

# Choirs Transforming Our World

A New Initiative of the Yale International Choral Festival

*by Mary L. Cohen, André de Quadros & Jeffrey Douma*

A few years ago the IFCM's Executive Committee commissioned a group of choral conductors to meet in Venezuela to create Conductors without Borders (CWB) with a specific purpose in mind – building skills and capacity in choral music in developing countries. Since the establishment of CWB, several projects have taken place under its umbrella, with American and European conductors giving master-classes and courses, and initiating a variety of partnership projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. CWB became an informal network of conductors and choirs working collaboratively.

With the passage of time, it became clear that CWB had a larger role to play in conceptualizing the 'border' as an element of exclusion. The international borders that separate countries are not the only kind of exclusion. A variety of barriers to full participation in cultural life exist for communities and individuals in all countries. Thus, CWB, in this new phase, sought to locate and understand the many of these barriers to participation in choral singing, whether because of poverty, alienation, mental health, conflict, illness, incarceration, or other obstacle, and to consider how conductors and choirs may develop transformative projects locally. It was essential to critique CWB's former mission and find a new, socially responsible philosophy; this task is central to this historic symposium at Yale.

The story of the Yale International Choral Festival – and of the present symposium – begins with the Yale Glee Club, Yale University's oldest musical organization. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, the era in which Marshall

Bartholomew (known to many simply as 'Barty') served as its director, the Glee Club has been a proponent of the idea that choral singing has a unique power to create meaningful connections between people, and has traveled the world with the goal not only of providing an enriching experience to its student singers, but of promoting international understanding and goodwill through singing.

The Yale Alumni Chorus was founded in 1998 to provide former members of the Yale Glee Club – and their singing friends – an opportunity to reconnect with one another through song. The Alumni Chorus has worked to carry Barty's vision into the twenty-first century, engaging in international musical collaborations and sponsoring creative musical outreach initiatives throughout the world.

Most of the Alumni Chorus's activities have been focused abroad, but for a number of years, the Glee Club and the Alumni Chorus have been interested in joining forces to do something that would bring the idea of international choral exchange home. The result is the first Yale International Choral Festival (June 19-23, 2012) – a collaboration between the Yale School of Music, Glee Club, Alumni Chorus, and New Haven's International Festival of Arts & Ideas. This new event that will bring four renowned choirs from four continents – the Chorus of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the Manado State University Choir of Indonesia, the Imilonji Kantu Choral Society of South Africa, and the Cambridge University Consort of Voices, along with the Yale Alumni Chorus and the newly formed Yale Choral Artists – to New Haven, Connecticut, for five days of singing and exploring the connections that choral music fosters between people.

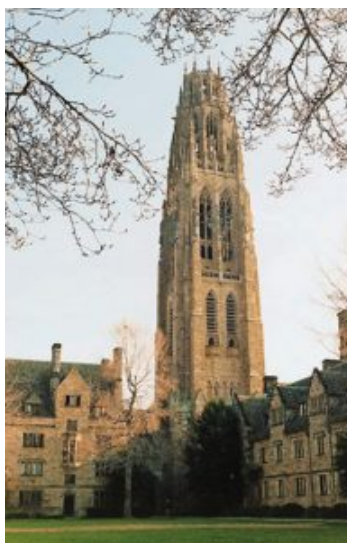
It is this latter idea – the idea of exploring – that has given rise to the symposium, Choirs Transforming Our World, which will take place during the final two days of the festival, June 22-23, 2012. We live in an increasingly interconnected global community, a fact that extends to all

facets of our daily lives. The choral singing community is, of course, no exception, and there is surely more international choral collaboration, exchange, and outreach happening today than ever before. At the same time, groundbreaking work happening on a local, grassroots level is reshaping our views of what choral singing can accomplish and how it can transform lives.

While many in IFCM may agree that these interconnections are beneficial, they also raise important questions. How can the connections we form through singing broaden our perceptions in meaningful ways? What can be learned through international choral exchange, and what cannot? Does an ensemble that engages in outreach with the best of intentions run the risk of being unintentionally paternalistic, or glossing over the very real differences between cultures? Is there, in fact – as we choral musicians frequently claim – something about singing that has a unique ability to draw people together, and if so, what is it? Do we overestimate the power of choral singing to solve problems, bearing in mind that choral music has been used to reinforce social divisions? How are choirs and their conductors called upon to develop a socially responsible practice? Through its partnership with Conductors without Borders and the American Choral Directors Association International Conductors Exchange Program, the symposium will bring experts and innovators from around the US and the world to explore these and other questions.

In particular, the symposium will bring together people from across the globe who are leading unique, empowering, and life-changing programs. The format of the symposium will include full group presentations, panel presentations on particular themed-topics, and a salon-style poster session where participants will have opportunities to discuss programs and ideas with presenters in a one-to-one dialogue. Ample breaks between presentations as well as a group symposium luncheon on Friday, June 22, 2012, group singing, and concerts,

rehearsals, and performances will provide participants informal interaction opportunities. The symposium will conclude with a Gala concert featuring Yale Alumni Chorus and New Haven Symphony Orchestra. Following the concert, performers and audience have the opportunity to move to New Haven Green for the Arts & Ideas outdoor concert.



*Harkness Memorial  
Tower, erected in  
1921, rises over  
the campus*

The range of topics to be addressed during Choirs Transforming Our World reflects the symposium's unique emphasis on choral singing and social responsibility. Sessions will explore the work of prison choirs in the U.S., choirs for adults with physical and neurological disabilities, and the Threshold Choir movement, an all-women choral program where members sing at the bedsides of people who are struggling, some with living and some with dying. Other sessions will share the ways professional choirs such as the Berlin Radio Choir and educational institutions such as the University of Toronto have used creative programming to engage with new audiences.

Panels will discuss successful international choral exchange, cross-cultural outreach through choral singing, choral singing and mental well-being, choral advocacy, youth choirs and social responsibility, and lesbian, gay, and transgendered choruses and their relevance today. Future listings will include a detailed schedule and names of all presenters. Information about how to register is available at [www.yaleinternationalchoralfest.org](http://www.yaleinternationalchoralfest.org).

As organizers of this new event, we are extraordinarily excited about its promise, and hope that you will consider joining us at Yale this coming June.

**Mary L. Cohen** is the Head of the Music Education Department at the University of Iowa where she teaches choral methods, elementary methods, graduate courses, and directs the Oakdale Prison Community Choir in conjunction with her research and teaching. E-mail: [mary-cohen@uiowa.edu](mailto:mary-cohen@uiowa.edu)



**André de Quadros** is a professor of music at Boston University, artistic director of the Arab Choral Initiative and the Bali International Choral Festival, conductor of the Manado State University Choir, and a founding member of CWB. E-mail: [adq@bu.edu](mailto:adq@bu.edu)



**Jeffrey Douma** is Associate Professor at the Yale School of Music, where he teaches conducting in the graduate choral program and serves as Musical Director of the Yale Glee Club, Yale Alumni Chorus, and Yale Choral Artists. E-mail: [jeffrey.douma@yale.edu](mailto:jeffrey.douma@yale.edu)

