus made its first European tour. The Cheltenham Choral Society invited BCCO to participate in the Three Choirs Festival, considered the world's oldest choral festival, and sponsored by the communities of Gloucester, Worcester, and Cheltenham. BCCO presented an American program of folk songs, jazz, and spirituals, including the work of Stephen Foster, Duke Ellington, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copeland, and Randall Thomas. The chorus performed at Gloucester College, Hartford College Chapel at Oxford, and St. Aldridge Church.

Writing her history of BCCO at the twenty-five-year mark, Frances Whitney considers the tour to England as a decisive turning point for BCCO. By her account the chorus was split in two—those who went on tour, and those who did not. Some

singers interviewed for this current history project—including those who participated in the tour and those who did not—did not consider the tour to be particularly divisive in terms of BCCO's cohesion as an organization. However, this view of the tour as divisive is also corroborated. Whether divisive or not, several singers who did participate in the tour considered it the high point of their experience with BCCO, so much so that they organized a very successful concert at International House on the UC Berkeley campus consisting of the program they had presented in England.

Nonetheless, BCCO began to decline shortly after the tour. There had been some unfortunate incidents during the tour. Eugene and another person of color experienced racial discrimination while attempting to be served in an English restaurant. Additionally, in 1985, Vista College was experiencing financial difficulties and dropped funding for BCCO.

By this time the chorus had diminished to around fifty singers. BCCO had already become a nonprofit and had created a board of directors in the early 80s after the Berkeley Adult School stopped sponsoring BCCO. When Vista College also ceased to support BCCO, the board had to step up to grapple with finances and run the organization. Without the support and structure of an outside funding organization, the BCCO board had to significantly shift to manage finances and governance.

There were a lot of conflicts within the organization at that time. There were some challenges to Jones' legitimacy as a choral conductor, some of which had come to light with the trip to England, and there were instances of covert racism within the chorus. Eugene was experiencing personal distress. His son had been killed in a motorcycle accident and he was also going through a difficult divorce. He would talk throughout the rehearsal to the degree that singers were frustrated that they weren't singing enough. Eugene is described as getting upset, and putting people down. One singer observed that Eugene could deal with the overt racism of the Oakland Fire Department, but was deeply hurt and offended by the more covert racism he experienced in the largely white community of BCCO. Eugene formed alliances with sympathetic chorus members who helped him process his experiences, but the issues of Eugene's formal training as a conductor, and the covert racism being exhibited were not addressed formally by the organization.

By spring of 1988 the chorus had diminished to thirty-four members, and for the first time, the chorus performed without an orchestra. During this time Eugene

Jones announced his retirement. BCCO performed the beautiful *Requiem* by Gabriel Fauré at his farewell concert, and the board set about in earnest to maintain the organization and hire a new music director.

Eugene continued his association with BCCO beyond his retirement. He was guest soloist for performances of the *Messiah*, reprising his rendition of "The trumpet shall sound" to great acclaim. In his obituary in *SFGATE* (October 3, 2003) Rick DelVecchio describes Jones as a "ground-breaking" firefighter and singer "who broke through segregation against African Americans in both fields." BCCO singers gathered at his memorial to honor his memory, and sing one more time for the visionary founder who, against the odds, was able to realize his "flash of light."



BCCO at St. Joseph the Worker Church, fall 2012
Photo by Bill Hocker



IV
IF YOU CAN TALK YOU CAN SING

Arlene Sagan, Music Director, 1988–2011

Some time prior to the end of 1988, membership plummeted so that fewer than thirty people sang at the December concert. Eugene retired and I was hired for the next year with the understanding that if eighty people did not register, the Chorus would not continue. In any event, I would not get paid unless sufficient funds were raised to pay me a salary. One hundred ten people eventually registered and we performed the Mozart Requiem. Although the choral parts are less than twenty-five minutes long, we needed help from singers outside the BCCO, especially tenors. *–Arlene Sagan, letter prepared for a July 1995 BCCO board retreat.*

Arlene Sagan was hired as the BCCO Music Director in late 1988. She was someone known to members of the board through her musical work. Leonard Cotrell, a board member at the time, knew Arlene because she had agreed to provide joint music lessons for his family. She also knew other board members through her work with the Berkeley Co-op. Arlene was an honors music graduate of UC Berkeley and an MA candidate in Music History and Theory from California State University, East Bay. Arlene had also been involved with numerous community music activities. She worked with the San Francisco Boys Chorus and the UC Berkeley Young Musicians Program as well as Cazadero Music Camp. She also served as director of children's programs at KPFA. Among other conducting positions, she led the Revels Bell Choir and was music director and conductor of the Point Richmond Madrigal Singers.

The board had made a concerted effort to attract new singers through flyers and advertisements in the local press, like the *East Bay Express*. These efforts were quite successful, and when the chorus met in the Live Oak Park Theater in late January 1989 to begin rehearsals of the Mozart *Requiem*, many new singers joined, and as noted in Arlene's

1995 report to the board, the size of the chorus more than doubled. One singer describes arriving to a chaotic registration process, as if the organization weren't quite prepared for the influx of new members. One longtime BCCO board member describes arriving at a first night of rehearsal in those early years of Arlene's tenure, and on the spot becoming a volunteer, helping with registration to ease the process.

The newly configured BCCO under Arlene's direction was a mix of those who had spent years with Eugene, and new singers with little sense of the traditions that had developed over the course of two decades. Eugene Jones, the charismatic former musical director, and his style of leadership were frequently evoked, and the transition to new leadership was sometimes difficult. Nonetheless, rehearsals and sectionals proceeded, and successful concerts were performed later that spring, with the help of singers Arlene had recruited.

Conducting the Mozart *Requiem* for the first time was clearly a totally engaging experience for Arlene. At intermission at one concert, she turned to some singers around her and asked, "Could you feel it? Could you feel the excitement of the music?" Several singers of that era report their excitement in being part of the newly emerging BCCO.

Despite this excitement, the organization struggled to maintain solvency. By the end of the spring semester in 1989, there were bills due to be paid, and not enough money in the treasury to cover these expenses, including the meager salaries for Arlene and the accompanist, Matthew Edwards. Prior to this, registration for each semester had taken place in the first weeks of rehearsal. As a means of relieving some financial stress, a board member suggested offering singers a discount if they registered during the spring semester for the following fall. That provided the treasurer with the funds to pay the outstanding financial obligations. In those early years of Arlene's tenure as music director she sometimes paid some orchestra members out of her own pocket because there wasn't enough money within the organization.

Under Eugene Jones BCCO had always performed Handel's *Messiah* in the fall. Arlene kept with that tradition for fall 1989, but by fall 1990 she led the chorus in singing parts of the *Messiah*, but also Bach's *Magnificat*. An audience member is reported to have said of that decision, "It's probably best not to try the Bach *Magnificat* with a nonauditioned chorus." But that kind of decision-making—to plunge forward into challenging music, despite the outcome—was very typical of Arlene. It wasn't unusual for her to decide on a musical program that was likely beyond the capacity of most of the singers in the chorus.

The nonaudition policy that had been part of BCCO from the start was crucial in terms of the development of the organization. Some singers had recent musical knowledge and experience—some had been singing with Eugene Jones for years. But with the influx of new singers, many did not have recent experience with choral singing. Some had never sung before. Some had sung choral music in high school or college, but not since. There are few opportunities to learn and perform great choral masterworks that don't require an audition. Without the hurdle of an audition, the path was clear for anyone interested, and many took advantage of the opportunity to immerse themselves in the best choral pieces in the Western musical tradition.

Without that influx of exuberant, but often untrained and low-skill singers, BCCO may well not have survived Eugene's retirement. So, while the organization struggled financially, it continued to be a vibrant organization powered by excited volunteers, and led by a musical director who freely shared her passion for music. This passion included starting the Berkeley Community Chamber Singers which Arlene led for many years, often holding rehearsals in her home.

Rocky Leplin's review of the May 1994 performance of Bach's *Mass in B minor* in *The Berkeley Voice* (May 19) reflects the reality of the chorus in the early 1990s. Leplin notes that the chorus "encountered some rough sequences halfway through the Credo, and never got back on track." Additionally the "fairly easy Et incarnatus curiously contained the most questionable pitches." But the "biggest boo-boo was a helter-skelter entrance to the Osana reprise." Nonetheless, Leplin concludes that the difficulties "were a minor loss compared to the infectious joy and quality of the singing that dominated the concert."

The board that eventually emerged in this mix of old and new members of BCCO had a vision of the organization that some felt was at odds with Arlene's conception of her role and authority. Arlene was quite spontaneous, and her process could be more stream-of-consciousness than deliberate. For example, it wasn't unusual for rehearsals to have an anarchic quality. There could be a lot of crosstalk at rehearsals as singers struggled to follow Arlene's train of thought, as well as her intentions. Most rehearsals were punctuated with the question, "What measure are we on?"

This was too much for some singers accustomed to more discipline. At the same time, the sometimes free-wheeling style of rehearsals appealed to those less comfortable with the more rigid hierarchy more typical in classical music training. Arlene delighted in what she referred to as the "one-room schoolhouse" of BCCO, where people of various

Berkeley Community Chamber Singers

by Madeleine Gordon

The Berkeley Community Chamber Singers (BCCS) is an a cappella group started by Arlene Sagan as the outreach arm of the Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra (BCCO). Their mission was, and still is, to go out in the community to sing at retirement homes and assisted living facilities where older and/or disabled individuals were not able to attend BCCO's concerts.

Besides singing at the senior residences, the chamber singers have also sung publicly, on the streets of Berkeley (such as Shattuck Avenue, Solano Avenue, and Fourth Street) during the holidays; as well as homeless shelters, memorial services, and birthday parties. They also sang for the Oakland Ballet (2016) and the Shotgun Players (2017).

BCCS members also sang at the Solano Stroll, Berkeley, for several years. BCCO had a booth there in order to solicit new members. After Ming Luke replaced Arlene as director, the chorus no longer needed to solicit new members and, therefore, no longer needed a booth at the Solano Stroll. The last year at the Solano Stroll was around 2015.

BCCS started off singing primarily English madrigals, but over the years has incorporated gospel, pop, folk, and classical pieces.

The group met in Arlene Sagan's home, and then somewhat later, rehearsals were held at the home of Peter and Susan Lindh on Sunday mornings until they both resigned from BCCO. After that, rehearsals were held at Arlene's home until she retired. The group continued to rehearse in various members' homes until they decided they needed a larger space. In 2016, they started to rent the Parish Hall at St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Albany.

After Arlene retired in 2011, Derek Tam became BCCS director in 2012 (-2018). He brought in very challenging pieces of music and incorporated more music theory into the rehearsals. This brought the group up to new heights—more polished. Under his direction, for the first time, BCCS offered a year-end public concert, which has continued to be an annual event.



Jason Sherbundy joined BCCS as director in 2018 (-2019). He was a taskmaster and really whipped the group into shape. He brought in experts, such as soprano Carrie Hennessey, to work on vocal technique, and there was a Master Class (Vocal Production Workshop), featuring James Toland, held so that others could observe a vocal training session. This was well attended by several members of BCCO. His directorship was short-lived due to personal reasons.

Costas Dafnis came in as director in fall 2019 (to present).

Chamber Chorus circa 2000. (Left to right front row) Gabriele Briggs, Arlene Sagan, Dan-Ching Young, Madeleine Gordon, Eloise Fox, Alice Sharp; (left to right back row) Peter Lindh, Stan Dewey, Janelle Detten, Susan Lindh, Lisa Nelbach, unknown singer, Mary Rogier, Fran Berges
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius

levels of experience and skill co-mingled and co-created memorable musical experiences. In the commemorative booklet put together to honor her at the time of her retirement, Arlene is described as being "an unflagging champion of the belief that every single person is capable of making music." Indeed, she lived that belief to the fullest.

As stated above, Arlene's style was not to everyone's liking. The board in the early 90s attempted to bring more structure to the organization. For example, the board wanted to hire a manager to help Arlene and the board with the logistics of the organization. Arlene was opposed to this idea. Some board members of this era in the early 1990s describe a frequently conflictual process that apparently was hard on everyone. There was a period when it was hard to find someone willing to be board president, and in at least one instance the president only stayed one semester. Nonetheless, the musical process continued unabated, with a consistent level of enthusiasm for engaging musical experiences, as well as committed volunteers willing to take on the myriad of tasks needed to maintain the organization.

After a few years, many of those board members who were in frequent conflict with Arlene eventually left the organization, and many went on to sing with other more established choral groups. Other board members came into positions of authority on the board. Notably there were women in Arlene's age range and shared sensibility, some of whom came to form friendships and even traveled with Arlene. Notably Lois Kauffman, Anne MacPherson, Alice Sharp, and Isabel Hanson assumed positions of leadership in the chorus and, along with other stalwart volunteers, further developed systems of organization that stabilized and strengthened the newly emerging BCCO. Johanna Clark and Sherry Smith were recruited into the BCCO leadership structure early on. Johanna noticed that announcements at break seemed to be lengthy, cumbersome, and confusing. She developed Chorus Notes, which she typed up every week, and copied for distribution at weekly rehearsals. Chorus Notes continue to this day to be an essential communication tool for BCCO.

While Eugene Jones was music director of BCCO, the chorus had far more Black participants. Although the number of Black singers had declined, Lois Kauffman, president of the board from 1994–1996, was interested in outreach into the Black community and was instrumental in developing a "sister" relationship with the Greater Cooper AME Zion Church in Oakland. Starting in 1992 and for several years afterward, a contingent of the chorus performed at an annual spring fundraiser for the church. The performance was followed by a reception, described in a 1995 flyer for the event:

Recitals

by Nancy S. Wolfe



Over the past years, BCCO has presented a variety of musical recitals for the Bay Area community. This activity not only served as a fundraising event for BCCO, but also reflected our connections to the local music community and was a showcase for the musicians.

We often held one recital a year. Chorus members volunteered to organize and manage these events. They were a source of much enjoyment by those who attended. These recitals were generally held in more intimate, informal settings, often in the homes of chorus members. I was able to host several such recitals in the living room of my home in Berkeley. When we wanted more space for a larger audience, we rented local facilities, among them the Berkeley Piano Club and The Crowden School. Refreshments were always served after the performances. This encouraged more social connectedness and allowed for informal contact with the guest musicians. We drew on local professional musicians, usually those who had some connection to BCCO, having either performed at one of our concerts or had a connection to our music director. Among performers in the past were Marcelle Dronkers, Elspeth Franks, Jillian Khuner, Brian Thorsett, Daniel Lockert, and Julian White. One of the last recitals featured violinist Stuart Canin and was held in the beautiful setting of the Chapel of the Chimes at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.

These recitals were not huge moneymakers, but they were extremely successful in providing a quality music experience and socializing in a relaxed, pleasant setting. They were a means to advertise upcoming BCCO concerts and a performance opportunity for local musicians. We received very positive feedback about these events.

Ken Lindahl opens wine for a BCCO event. Photo by Ruth White

After our performance, the congregation responds with a delicious repast and reception where chorus and congregation mingle and renew friendships. This year we have been asked how many are coming so the church can know "how many rum balls" they need to have on hand. Enough of those rum balls and you will need a designated driver in your party. *–Flyer for Greater Cooper fundraiser, spring 1995*

This board, more friendly and supportive of Arlene, was successful at garnering Arlene's agreement in hiring a part-time chorus manager. Alice Sharp, who had been both a board member, and a singer with BCCO for several years, was hired as the first manager. Up until then, board members and Arlene managed tasks like getting the mail from the post office box, organizing registration, and setting up for rehearsals.

Alice assumed the position of BCCO Manager in spring 1994, and the organization functioned more efficiently with one person managing administrative details. Since this was a new position, Alice said of her work that she created the role of BCCO manager. Having been a board member herself, she was well known to the board and well aware of the needs of the organization. The manager role Alice created was one of authority and autonomy over many aspects of administrative

organization, and the board was grateful for her contribution. Alice and subsequent managers of this era developed the initial organizational systems and ultimately computerized systems that streamlined registration, data collection, and communication. This process was enhanced by software developed specifically for BCCO in the late 1990s by chorus member David Flack. For many years the only paid staff for BCCO were Arlene, an accompanist and a part-time manager.

Fundraising was a significant challenge for BCCO throughout much of the 1990s. Chorus Notes from that era reflect an assortment of fundraising activities, including Dixieland dance parties with music provided by longtime orchestra member Dana Kemp and his band; as well as silent auctions and garage sales. In the mid-1990s, Isabel Hanson organized the first formal BCCO fundraising recitals where soloists or orchestra members volunteered their performance time, and board members provided food and wine. For many years these recitals were a regular activity.

Board minutes from this era reflect ongoing attention to various logistical problems—a sound system, so that Arlene could be heard during rehearsals; ongoing concerns about the risers; details of set up for concerts—using Arlene's VW van, or hiring a truck to move risers from her garage; set up and take down for three concerts; potentially buying or building new risers; finding a rehearsal space that was wheelchair accessible.

In the meantime, BCCO was developing into a more coherent musical organization. For financial reasons, there was a time when some members of the board suggested offering concerts without a full orchestra, with only piano accompaniment. Arlene's vision was always to perform the work as it had been intended by the composer, and Arlene had enough board support to prevail. At the same time, Arlene's skill as a conductor was improving and the performances became more satisfying for both singers and audience alike.

Arlene felt she had found her true métier in life, conducting choral masterworks, and she wanted more. In a letter to the board in 1996 Arlene relates the following:

> **In 1994, I went to the Board with the following proposal. I pointed out my contributions in both time and money and said that even though they were unable to reimburse me, if in return for these contributions, BCCO could help me, I would be grateful for I wanted to do more conducting of large works with orchestra. I would organize the group, do all the work, and be personally fiscally responsible.** *–Letter to the board from Arlene Sagan, October 1996*

The board approved this proposal, albeit with some reservations, and the first "parallel season" concert was a performance of Handel's *Messiah* in fall 1994. "Parallel seasons" were literally a parallel process of registration, rehearsals, and performances available to BCCO singers, as well as non-BCCO singers. Midway through a semester singers could register and pay to be part of the "parallel season," then begin rehearsals usually on a Tuesday evening, so as not to conflict with BCCO's Monday night rehearsals. Concerts were held once regular BCCO concerts had been completed. Arlene and her son Alan managed registration, rehearsals, and performances. Arlene took fiscal responsibility for the project, but also had an agreement with BCCO to borrow music stands, lights, and risers.

Parallel seasons provided an opportunity for BCCO members to repeat music that had been learned in previous seasons. For example, BCCO performed the Bach *Mass in B minor* in spring 1994, and then in the parallel season, those who chose to register, performed it again in June of 1995, after the concerts from the regular BCCO season had ended. Along with the Bach performance in June 1995, parallel seasons occurred in fall 1994 and 1995 featuring the *Messiah*, and spring 1996 with a performance of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*.

Arlene wanted to integrate this project into BCCO and made this proposal to the board in spring 1996. The board continued to have reservations about having the financial and organizational resources to support these additional concerts, and voted down Arlene's proposal. Having failed to get board approval for her project, Arlene decided to start her own nonprofit organization and a separate chorus, Bella Musica. This provoked a crisis within BCCO.

The board met with Arlene in a special Saturday session in late October 1996. The concerns expressed were that since Bella Musica had developed out of the previous "parallel seasons" sponsored by BCCO, there would be confusion as to the relationship between the two groups. Some feared that BCCO would be weakened due to competition from Bella Musica. That fall the BCCO repertoire was Handel's *Messiah*, a piece well known to many chorus members. Board members were concerned that experienced singers would not want to rehearse the *Messiah* for three or four months and would leave BCCO for Bella Musica. And in fact, BCCO registration that fall was down.







By the mid-90s both Arlene, and the core group of singers who registered with BCCO year after year, had become more experienced, and recent concerts had been successful and exciting. BCCO had performed the Fauré *Requiem* in spring 1995, and then had performed the Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* in spring 1996. Both were quite successful with singers and audiences. Some board members expressed dismay and a sense of "low morale" that after working so hard to produce a more professional sound, that the organization would not continue the positive trajectory because of competition from Bella Musica. Many board members felt betrayed by Arlene, and expressed their anger and disappointment at the meeting. Arlene defended her choices and expressed the hope that the two groups could co-exist synergistically.

Ultimately there were some compromises. Among other things, Arlene agreed that Bella Musica would delay beginning rehearsals to avoid singers having to choose one chorus over another. This was a relief to many board members. Isabel Hanson summarized the event with the following statement contained in a letter she wrote to the board:

> **Although there were no dramatic overall shifts in anyone's position, we felt that the atmosphere was positive, allowing all of us to be heard, and reaffirming everyone's love of music, high regard for Arlene, and desire for BCCO to continue flourishing.** *–Isabel Hanson, letter to the board, Fall 1996*

At this same board meeting, treasurer Mary Ann McCamant reported that BCCO had $8,500 in the bank, which was not enough to cover expenses for the upcoming concert. She reported that raising that money was doable and listed the various

ABOVE LEFT: Sherry Smith and Mary Ann McCamant at the BCCO garage sale, August 12, 1995;
RIGHT: Alice Sharp at the BCCO garage sale, August 12, 1995
Photo by Johanna Clark

OPPOSITE PAGE: For many years Sherry Smith hosted mailing parties. From left (seated) Judd Smith, Lyrie Churchill, Lisa Nelbach, unknown volunteer, Eloise Fox, Dorothy Wechsler; (standing) Helene LeCar, Terry Rillera, Sherry Smith, Virginia Goeckner, unknown volunteer
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius









For many years after warm ups there was always a community back rub. Photos by Ruth White

sources of funding, including an upcoming recital, money donated at the concert, and a grant from the City of Berkeley for $750. She projected that BCCO would be able to get through the fall concert series, but there was no cushion for the spring.

This was a problem because the board needed to decide that day on the repertoire for the following spring. One possibility was the Mozart *Requiem*, which had last been performed in spring 1989, and which would require a smaller, less expensive orchestra. The other possibility was the Verdi *Requiem*, which BCCO had not done before. But the Verdi orchestra would be quite expensive and a risky endeavor because there was no financial cushion going into the spring. There was great excitement about the possibility of choosing the Verdi *Requiem*, but caution due to the precarious financial position. To her credit, treasurer Mary Ann McCamant argued that BCCO needed a "morale booster" and that the choice should be Verdi, even if it meant bakes sales, or garage sales, or whatever else might have to happen to raise enough money. Her argument won the day.

It was the custom, twice a year, for the president of the board to write an appeal for donations that was sent out to the BCCO mailing list of about 1,500 people. This packet included a flyer for the upcoming concert and a notice and registration form for the next semester, along with a fundraising letter. In the letter that went out to the BCCO community in late fall 1996, president of the board, Johanna Clark, wrote the appeal for donations and let the community know that BCCO wanted to next perform the Verdi *Requiem*, but that it was an expensive endeavor. The support of the community was needed to proceed.

This was a very successful appeal and checks flowed to BCCO. Additionally, since there were no limits then on the number of singers who could register, excitement about performing the Verdi *Requiem* meant an influx of new singers, and so, an influx of revenue from tuition. It was an exciting and ultimately successful project; audiences loved the performances and concert donations were generous.

Music and Community: Sectionals, All-Days, and Cast Parties

by Johanna Clark

BCCO has a long tradition of community events focused on music. When Eugene Jones was music director not only did singers socialize at the breaks, but also often went out together after rehearsals. One singer from this era was a student at the time, and remembered arranging her class schedule so that she wouldn't have to go to an early class the day after a rehearsal. After concerts there were always pot luck dinners where singers listened to the tapes of their performances. Additionally, during Eugene's tenure as music director, the chorus had yearly retreats at Asilomar.



When Arlene Sagan became music director, weekly sectionals were added. The sectionals were held at singers' homes and often also at Arlene's home. The sectionals were generally for two parts, and were well attended. They were opportunities for learning the music in smaller, informal, more interactive settings, and also opportunities to socialize, especially during breaks for refreshments.

Having two All Day rehearsals each semester became a tradition with BCCO during Arlene's tenure. Arlene and others would lead sectionals in the morning and there would be a run-through of the entire piece in the afternoon. The main event for many was the hour-long lunch. Lunch was potluck, with two or more long tables filled with a spread of delicious dishes that BCCO cooks would contribute. Singers came to expect signature dishes from one another at these events. There was talk for a while of compiling a BCCO cook book based on these recipes. Patti Powers-Risius and Johanna Clark organized and coordinated committees for set up, and clean up and made sure the day went smoothly. The All Days were held at various venues over the years, including many Berkeley churches, but ultimately Arlington Community Church was deemed the best venue and Johanna would book the dates for the All Days six months in advance.

Cast parties after the final concert of the semester continued as a tradition throughout Arlene's tenure as music director. These were always held at a singer's home, and as the chorus grew it became more and more difficult to find hosts whose homes were large enough to accommodate singers, orchestra members, soloists, partners and friends. Johanna Clark and her husband Tom Clark hosted 21 cast parties, including summer sessions. Louise Gund and Liz Raymer and Ronnie Boynton were also frequent and gracious hosts. These parties would easily flow into sing-alongs. When Arlene arrived she would bring tapes of the performance to share. Some singers enjoyed listening to the performance tape with Arlene; others preferred the sing-along, accompanied by Joe Liebling, David Lichtenstein, or one of BCCO's own accomplished pianists, Sherman Rothman and Lena Johnson among them.

The sectionals, All Days, and cast parties during Arlene's era were informal and fun. The social interaction helped support and cement the social and musical connections and creative thinking that contributed much to the evolution of the organization.

Singers enjoy lunch at an All Day Rehearsal, Arlington Community Church, April 1997
Photo by Johanna Clark



In many ways, spring 1997 was a turning point for BCCO. The organization, the conductor, and the singers were ready to take on a challenge, and did so successfully. There are several factors that contributed to BCCO being in a better financial position in the coming years, but the brave decision of that board was certainly instrumental in solidifying BCCO as a vibrant community arts organization. BCCO would never again face such dire financial circumstances.

A survey of the chorus conducted in 1997 asked chorus members to offer feedback, suggestions, and thoughts on the experience of singing with BCCO. These are paper forms that leave space for written responses, so they are somewhat open-ended and require significant engagement from the respondent. These were distributed at rehearsals toward the end of the term. The survey asked for feedback on rehearsals, workshops, and other aspects of being part of BCCO. What is remarkable is that there are very few negative remarks, and where there are negative remarks, the complaints are quite specific: announcements are too long, frustration about talking during rehearsals, what to do if someone is off-key, what kind of paper flyers are printed on, could Arlene speak more slowly. Otherwise the responses are thoughtful and quite positive, and speak to the positive and inclusive culture of the organization, and to the joy of the community experience. One respondent notes that working together, eating together at various potlucks, and singing together provide opportunities for a lot of positive social experience. One singer writes that BCCO "provides a feeling of community in the best sense."

In late 1997 a classical music reviewer for a regional paper in upstate New York contacted BCCO because he was in the process of compiling information regarding the health of community choruses. Jody Ames, longtime board member, responded to him, writing that the survival of BCCO was due to several factors:

Sectional in Arlene Sagan's living room, December 1997
Photo by Johanna Clark

1: our dynamic music director, with a vision of inclusiveness that goes a long way in the Berkeley community.

2: dedicated members who produce the concerts and fundraisers, all services donated free of charge.

3: an active board of directors, including grant-writers, carpenters, lawyers..., all chorus members who want to see it thrive.

4: a community that provides people with these interests to make up the chorus and to support the concerts.

–Jody Ames, report to the board, fall 1997

Another successful program began in 1998 also contributed to the financial stability of the organization. For summer 1998 the board contracted with Ellen Hoffman, an accomplished local musician, to direct a program of Broadway music. The Broadway programs that continued for several summers exceeded expectations in registration and were a lower cost than other semesters because although there were concerts, the accompaniment was piano which meant no extra expenses for an orchestra. Eventually the Berkeley Broadway Singers formed their own organization and asked if BCCO wanted to continue their association, but the board chose not to do so.

The January 1998 minutes of the board meeting include a historical perspective of income. By fall 1997 concert donations had more than doubled. By February 1998 the board was considering establishing a reserve fund. By June 1998 the treasurer made the following report:

The last few seasons have been increasingly successful. With the exception of a large unexpected bequest, the money in the bank is due to volunteer fund raising efforts: the Fall recital, the Dixieland Concert/Silent Auction, and the Garage Sale. We now have a comfortable cushion to weather some harder times. *–Treasurer's report, June 1998*

As the millennium was coming to a close, BCCO was in a strong position. Historical income analyzed in 1999 showed that between 1994 and 1998 the total income taken in had doubled from $34,785 to $71,150. Forty-three percent of income during that time came from registration, 15 percent concert door, 12 percent donations, and the rest from the ad campaign and various fundraisers. The more financially stable chorus continued to develop predictability, coherence, and consistency, as well as developing systems responsive to the growing demands of the organization.

Phantom Fundraiser

by Stan Dewey and Jarred Miyamoto-Mills

The Phantom Fundraiser was a regular part of the BCCO fundraising plan from the early 2000s until 2015. Initially the idea was that, rather than have garage sales or bake sales, etc., there would be a simple request of chorus members: please make a donation to BCCO. The board at the time also felt that it was important to be as transparent as possible about the finances of the chorus, so along with being a short-duration fundraiser—now you see it, and then it disappears—the Phantom was an opportunity to communicate about the financial status of the chorus.

This was a fairly straightforward process for several years until 2006, when Stan Dewey took on the role of the Phantom, modeled on the character from *The Phantom of the Opera*. He borrowed a fedora and a cape from David Hildebrandt (the cape being an original English Bobby cape) and included the signature half-face mask of *The Phantom of the Opera*. In the final week of the fund drive, the Phantom would appear and ask for donations. Stan wrote a parody of a tune from *The Phantom of the Opera*:

I am the Phantom,... Phantom of the Chorus.
I come out once a year,... to rescue us,
From raffles and auctions, and long bake sale nights,
From car wash, garage sales and other such frights!
The Phantom of the Chorus... The Phantom of the Chorus...
is here—inside your mind!





Stan invited Sheila Singleton to be part of the act in 2007, and then in 2008 asked Jarred Miyamoto-Mills to step in while Stan was away. Then from 2009 on Stan and Jarred formed a duet, with Sheila sometimes joining them.

During the first two weeks of the fundraiser Stan and Jarred made reports about income and expenditures for BCCO. The third week, which coincided, as near as possible, with Halloween, Stan, Jarred, and Sheila would don their costumes, get someone to flick the lights on and off, and amuse the chorus with their singing and clever word play ("I have no hesitation to ask for your donation.").

In 2009 the Phantom fundraiser started to include a competition between sections which was tracked from week to week, and this competition was taken quite seriously by some. In 2015, the last year of the Phantom, 87 percent of the entire chorus made a contribution to BCCO. Initially the Phantom fundraising goal was $6,500. At its height in 2013 the Phantom raised $17,567. In 2014 it raised $13,387, and in 2015 $16,938 was raised. By the time the Phantom was ending, the idea of being a monthly subscriber had been introduced.

The Phantom was a successful fundraiser. It was also a lot of fun, and it built community in the process. Chorus members became more informed about the financial condition of the organization, and making a financial contribution became a community event. It was fun to contribute and to participate in section rivalries. It fostered a sense of us all being in this together, spurred on by our Phantoms, Stan and Jarred, and our Phantom Phem, Sheila.

ABOVE: Jarred Miyamoto-Mills, Sheila Singleton and Stan Dewey as the Phantoms

BELOW: Jarred Miyamoto-Mills and Stan Dewey as the Phantoms
Photos by Patti Powers-Risius

In January 1999 the board became more focused on developing a committee structure which would do preliminary work on issues and make recommendations to the board at large. While groups of people handling various issues such as fundraising, publicity, music selection, and concert management had existed, in January 1999 the board more seriously considered the types of committees needed and their specific responsibilities. The committees set up or reestablished at that time were for finance, fundraising, publicity, member communications, concert management, hospitality, space acquisition, and music selection. Committees begun in the early 2000s include the Development Committee, and the Personnel Committee.[1]

Among the standing committees was the uniquely BCCO Music Committee. As Music Director, Arlene had the major role in determining what pieces BCCO would be performing, but she was always interested in input from chorus members about repertoire. Begun in the early 1990s and chaired for many years by Johanna Clark, the Music Committee meetings were always open meetings and the invitation to attend went out to all chorus members. Those interested were asked to make suggestions for, and to participate in, a discussion about upcoming repertoire. Interested singers could bring suggestions directly to the committee meetings, and other suggestions were submitted either though the ever-present Suggestion Box, or as part of the surveys usually done each semester. The discussion at the meetings included consideration of such factors as orchestra and soloist requirements, financial implications, and suitability for the chorus. Longer works were considered more appropriate for the spring semester when there was a longer rehearsal time.

During this time BCCO fundraising activities settled into a consistent pattern. The spring recitals continued, and in the fall the Phantom fundraiser became a regular feature of late October.

With the Phantom, chorus members were simply asked to make a contribution and did not have to attend a recital or participate in a garage sale. It was always great fun when Jarred Miyamoto-Mills, Stan Dewey and Sheila Singleton would be costumed as the Phantoms and beckon donations from chorus members, compete with sound effects and flickering lights.

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[1]The Personnel Committee was begun in response to a serious conflict that had developed between the board president and the BCCO manager. The board president and the manager were those most responsible for the day-to-day administrative functioning of the organization, and at times, conflicts arose. The board also became aware that if the manager felt in conflict with the president or any other board members, she had nowhere within the organization to bring grievance or find support in navigating potentially tense situations. The Personnel Committee was primarily organized to help alleviate tensions that might arise and was successful at mediating conflict. The Personnel Committee also took the position of advocating for the manager in some instances, for example, proposing that the manager receive pay raises.

The rehearsal/concert schedule had been consistent for some time. The chorus would begin rehearsals on the Monday after Labor Day and perform in early December. Rehearsals would resume shortly after New Year's with concerts in early May, often ending on Mother's Day. The dates and times for performances were determined to some degree by services in the churches where BCCO would perform, but eventually BCCO developed a relationship with Fr. Bill O'Donnell at St. Joseph the Worker Church, and St. Joseph's became the sole concert venue. Father Bill O'Donnell was pastor at St. Joseph's and supported the mission of BCCO. Father Bill was an activist priest and as his obituary in *The New York Times* noted, he was "a Roman Catholic priest famous in the San Francisco area for having been arrested about 250 times in 30 years in support of often radical causes here and abroad..." (*NY Times Dec. 13, 2003*). Fr. Bill had allowed BCCO to find a home at St. Joseph's, even renting space to store the risers so that the risers and music stands didn't have to be transported by truck from their longtime storage place, Arlene's garage.

Setting up for the dress rehearsal and each concert had always been a major logistical challenge and had occasionally lacked central coordination and accountability. But eventually, as individuals came to learn how best to manage and take responsibility, and the same individuals could be counted on to take this responsibility from semester to semester, the processes became more intelligent and streamlined. Stan Dewey became the first person in charge of concert logistics in 1999.

The process of setting up for a concert involved transforming a church sacristy from a place for religious service into a venue for live choral and orchestral performance. A crew of volunteers would retrieve the risers from their storage place; another crew would move the altar (no mean feat!), flowers, and candles, carefully marking off with tape where everything had been so that everything could be returned to the right spot. Risers and chairs for the chorus and orchestra, as well as lights and stands for the orchestra were all set up. At the entrance to the church volunteers readied programs and donation boxes; others set up tables and collected donated home-baked goods which would be sold at intermission. Then, after the performance all of this was broken down again, and the entire church was vacuumed, so that it was ready for services the next day. Before developing the relationship with Fr. Bill at St. Joseph's, it was not unusual for the three concerts, which were held over two weekends, to be at two different venues, which meant that the concert set-up process could also include packing everything back into a truck to be transported elsewhere for another concert the next day or weekend.













TOP LEFT: Bob Fearman and Nancy Benson set up risers at St. Joseph's;
TOP RIGHT: Patti Powers-Risius at the refreshment table

MIDDLE LEFT: Peter Winship and Jim Morris setting up for a concert at St. Joseph's.
MIDDLE RIGHT: Marlise Rosmark tapes down cables;

BELOW LEFT: Paul Canin, Tom Clark and Judd Smith — BCCO spouses collect donations at concerts
BELOW RIGHT: Liz Raymer, Sherry Smith, Sile Convery and another volunteer stuff programs.
Photos by Johanna Clark

This work required a lot of volunteer effort and coordination, and St. Joseph's was always buzzing with activity before and after each concert. Weeks before the performances, concert sign-up sheets would circulate at rehearsals so that singers could commit to baking cookies, setting up music stands, carrying risers, or any of the countless tasks that were required. Concerts were well-attended, exciting, and fun. Becky O'Malley, editor of *The Berkeley Daily Planet*, describes attending a BCCO concert at St. Joseph's during this era.

> **I was in St. Joseph the Worker Church one Sunday evening, the night before Father Bill O'Donnell died. It was the most Berkeley of events, the Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra's holiday special: Handel's *Messiah* sung by an enormous assemblage of unauditioned but well-rehearsed community members who rattled the stained glass windows with glorious sound. The orchestra was splendid. The soloists were thrilling. The audience enthusiastically stood up to join in singing the "Hallelujah Chorus." BCCO performances bring out all kinds of Berkeleyans, people who probably couldn't sit down at the same dinner table for conversation (or even agree on the choice of a restaurant), but who manage to get together harmoniously a few times a year.**
> *–Becky O'Malley, editor Berkeley Daily Planet (December, 2003)*

There were also important new developments in the early 2000s. BCCO had been rehearsing in the basement of St. Ambrose Church, but the board was increasingly committed to finding a more accessible space for rehearsals. There was a rigorous search process which culminated in the move to Berkeley's First Congregational Church in fall of 2001, where BCCO remained until the unfortunate fire at the church in October 2016.

Another development in the early 2000s was that BCCO resumed the tradition of yearly retreats. In the Eugene Jones era the retreats were at Asilomar. In fall 2001 the singers gathered in the redwoods, at Cazadero Music Camp. Fifty singers participated in the weekend retreat that became a staple of the BCCO fall calendar for many years. A highlight of the retreat was the Saturday night Untalent show emceed by Sherry Smith. For many years, as the date of the retreat approached, Sherry would come to rehearsal in her Hawaiian shirt and sailor hat, and at the break she would play a tune on her ukulele and encourage singers to participate in the weekend.

Retreats and the Untalent Shows

by Sherry Smith

With Arlene Sagan as BCCO's Music Director, the idea was born that the chorus should offer an annual retreat, to provide the chance for choristers to get to know one another in an informal setting while preparing for the winter concerts.

Arlene was familiar with the Cazadero Music Camp, having been a counselor and music instructor there for several summers.

The nonprofit organization then running the camp on behalf of the City of Berkeley arranged for the chorus to use the Russian River-area facility for a Friday-through-Sunday morning in October, as the last occupancy of the camp before it closed down for the year. The first retreat occurred in 2001.

A committee was formed to plan the activities for the days and to promote the idea to the Chorus. A fee of about $125-150 was fixed (and "scholarships" were available) which included all meals. The average attendance over the years was between fifty and seventy-five people, and guest "clinicians" were invited to work with those attending to help with choral preparation for the winter concerts.

The retreats were part of the chorus calendar from 2001 through 2018, at three locations: Cazadero, 2001-2006; (there was no retreat in 2007); Valley of the Moon in Glen Ellen, 2008-2012; and Camp Arroyo (then run by the YMCA), in Livermore, 2013-2018.

One of the popular features of each retreat was the "Untalent Show," so named to encourage everyone to take some part. In truth, an extraordinary amount of talent was actually displayed as part of these shows. Typically, instruments were played, skits were written and performed, pantomimes and parodies enacted, and even jugglers and cartwheelers flipped and whirled.







Nearly everyone who participated in the Untalent Show had not rehearsed until arriving at the retreat site, and not more than two or three hours were totally available for rehearsals. Those preparing skits often recruited people in advance and if costumes were recommended, they were asked to bring them along. But almost all the offerings were prepared on the spot. Many participants had no idea they would be performing until, somewhat to their surprise, they were recruited to be part of the show.

Over the years, an average of fifteen to twenty "acts" were featured in the show. The quality of the entertainment was truly astonishing, given all the constraints.

Photographs and some videos captured many of the performances, and several choristers have these in their personal archives.

The goal of providing a chance for the chorus members to become better acquainted through eating, bunking, and entertaining with their colleagues was very enjoyably achieved. Ask anyone who went!

TOP: Untalent Show, Fall 2015 — Tenors parody Kurt Erickson's *I Think I Shall Praise It* (from left to right) Ella Hirst, Ken Lindahl, Ande Bennett, Pam Miller, Marco Falcioni, Linda Morris, Joan King-Angell, Christine Steers.

BELOW RIGHT: Debra Haecker, Lin Clymer and Marie Ann Hill dressed for the Untalent Show
LEFT: Sherry Smith
Photos by Patti Powers-Risius

Communications systems were changing rapidly in this era. Early in the 1990s board members talked to one another on the telephone or in person, and agendas for board meetings were sometimes handwritten. Chorus Notes were typed, and then copied for every Monday rehearsal. Eventually board communications became email based and the BCCO developed a website that gradually attracted users.

The board conducted surveys of singers in December 2001, May 2002 and May 2003 and the responses are overwhelmingly positive. Specific criticisms have to do with breaks being too long, not being able to hear or follow Arlene, and the cost of parking when the chorus moved to rehearsing at First Congregational Church. In the spring 2003 one response references Arlene's health and suggests that the board consider a new conductor. In the May 2003 survey, two responses reference discomfort with "political advocacy." One comment expressed disappointment that the board president hadn't gotten more support from the board.

Those comments are in reference to a political controversy that developed in spring 2003. At that time the United States was invading Iraq in retaliation for the September 2001 attack at the World Trade Center. Many people in Berkeley and the BCCO community were demonstrating against the war and were appalled at the brutal "shock and awe" rained down on Baghdad and the Iraq countryside, and were protesting the U.S. government's false justifications for the war, including the fabricated allegations that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction."

In the past the music director or board president occasionally announced that a particular concert was being dedicated to the memory of specific individuals who had recently died. That spring, board president Stan Dewey and Arlene conferred about their overwhelming anguish about the war. BCCO was singing the Brahms *Ein deutsches Requiem*, so Stan sought approval from the board to have the following dedication placed in the concert program, referencing the word "comforted" from the requiem:

> **BCCO dedicates the performance of the Brahms *Ein deutsches Requiem* to all those who have died in the Iraq War and all those who have lost loved ones in the war, to war and social strife, that they may be comforted.**
> *–Board minutes, spring 2003*

The board thoughtfully deliberated the issue, but decided that BCCO should not enter what some felt was a political arena, or take any stance on the issue of the war. The board voted down this proposal, and others along similar lines. So, when in his

remarks to the audience at the concerts Stan referenced his personal feelings about the war, many board members felt that Stan had disregarded the board's decisions. Years later Stan talked about his decision:

> **... it became my traditional task to make a speech at the intermission break, and my mind was being consumed with this war, and I felt like I was singing for those who were dying and for those who were losing people, and so I wanted to express that in my speech, and I did. And I said I personally am singing for these people...** *–Stan Dewey, comments in BCCO history meeting, spring 2016*

The issue came up again at the August 2003 board retreat. Some felt that Stan should be censured, but the board declined to do so. In protest of the board's inaction, following the meeting four board members emailed their resignations from the board. Although there was a lot of board process on this issue, and despite the intensity of conflict within the board, and the resignations, the issue did not become a major conflict within the chorus at large. Some individuals left the BCCO over the issue, but Stan continued a successful presidency of the board, and all of the board members who resigned continued to sing with and participate in BCCO.

As the new decade progressed, BCCO had continued success as a vital, community-based musical organization. The budget

Volunteer of the Semester Award

by Patti Powers-Risius

It is obvious that BCCO runs so smoothly because of the efforts and ideas of many volunteers. Quite a few of these singers are acknowledged in the concert program and verbally during the year, but the BCCO Board of Directors wanted to recognize individuals who have consistently contributed their time and talents. So it began in 2003 to give a "Special Volunteer" Award at the end of each semester and has continued through 2020. The first awardee was soprano Lyrie Churchill for bringing our director Arlene Sagan to and from rehearsals, setting up chairs, and baking chocolate cookies for break time. The awards have been for a variety of accomplishments: Chorus Notes editors, orchestra set up, orchestra liaison, rehearsal refreshments, rehearsal setup, design of BCCO website, building Arlene's concert podium, rebuilding/painting risers, garage sales, sound systems, music retreat organization, music retreat emcee, mailing parties, BCCO store sales at concerts, All-Day potluck organization, Solano Stroll organization, Chamber Singers music ordering, putting together concert programs, concert postcards design, concert program sales, concert flyers design.



Martha Richards, Hester Bradbury, Veronika Fukson, Anne Mester ready at the refreshment table
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius

for 2004 was $94,150; in 2005, $93,492. The board was also committed to improving the orchestra, so between 1996 and 2003, orchestra expenses increased from $5,000 to $25,000. In the early days of BCCO, Eugene conducted separate weekly rehearsals for orchestra members, but eventually the orchestra was contracted only for final rehearsals and concerts. Under Arlene's directorship the orchestra was a mix of amateur and semiprofessional musicians, many of whom felt part of the community and returned from one semester to the next, and participated in social gatherings with singers. At the same time there were occasional arguments with orchestra members and the perception by some that some orchestra members lacked respect for Arlene's authority.

Improvements in the orchestra were further enabled when board members with specialized fundraising skills were recruited, notably Betty Pigford and Mary Rogier. In 2004 they proposed a Special Projects Fund which would provide funds to improve BCCO's ability to compensate the orchestra members and soloists at a level commensurate with prevailing rates. The initial target of this fund was $10,000 to $20,000. The committee proposed to solicit gifts from current donors who had demonstrated their commitment to BCCO; seek foundation and corporate support; identify and approach new individual donors; and set up a match challenge. The fund would also underwrite performances of masterworks which might otherwise be too costly to perform.

The success of the Special Projects Fund allowed financing for performances of Francis Poulenc's *Gloria,* a work Arlene had long wanted to conduct. With the support from the Special Projects Fund, BCCO performed the Poulenc *Gloria* in fall 2005. Filmmakers Karen Davison and Nancy Sue Brink had become interested in BCCO, and started a documentary film focused on Arlene as director of BCCO. They assembled a film crew and were able to film that concert.

Other innovations in this era included the first Choral Composition Competition, which was proposed in September 2004. Jerry Mueller was the first to receive that award, and BCCO performed his piece, *23.5 Degrees* in December 2005. In the second round of the Choral Composition Competition, Robin Eschner won with her work *Hear the Bell,* which was performed at the spring 2008 concerts. Robin was also commissioned to write a piece commemorating Arlene's decades of work with BCCO, and her composition *Because We Sang* was performed at Arlene's final concert series in spring 2011.



The 2008 survey reflects that most participants were having a "very good" or "great" experience in BCCO. Significantly more participants were using the website and finding it useful than those who never used it. Ninety-four percent of singers experienced the joy of singing at Monday rehearsals and 82 percent of singers rated their overall musical experience positively. One participant commented about "the overall feeling of love and helpfulness and good cheer that embraces you the moment you enter a rehearsal. I love how hard everyone works." The biggest complaints were the talking, not paying attention, breaks are too long, and of course the perpetual: "less talk, more singing." One singer commented:

> **BCCO is unique and a treasure. It gives anyone who is willing to put effort into it a chance to make music in common with others. Everyone should have this type of accessibility to and equity in music. Bravo!**
> *–Anonymous comment, BCCO survey 2008*

These comments are surprising to some degree because a significant controversy arose in the chorus that fall. In fall 2008 the chorus was performing a variety of opera

Arlene leads rehearsal at St. Joseph's. Photo by Johanna Clark

choruses. The San Francisco Opera had recently premiered the opera *Appomattox* which it had commissioned from Philip Glass. Former board president Tony Drummond was able to secure permission from the SF Opera for BCCO to sing two choruses from that work, without having to pay for the rights to perform this music. One of the choruses, "The ballad of Jimmie Lee," depicts the 1965 civil rights era murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson in Marion, Alabama. The lyrics tell the story of Jimmie Lee's brutal murder, complete with racial epithets, using the language of the troopers who beat, shot, and ultimately killed Jimmie Lee Jackson. It is a very powerful piece, and some chorus members objected to having to sing offensive language. To manage this controversy the then-board president Annette Bistrup, assisted by Jarred Miyamoto-Mills, suspended rehearsal so that singers could address this issue as a community. One by one chorus members went up to the microphone set up in the front of the room, and expressed their feelings about singing "The ballad of Jimmie Lee."

The feelings this process elicited are reflected in the 2008 survey. Many respondents thanked Annette and the board for handling the controversy with tact and respect. Several singers thought the process of managing the controversy wasted precious rehearsal time, or that it could have been anticipated and dealt with before it became a major issue. Another singer commented, "I greatly appreciated the time we took to discuss whether we wanted to sing Jimmie Lee or not, and how civilized it was. Thanks for trusting us to choose what we wanted to do and making that possible."

In turn the board had a very thoughtful process when faced with the decision about whether to perform this piece. Some felt it wasn't suitable for a concert in a holiday season. Others felt it expressed an important raw truth about our shared American history. Others were concerned about a possible offense to the SF Opera which had generously granted permission for the performance. Others were concerned about what it might be like to be a Black person, especially a Black child, in the audience hearing a chorus of predominantly white singers shouting the racial epithet. Ultimately the board's decision was to go ahead and sing "Jimmie Lee," but those who objected could sit out that piece if they so chose. Unfortunately, when it was time to perform, Arlene had a health crisis and wasn't able to conduct. Jonathan Khuner, longtime friend of BCCO, stepped in at the last moment to conduct the first concert. As musical director of the West Edge Opera, and assistant conductor for the Metropolitan Opera as well as the Lyric Opera of Chicago, he was well versed in this repertoire and generously willing to step in on a moment's notice.

Despite the controversy surrounding singing "The ballad of Jimmie Lee," in the following semester, the survey from spring 2009 reflects that 81 percent of respondents were experiencing a joy of singing in the regular Monday night rehearsals. Ninety percent of respondents were having a great or good overall musical experience. While these numbers are quite positive, the "joy in singing" index had declined by more than 10 percent from 2008. It is difficult to know why this would have been the case, but this decline coincides with the noticeable decline in Arlene's health, and her ability to conduct. Indeed, while the chorus surveys of this era were overall quite positive, more specific comments expressed discontent, especially with how Arlene led rehearsals and conducted concerts. Some participants found rehearsals tedious, too much talking and not enough singing, and frustration with Arlene's decisions. Many complained that there was too much talking in general at rehearsal, and that it reflected a lack of respect for Arlene. Another specifically addressed Arlene's concert performance:

> **I didn't feel confident singing to Arlene's conducting of the Puccini mass. It seemed like she was worried about losing her place and barely looked up at us from her score. Last-minute tempo changes caused big problems. I think Arlene has provided great service to BCCO and I'm sorry to have to write this negative evaluation of her concert conducting.**
> *–Anonymous comment, spring 2008 survey*

Arlene always read all the surveys with great interest, and we will never know if she was influenced by these sorts of comments, but in spring 2009 Arlene announced to the board her intention to retire. She had conferred with trusted friends and advisors and come to the conclusion that her last season with BCCO would be spring 2011. Arlene had been music director for BCCO for twenty years at that point, and for many singers, past and present, as well as community members, Arlene herself was the living embodiment of BCCO. The board came to understand that the loss of such a central organizing figure would be very disruptive, and very challenging. This loss, and the ensuing changes, would strike deep at the heart of the organization, even though it was apparent to many that it was time for Arlene to retire.

The board focused on the issue of transition at the spring 2009 retreat and voted to form a Transition Committee to oversee the two-year process of Arlene's retirement, and hiring a new music director. As a part of this process, during the summer of 2009, the board held focus groups as a means of understanding both the core values of the organization and a vision for the future. The result of this process was a commitment

to maintaining the basic structure, goals and BCCO mission: a nonaudition chorus presenting free concerts of choral masterworks twice a year.

The board also conducted values surveys separately for the board, and the chorus at large. In these separate surveys both the board and the chorus members reflected nearly an identical hierarchy of values, indicating a significant coherence within the organization. The top two values for both the chorus and the board were (1) artistic excellence, and (2) tradition of singing choral masterworks. For the rest of the values ranked, there were only minor discrepancies between the values each group put on learning (board #3/singers #5); openness to all levels of singers (board #4/singers#3); communal spirit (board #5/singers#4); fun (board #6/singers#6); innovation, musical choices and mutual respect (board #7/singers#8; free concerts (board # 8/singers #7).



BCCO Board, 2009. Front row (l to r), Karen Davison, Arlene Sagan (music director), Li-hsia Wang; (row 2) Patti Powers-Risius, Sheila Singleton, Johanna Clark, Win Williams, Nancy Wolfe; (row 3) Betty Pigford, Mary Rogier, Gabriela Crane, Eileen Flanagan; (top row) Mary Lee Cole (manager), Tony Drummond, Louise Gund, Jarred Miyamoto-Mills, Anne Mester, Stan Dewey, Annette Bistrup
Photo by Patti Powers-Risius

In the fall of 2009 the board elected the Search Committee which consisted of four board members: Betty Pigford and Mary Rogier (co-chairs), Liz Raymer and Gabriela Crane; and three nonboard members Sherry Smith, Catherine Atcheson and Frank Chang who represented the community, the singers and the orchestra. By October 2010 the Search Committee had reviewed the forty-eight applications that had been submitted, and was starting to narrow the field to the fifteen who would be interviewed, and ultimately 5 candidates who would audition in early 2011.[2]

In spring 2010, for the first time, the board hired a consultant to provide advice on the momentous process of making this organizational transition. Leyna Bernstein had been informally advising board president Annette Bistrup, and had advised the Transition Committee. Leyna was then chosen to lead the board retreat in spring 2010. Leyna helped the board understand that identifying the core values of the organization was an integral part of successfully navigating this process, and she reminded the board that despite any individual or collective attachment to Arlene, the job of the board was to always have the best interests of the organization at heart. There had been some friction between Arlene and some board members over the years, particularly regarding Bella Musica, but for the most part, the board hadn't had any reason to have to choose between allegiance to Arlene, and the bests interests of the chorus at large.

In the meantime, Arlene's health continued to deteriorate. She was able to conduct the May 2010 concerts of the Bach *B minor Mass*, but her health was clearly compromised, and immediately afterward Arlene was hospitalized. By June 2010 as the board was completing plans for fall 2010, Arlene was still hospitalized. The board faced a difficult decision: whether it was in the best interest of the chorus to allow Arlene to continue to conduct for fall 2010. After much discussion, the board dispatched board president Eileen Flanagan and board member Sheila Singleton to meet with Arlene, and suggest that Arlene step aside for fall 2010, with the hope that her health would improve and she would be able to come back in spring 2011 for her final concert season. Ultimately, Arlene accepted this idea and the board contracted with Joe Liebling as guest conductor for fall 2010. Joe was not only a seasoned musician who among other accomplishments had conducted the Oakland Symphony

[2] One of the things that the board became aware of in the search for a new music director was that the BCCO music director position, which involved working with chorus and full orchestra, was quite desirable. Because BCCO is a nonaudition amateur group, some were surprised at the professional accomplishments of applicants and the level of interest in the position



Chorus for twenty-three years, but he was also a longtime friend of BCCO whom Arlene had invited to guest conduct rehearsals on several occasions. Additionally he had been a frequent guest at the fall retreats, where he was in demand as accompanist for many acts in the Untalent Show.

With the deterioration of Arlene's health, her energetic stance as music director had diminished considerably. So when a new conductor took to the podium in fall 2010, the chorus responded very positively to the clarity of his leadership and his well-developed musicianship. Ultimately the chorus's positive connection to Joe made the music director decision more complicated because Joe also applied for the job of BCCO music director, and he was among the five finalists.

Late in 2010, as the board prepared for Arlene's final term as music director, new questions arose. The chorus by and large was enjoying working with Joe, and Arlene's ability to come back and lead the chorus was still questionable. The board had continual discussions, trying to find the best balance between supporting Arlene in her final concert series, and making decisions in the best interests of the chorus at large. Was it in the best interests of the chorus to have a music director whose health was precarious, and whose ability to conduct was at best compromised? This question was the subject of endless discussion among board members, and many chorus members contributed their opinions as well.

Arlene was adamant that she would lead rehearsals and concerts in spring 2011. She had asked her own consultant/advisor to assist her with the sometimes contentious

Arlene Sagan and Joe Liebling, St. Joseph the Worker Church, May 2011
Photo by Bill Hocker

meetings with board members, and ultimately he helped to persuade her to accept a schedule where she and Joe would share responsibilities. This was a difficult process and there was much disagreement about who had responsibility for what, and this was complicated by Arlene's occasional hospitalizations. Just when consensus seem to have been achieved, some disagreement or miscommunication would erupt and cause a new crisis, and a new set of negotiations and understandings.

In the meantime, the Search Committee had narrowed the field of candidates to five individuals, including Joe Liebling, and early in 2011, the finalists auditioned at specially arranged Saturday rehearsals. Many chorus members participated in these auditions, and surveys were provided for chorus feedback. While chorus participation and feedback were encouraged, the board made it clear that choosing a new music director was not an election. Under pressure from chorus members, the board agreed to a final survey where chorus members ranked their preferences. At the same time, the candidate rankings would not become public knowledge. The information on chorus preference was an important consideration in deliberations about the next BCCO music director, but it was not the final word.

The process, by its very nature, was fraught. Some candidates were favored by some, and some by others, and there would inevitably be disappointment because only one candidate would be chosen to succeed Arlene. This was then complicated by the allegiance many singers had developed toward Joe Liebling, who was ultimately not chosen to become BCCO's next music director. Additionally, issues of chorus member participation and democratic process were difficult to navigate. The democratic leanings of singers wanting a voice in decision-making strained against the less-than-democratic structure of the organization. BCCO had never been a membership organization, per se; registering to sing does not give you a vote in the governance process. Instead, decision-making has always been delegated to a non-elected board. Board members volunteer, or are otherwise nominated and voted in by other current board members. Throughout most of BCCO's history this system had functioned without too much difficulty. But at this juncture, some chorus members were quite dissatisfied.

Precisely because of this tension within the organization, the board strove to maintain the trust of fellow singers. The Search Committee distributed a FAQ organized around pertinent questions: how is the search process being managed; who is on the committee and how were they chosen; what criteria are the committee

using to guide this review; how will singers be kept in the loop; how will the board make its final decision. Additionally board president Eileen Flanagan and Search Committee Co-chair Mary Rogier conducted Q&A sessions fielding questions and concerns about the process. There were frequent communications in Chorus Notes, and Eileen frequently addressed the issue as part of the routine announcements shared at the rehearsal breaks. And, as noted above, because of strong advocacy from singers, the board reversed its position and agreed to provide singers an opportunity to rank their choices for the new music director.

The board made every effort to be as responsive and transparent as possible, while maintaining the confidentiality of the hiring process and respect for the very deliberative process and diligence of the Search Committee. But, for some singers, this was not enough. The process was intense and challenging, but at the same time, this intensity can be seen to reflect the sense of identification and deep connection chorus members felt toward the organization: everyone cared, a lot. And so, while the transition process was difficult, the tension speaks to the strong sense of community at the heart of BCCO.

Everyone involved in the chorus during this transition would likely agree that it was a rocky time. Witnessing a beloved leader become diminished and face the end of her tenure evoked poignancy and a sense of precariousness. Deep feelings sometimes erupted into anger and blame. But the coherence of the organization was maintained, at least in part, because every Monday night the chorus continued to gather together in the familiar routine of rehearsal and engage in the profoundly beautiful work Arlene had chosen for her final season, Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*. The other piece that the chorus was working on, *Because We Sang,* had been commissioned from Robin Eschner. The text Robin chose to honor Arlene was particularly appropriate:

Because we sang
at the table,
and while we walked through the fields,
Because we sang
sometimes even in silence
simply by looking,
we kept for the rest of the year
what sanity we needed.
–Eugène Guillevic, "Élégie de la forêt Sainte-Croix #32"
translated by Denise Levertov

The transition process was truly a community event. Many individuals with expertise in nonprofit organizations and choral singing freely lent their advice and guidance. Advisors of note were Tom Clark, Robert Cole, Debra Golata, Marika Kuzma, Lynne Morrow, and Tricia Swift. The transition was also expensive. The board passed a budget for 2011 of $189,790 which included the extra expenses of double conductor salaries for fall 2010 and spring 2011, and consultant fees. Additionally, there were funds allocated for a tribute event to honor Arlene, and a cash gift for her retirement, as well as a welcoming event for the new music director. Betty Pigford, fundraiser extraordinaire, created the Tribute Fund, and put a lot of effort into contacting loyal BCCO donors so that the expense of the transition would be covered by donations as much as possible, rather than having to use reserve funds.

Chorus Notes for March 2, 2011, announced that Ming Luke had accepted the offer from the BCCO board to become the next Music Director for BCCO. Ming's background included attending two of the premier music schools in the country, having gotten a bachelor's degree in Music Education and Piano Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College and an MFA in Conducting from Carnegie Mellon University. Ming was also an accomplished pianist and already had extensive conducting experience. Along with his professional accomplishments, the Chorus Notes announcement references Ming's passion for working with singers of all levels, and the value he places on the sense of love rooted in the word "amateur."

While the succession issue had been resolved, issues of the final concerts still remained. The agreement for the semester had been that Arlene would conduct two of the final concerts, and Joe would conduct one concert. Arlene very much wanted to keep to this agreement, but due to Arlene's health, the board again had to engage in difficult deliberations which resulted in the agreement that Arlene would conduct only the final concert. So, Arlene ascended the podium for the final time on May 8, 2011. At the conclusion of the performance, the overflowing crowd at St. Joseph the Worker Church gave her a much-deserved standing ovation. The CD of the concerts contains two different versions of the Brahms *Ein deutsches Requiem*, one edited by Joe, and one edited by Arlene.

The tribute event for Arlene was held on May 22, 2011, and crowds filled the pews of the Universalist Unitarian Church in Kensington. There was a lovely performance tribute including a violin piece written and performed by Arlene's son David Sagan,

and a video tribute produced by Nancy Sue Brink and Karen Davison. The performance was followed by a beautiful reception, including a champagne toast to Arlene. The chairs for this successful event were Veronika Fukson, Rebecca Tracy, Helen Canin, and Dorothy Wechsler. Ama Torrance produced a memory book for attendees of the tribute, which opens with this summary of Arlene and her work:

> **In May of 2011, Arlene Sagan retires after a long and inspirational tenure as Music Director of the Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra. During her 23 years on the BCCO podium, she has been an unflagging champion of the belief that every single person is capable of making music, needing only the desire and the encouragement to do so. She has provided so many of us with just such encouragement, and has always had faith in our ability to learn, perform and feel the emotion within the great choral masterpieces. This is her continuing gift to each of us, and to our audiences.**
> *–Memory book produced in honor of Arlene Sagan's retirement, May 2011*

Arlene died on July 5, 2012, in her North Berkeley home, a place that was familiar to many in the chorus because Arlene had often opened her home to the chorus for meetings and sectionals. She is buried in Mountain View Cemetery, and etched on her gravestone is the Zimbabwean proverb that she had so often shared, and had been at the heart of her work: *If you can walk you can dance, and if you can talk you can sing.*



Arlene Sagan's last concert, St. Joseph the Worker Church, May 8, 2011
Photo by Bill Hocker



V
INDEED, THERE IS SOMETHING THRILLING

Ming Luke, Music Director, 2011-present

Leading a group of vocalists who come together because they love singing and making music together is one of the most rewarding professions to have... Indeed, there is something thrilling when musicians of all levels come together for a brilliant performance; it's the essence of what community is and shows the power of music. *–Ming Luke, BCCO Music Director job application cover letter, fall 2010 as quoted in Chorus Notes, March 2, 2011*

Ming Luke started his tenure as BCCO Music Director in September 2011. Singers warmly welcomed Ming as BCCO's third music director, and his enthusiasm and musical leadership infused the chorus with a sense of exciting possibility. At the first rehearsal the board provided special cakes, and chorus members sang a welcome song to Ming to the tune of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," with lyrics provided by Mary Rogier. A few weeks into September, there was also a welcome reception held for Ming at the Hillside Club, emceed by Tom Clark. Entertainment included a duet sung by board members Sheila Singleton and Jarred Miyamoto-Mills, with lyrics again provided by chorus parodist Mary Rogier.

Planning for fall 2011 had included a meeting held shortly after Ming had been hired so that Ming and the Music Committee could prepare for a fall program. Additionally, over the summer the Transition Committee had invited orchestra members to meet Ming at a reception held at the home of Nancy Wolfe.

In the board meetings held during the summer, Ming requested that the chorus hire an assistant conductor and also offer apprentice conductor opportunities. Ming argued that there are very few opportunities for those interested in learning to conduct, so by offering these positions BCCO was making a significant contribution to the music community. The idea of hiring more musical staff was a new concept for BCCO, but the

board supported Ming in his request. In fall 2011 Derek Tam was hired as the first BCCO assistant conductor, and Derek continued in that position for two years. Eric Choate followed Derek and was assistant conductor from 2013-2015. Derek, Eric, and the several apprentice conductors were kept busy leading warmups and sectionals, as well as parts of rehearsals. Ming has been very generous with the assistant conductors, and the apprentice conductors, in offering opportunities to conduct at BCCO concerts. Eric and Derek have both gone on to successful positions in the Bay Area music scene.

During the transition there had been criticism that board members were staying on the board too long and the board was urged to institute term limits. A survey was conducted which found that the average board tenure was 2.5 years. Nonetheless, some board members had held their positions for a long time. Several longtime board members had committed to stay through the transition in order to provide stability and continuity. This meant that there was a high level of trust among board members throughout the transition. As Patti Powers-Risius noted, "We had a strong history and we had been through a lot." Johanna Clark's observation was "that so many of us had been old-timers on the board, it was useful." Many of the board members who had been active in the transition did retire within a year or two. Ultimately the term limits proposal passed the board. The new policy limited terms for board members to nine years.

BCCO had also become quite popular. Even while Arlene was still conducting, registration had to be limited. This had been a difficult issue for the board to consider because part of the mission of the organization was to offer anyone interested an opportunity to sing great choral masterworks. Under Ming's leadership BCCO was more popular than ever. The reality was that fire regulations dictated how many people could assemble in the rehearsal space at First Congregational Church, and space for singers in concerts was even more limited.

The board decided in fall 2011 to start a waiting list for those interested in joining, and unfortunately sometimes this list was as long as 200 people. This was a significant shift in the culture of the organization. It was quite disappointing for some former singers not to be able to sing the final semester with Arlene, or to have the easy access to registration that had always been a part of BCCO. Unfortunately the waiting list was not a gender neutral policy. If you were a bass or tenor, the waiting list was likely not very long. Altos and sopranos, on the other hand, could wait years.

In part because there were so many women on the waiting list, in spring 2014 the

European Tours

by Linda Berti

My daughter Megan grew up in the children's chorus. From the time the choristers begin, they look up to the "Level 4" students and strive to become one someday. The top-level gets to sing the most exciting and difficult repertoire AND they get to tour abroad! As a chaperone, I went on many of these tours to Spain, Greece, Italy, and England. It created unforgettable memories that still make me smile today. Not only did we see the incredible sights of another country, but also the children got to sing in some amazing cathedrals and performance halls to very appreciative audiences. What an experience!

I had been singing with BCCO for many years when I was asked to join the board. It was an honor to do so. After learning how the board works and feeling a bit more comfortable in my new position, I asked why don't WE tour abroad. There had been one previous tour early in the development of the chorus and none since that time. Why not make that a part of our BCCO opportunity? The idea was rejected at the time, but when we hired Ming Luke as our new director, dynamic, young and enthusiastic, and he said, "Why don't we tour?", my dream came true!

Our first tour was to Eastern Europe. In June 2013 we went to Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic with a day trip to Vienna to enjoy a workshop with the director of the Vienna Boys Choir. We sang the *Mozart Mass in C* and the Dvorak *Requiem*, but the highlight of the tour was performing the Dvorak to a packed audience in Prague singing at the beautiful Rudolphinum Concert Hall. We were singing the music of one of their own "sons" and they were so appreciative! It was a glorious end to a wonderful first tour.

Our second tour in 2015 was to Western Europe—Belgium and Germany—singing the Verdi *Requiem*. We collaborated with the Contra Costa Children's Chorus, combining tours and performances of the *Requiem*. In addition to singing and sightseeing in the various countries,



BCCO was able to visit the battlefield memorial at Ypres—very moving.

Our third tour in 2017 was to the Baltic countries—Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Sweden—singing the Brahms *Requiem*. We visited the famous outdoor concert Song Festival grounds, which is the site of the famous "Singing Revolution" for the Estonian freedom from Soviet rule. We performed in Tallinn, Riga, and Stockholm and had a fascinating tour of Helsinki, a favorite of everyone. The food was delicious, the singing divine, the scenery gorgeous, and the sightseeing great fun.

A new tour is being planned for 2024—we don't know where yet, or what we might perform, but we do know that we will all be excited to put the Covid years behind us and celebrate singing again! We are all looking forward to more adventures, more friends to meet, more music to perform, more time together in song.

The benefits to touring are many. The obvious is the sheer joy of travel to a new country, but the more important joy is sharing that experience with our fellow chorus members and the singers we collaborate with from the other countries. We have been so warmly received, we and enjoyed shared time with our newly found singing soul mates! The bottom line is we realize that music unites us all regardless of our heritage, our religion, our politics, or our status. We all love to sing! We may have enjoyed playing sports or climbing mountains when we were younger, but singing is a gift that keeps on giving for a whole lifetime.

BCCO performing at Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech Republic, 2013
Photo by Bill Hocker

board approved starting the Women's Chorus and asked Debra Golata to conduct. Deb is a longtime friend of BCCO, and has a bachelor's degree in music education from Michigan State University and a master's degree in choral conducting from San Jose State University. She had been associated with BCCO over the years as soloist, accompanist, vocal coach, and guest clinician. Among her many professional achievements, she sang for fifteen years with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra Chorale.

For the May 2013 performances, BCCO sponsored a Young Composer Competition. This was a national outreach, and the works were judged by honorary chair John Adams, composer Gabriela Lena Frank, Christian Fritze, UC Berkeley professor Ken Ueno, and Ming. Five semifinalists' pieces were sightread by the chorus, which voted on its favorites, adding its input to the judges'. Three pieces chosen to be performed were: Michael Schachter, *Oseh Shalom Bimromav*; Costas Dafnis, *Carmen Vocis;* and Keane Southard, *A Day of Sunshine.* Michael Schachter won the competition. The finalists were flown out to work with the chorus, and also for the concerts.

Ming also championed the idea of a European tour for singers, which was enthusiastically supported by the board and chorus members. In summer 2013 chorus members traveled to Budapest and Bratislava, where the chorus performed Mozart's *Great Mass in C*, then performed the Dvorak *Requiem* in Prague. The tour was quite successful and was followed by another in 2016 to Bruges, Stuttgart, and Heidelberg, where the chorus performed the Verdi *Requiem*. In 2019 the chorus toured Tallin, Riga, and Stockholm, performing Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*.

BCCO was also outgrowing its relationship with St. Joseph the Worker Church. Without Fr. Bill's support, coordinating with St. Joseph's became more and more difficult. Additionally, as the chorus improved under Ming's leadership, many felt that BCCO needed a hall better suited acoustically for choral performance. Performances moved to Hertz Hall on the UC Berkeley Campus for the concerts in June 2014, but due to fire regulations, BCCO was not able to continue to perform there. January 2015 concerts were in the Berkeley Community Theater and required building risers. Jarred Miyamoto-Mills led riser-building teams who together put in more than 500 volunteer hours.

Ultimately Kit Ratcliff was able to work with the UCB Fire Marshal and the Hertz administration to increase the stage capacity from 165 to 245 by making improvements in the exiting system. These increased occupancies assure that chorus members are able to sing in at least 2 out of the 3 concerts. Balcony capacity was also

increased which meant that the entire Level IV of the San Francisco Girls Chorus School could perform from the balcony for the performances of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*—an approval which came through on the Thursday before the first performance on a Friday! And, while still requiring volunteer effort, set up in Hertz Hall is no where near as labor-intensive as setting up and taking down risers at St. Joseph's. Moving to Hertz Hall also meant a shift in performance schedule to concerts in January and June, when students were on break from the university.

As the 2015–16 season approached, the board was considering the 50th anniversary of the organization. The board asked Karen Davison, a former longtime board member and past president of the board, to oversee the celebration of BCCO in its fiftieth year. The 2015–16 season contained a variety of activities culminating in the spring concert performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. This was a significant logistical and musical challenge, and a major success for BCCO in its fiftieth year.



Ming Luke conducting Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, Hertz Hall, June 2016
Photo by Bill Hocker



VI
CONCLUSION (FEBRUARY 2023)

Although this history was conceived as a project of the 50th anniversary of BCCO which BCCO celebrated in the 2015–2016 season, this writing is being finalized in early 2023. In March 2020, BCCO abruptly shut down, along with the rest of the world, as everyone struggled to manage the threat of a global pandemic. In November 2021 in-person rehearsals resumed, and after a two-year hiatus in performance, in June 2022 singers again took to the risers in Hertz, masked, and appropriately spaced apart, to perform works by Mendelssohn and Brahms, along with *Because We Sang* by Robin Eschner. Additionally, the chorus performed *Psalm 13* by Alexander Zemlinsky which concludes after a torturous process, "Ich will dem Herren singen."

Throughout the years the mission for BCCO has not changed: a nonaudition chorus performing choral masterworks, and presenting free concerts to the public. But, of course, much has changed. The class offered as part of the Berkeley Adult School, and then Vista College, emerged eventually to become a self-sustaining community arts organization which spawned other musical projects: the Berkeley Community Chamber Singers, Bella Musica, Berkeley Broadway Singers, and the Women's Chorus.

Under Eugene Jones, BCCO organized around a charismatic leader. The idea of this project, set in the context of Berkeley in the 1960s, was the right idea at the right time. The inspiration of Jones's "flash of light" was compelling and it caught on. The ideas of a nonaudition chorus and free concerts were exciting, and challenged

BCCO performs Benjamin Britten's War Requiem, Hertz Hall, June 2016
Photo by Bill Hocker

notions of classical music as a rigid hierarchy geared primarily toward an elite audience. Jones inspired singers to approach traditional choral masterworks with ownership and enthusiasm, always going for the feeling of the piece. The early participants in BCCO shared a sense of community and purpose that, to some degree, transcended racial and class stratifications. The chorus attracted many young women and men, who in turn formed partnerships and friendships that have spanned decades. At the same time, the organization itself was dependent on the external structures of first Berkeley Adult School, and then Vista College. Once Vista College withdrew its support, the chorus struggled to continue.

There were difficult years toward the end of Eugene Jones's tenure when, for the first time, BCCO had to perform without an orchestra. The transitions at the start and at the end of Arlene Sagan's tenure were difficult, but under her leadership the chorus as a freestanding institution, stabilized and was able to prosper. Under Arlene's tenure there were levels of anarchy and chaos that were intolerable for some. But, one could also argue that the chaos was a fertile environment sparking innovation, and fostering connection and creativity, and allowing the infrastructure particularly suited to this organization to take root. Individuals who felt connected to BCCO and wanted to see it prosper freely offered their ideas, expertise, time, and labor to the newly developing organization. There was a sense of openness, urgency, enthusiasm, and mutual support which helped the organization thrive. Many came to love singing with BCCO and felt a family kinship within the organization. With a strong sense of cooperation and collective decision-making, board members volunteered, and were recruited, and took responsibility for various aspects of functioning and fundraising. Many people worked very hard at a myriad of tasks, from organizing silent auctions, to stacking chairs after a rehearsal, from making financial projections, to vacuuming St. Joseph's after a concert.

BCCO is now a more mature organization. Many more singers are older; there are now more canes and walkers per capita than at any other time in BCCO history. Singers are mostly white. Most people interested in joining BCCO will likely have to spend some time on the waiting list first. Whereas Arlene's rehearsals could be chaotic, Ming's are controlled. There are no questions from the chorus during rehearsal (or arguments from the orchestra!). Ming's conducting is accomplished, and the chorus feels confident with his leadership. Ming has recruited new, talented musicians for the orchestra. At the same time, even more so than before, the orchestra is

separate from the singers, with seemingly little sense of community among themselves or identification with the organization. Yet, that musical support from the excellent musicians in the orchestra contributes significantly to the improved quality of performances. All in all, there is a more professional environment, and with that, increased satisfaction and collective pride in the quality of concerts.

At the core of BCCO is the idea that all of us can access our ability to connect through music. BCCO as an organization has been firmly committed to the value of this connection. Eugene Jones saw that this connection could transcend race and class, and wanted to open the doors so that anyone interested could know choral masterworks from the inside, and then offer performances in free concerts open to anyone who wanted to attend. Both Arlene Sagan and Ming Luke have followed in Eugene's footsteps in their wholehearted embrace of these values, and like Eugene, have contributed significantly to the success of the organization by sharing their passion for music, along with their commitment, expertise, and inspired leadership. The success of BCCO has meant that the doors cannot feasibly be as open as they once were. Nonetheless, BCCO continues to be a collective project, nurtured for over fifty years now by thousands of people, with a sustaining commitment to provide access to shared musical experience, for as many people as possible, as best it can.

Finally, in its iteration here in almost postpandemic February 2023, BCCO continues to thrive. As of this writing more and more singers are returning to the familiarity of Monday night in-person rehearsals, now trying to recognize one another with masks on, verifying vaccination status at the door, wearing hats and gloves and warm jackets because doors and windows are open to the cold winter night to allow proper air circulation. We gather and start warmups. There's a sense of return, of never having left.



For more information on
Berkeley Community Chorus & Orchestra
including information on performances
past and present, visit www.bcco.org.

BACK COVER: BCCO performs Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, Hertz Hall, June 2016
Photo by Bill Hocker

