

**In Harmony**  
by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

I used to think my transition was so smooth because I chose my friends (all lesbians) wisely over the years and had a great deal of emotional support as a result. Recently, I have begun to rethink this interpretation and to consider if there might have been other factors working in my favor.

I was a founding member of the Portland (Oregon) Lesbian Choir. The group formed in 1986, about twelve years after I adopted the label “lesbian.” In addition to the Choir, I had been involved in various types of lesbian organizations – a women’s newspaper, a theater company, and a gardening group. By far the strongest, deepest bonds I formed were those in the Choir, and this is a sentiment echoed by many who join queer choruses.

At the fifth FTM conference, I met a man who transitioned while employed as the accompanist for a women’s chorus in the midwest. His transition was a topic of considerable discussion at the organizational level – Do we want to have a male accompanist? What happens at chorus retreats? Are we going to lose audience members?

The most important question, however, underlies all the others: Can we expand ourselves to include a man as a member of our family? For the bonds in a queer chorus are those of family. Over time, my own chorus had replaced my family of origin as my primary source of emotional support and sense of being home. Though my family was not unsupportive of my transition, or of my life prior to transition, I never had the sense of being able to turn to them for unconditional support. One just can’t do that in an alcoholic family. There are always conditions placed on support.

The FTM accompanist had not only been accepted as a member of the family, the group has since turned down gigs in women-only space because they would not have been able to perform with him. This has meant never performing at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, a huge decision for a midwest-based chorus. The Festival attracts about ten thousand women every August, and can be a major audience-builder for a chorus that lives nearby. Nevertheless, his chorus family has completely supported their FTM accompanist and will not perform at Michigan without him.

A subgroup of the Seattle Lesbian & Gay Chorus performed at the closing ceremony for the recent FTM conference, and I learned that three of its members have transitioned FTM in the past few years. One of the pieces they performed, *A Far Better Man*, was a beautiful song about transitioning. Moved to tears myself, I could hear gasps and choked-back crying all around me, and knew I wasn’t alone in my appreciation for hearing my story told so beautifully. Unusual for a choral piece, the song was a solo with minimal choral accompaniment – the solo was sung by an FTM chorister, in a beautiful baritone voice. Before singing the song, he told the audience that his transition was much easier because of the love and support he received from his chorus. The song had been written after he’d had a long conversation with the librettist, and it is clear from the lyrics that this particular singer was no longer welcome in his family of origin. It is also clear that his life has gone on without them, as his chorus is his family now.

The Seattle Lesbian & Gay Chorus is a member of GALA Choruses, an international association of over 200 queer choruses. At its 2000 festival in San Jose, attended by over 140

choruses, the GALA board chose 40 songs of the 1,000+ performed to be recorded on a "Best of GALA" CD. *A Far Better Man* was selected for inclusion on this CD.

The arts have long been recognized as important for their ability to make tangible the soul and heart of a culture. Most art, however, is a solo endeavor – painting, sculpture, photography, even dance and drama, are individual efforts. Singing, also, can be individual. However, a chorus produces a unique effect on singer and audience alike, when allowed to do so. There is nothing so powerful as a group of 50 singing varying parts and converging on a single note, to sound like one voice. To be part of a group of individuals who each contribute their voice to making a whole is a gestalt that is repeated in each individual over and over, at each rehearsal and every performance. Over and over, the individual receives the message, in a somatic medium, "You are an indispensable part of a whole that is much greater than the sum of its individual parts." A chorus is not 50 people singing their individual parts – a chorus is an entity unto itself, and to sing in the chorus is a spiritual experience, a connection to something larger than yourself.

If you take 50 random professional singers and give them a piece of sheet music for a powerful song, asking them to sing it together, the result will be a song that sounds professionally sung. However, if you take a community chorus that's been together awhile and ask them to sing the same piece, the result will move you to tears. I don't doubt a group of professional singers could have sung *A Far Better Man* with more technical precision. However, the audience reaction would not have been gasps and tears had that been the case, because the reaction was not based in the merits of the performance, but in the heart of the chorus. The chorus opened itself to the audience and we shared the spiritual experience with them. For that moment, we were *all* family.

This is a tricky balance in any community chorus, and an ongoing debate – how much do you emphasize choral excellence, and are you putting your heartfelt experience at risk if you do so? Are you intellectualizing an essentially somatic emotional experience if you insist on technical precision? Yet if you do not insist on any degree of musical excellence, can you experience the spiritual transcendence of a perfect unity of sound when the chorus converges on a single note to sound like one voice?

Sounding like one voice is not easy for 50 people to achieve. With practice, it becomes second nature – and it can forge the spiritual bond that makes those 50 people family to each other. And that spiritual bond can sustain a person in transition, allowing a lesbian chorus to accept their male accompanist at the expense of some audience support. In my own case, that spiritual bond caused my fellow choristers some pain at losing me as a singer. Yet it also caused them to support my path in life.

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