

# **CHORAL CONDUCTORS TODAY: AN UPDATED REPORT**

***A COMPARISON OF  
2017 AND 2005 FINDINGS***



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2017**

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# CHORAL CONDUCTORS TODAY: AN UPDATED REPORT

Chorus America has a long history as the leading source of information, professional development, and advocacy for choruses. We continue to explore how choruses – and leaders of choruses – work. In 2005, Chorus America published *Choral Conductors Today: A Profile*, a survey of conductors to better understand how the roles, responsibilities, and challenges they encounter affect the choral ecosystem. It was intended to provide leaders of choruses with more field data, rather than just anecdotes, to guide their decision-making. In the introduction to the 2005 study, we wrote, “the times demand that we understand more about our art and the way it is delivered, so that we can help shape the future rather than merely react to current conditions.”

That deep desire for understanding continues to motivate our research efforts. Now, in 2017, we are closer to the end of the second decade of the new century and millennium. Yet there is continuing interest in those same challenging questions we confronted in 2005, the middle of the first decade: What practices, preparation, activities, responsibilities, and rewards characterize choral music conducting?

Chorus America has trend data on organizations in the annual *Chorus Operations Survey Report*, by asking the same questions every year. For this study examining choral music conducting in 2017, we decided to use the same efficient approach, and gathered data using a very similar procedure to the one used for the 2005 report: an almost identical questionnaire over the same online platform. It reached similar response sizes (621 in the second decade compared to 684 in the first). So this report, in addition to describing the state of affairs for respondents to the 2017 survey, can make some comparisons to the state of affairs for respondents to the 2005 survey, gaining additional insight into how the profession of choral conducting has changed from the first decade to the second.

The study focused on choral conducting as a profession. We posed questions to conductors about their education, employment and other activities, the number and

type of choruses led, compensation and benefits from each chorus, range of responsibilities, level of satisfaction, and a variety of other topics.

The survey of 48 questions was posted online twice, once in summer 2015 and again in early 2017. We informed many thousands of choral conductors about the survey via letters, emails, newsletters, and social media. We are very grateful to the survey's sponsors Westminster Choir College and St. Olaf College, as well as the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) for partnering with us to share the survey with their own networks as well. A total of 621 choral conductors provided usable responses, including data on their own experiences, activities, and lives, as well as operational data on their work in the 1,148 choruses that they lead. The majority are male (58 percent); the average age of all respondents is 49 years, and is similar for males and females. Respondents primarily reside in the U.S. (94 percent use U.S. zip codes). Only 10 percent were African-American, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific, less than the proportion of minorities in the U.S. population, but higher than the first-decade share of diverse respondents. Minority respondents were younger (46 years old) and earned nearly the same average income (\$54,300). Now, as in 2005, we believe this sample is large enough by standards of statistical analysis to correspond with many characteristics of the population of working choral conductors as a whole.

In both the first-decade and second-decade reports, Chorus America expanded its scope beyond its main target group of *independent choruses*—those that operate as nonprofit community organizations and are not funded by a school or church—to learn about conductors of all kinds of choruses, broadening our knowledge of the field. Conductors tend to lead more than one—and more than one kind of—chorus. A better understanding of the complex array of their roles and responsibilities helps Chorus America develop meaningful services that support their work. An evidence-based account of how the conducting profession is evolving highlights significant changes, so Chorus America can target emerging needs.

We hope the findings in this report will guide chorus conductors and leaders in several ways:

- Conductors can learn more about their profession, and how their musical and professional work compares with others who share the same occupation.

- Chorus managers and board members who set policy for choruses can see the different combinations of roles and responsibilities and benefits that choral leaders experience.
- Music educators in conservatories, colleges, universities, and other settings can use these results to guide future conductors in their career planning.
- Other arts organizations, and their leaders, advocates, and researchers can use this report to compare to their own fields.

The choral field is large and diverse, and not every finding will resonate with every conductor or every chorus. The range of experiences in the field shows that there is no single “typical” choral conductor. This report does not have recommendations on what any person or organization should do. This is a report on what is, not on what should be. The report uses data gathered from a “convenience” sample, and is subject to various biases, like all survey research.

Notwithstanding those cautions, knowing more about any industry or sector helps individuals and organizations come to better decisions in their careers, strategies, training, and artistic excellence. Along with Chorus America’s other research programs, this report contributes overall to Chorus America’s goal of strengthening choruses and increasing appreciation of choral music, and adding to the positive impact that choruses and choral music already have in society.

The following pages summarize key findings for all survey respondents, and compare first-decade and second-decade respondents in important areas. Most of the report has more detailed tables, figures, and analysis to give specific context to those field-wide averages and totals.

## *KEY FINDINGS*

All survey respondents were individuals, who described their career and work in choral music, along with specifics about their work in as many as five choruses. This opening set of findings is a summary of findings from the detailed pages that follow, based on data from the 621 valid responses to this survey.

### ***1. Choral conductors create careers directing multiple choruses.***

- The typical conductor leads one or two choruses, often of different types.
- The 1,148 choruses led by survey respondents include more than 68,000 singers.

### ***2. Choral conducting remains a very satisfying profession.***

- Conductors are generally very satisfied in their work.
- Those who stay with choral conducting tend to earn more and become more satisfied as they age.
- Their estimated average annual total earnings are in the upper-\$60,000 range; those with doctorates and/or employed as full-time educators generally earn more.
- Choral music conducting generates about two-thirds of respondents' total earnings, an average of about \$49,000.
- Average estimated income for female conductors is about 74 percent of income for male conductors.
- Male conductors lead proportionally more community, school, volunteer, religious, and professional choruses. Female conductors lead more children's choruses.
- Few choruses provide health insurance, paid vacation, or other employment benefits to their conductors. Choral conductors in education tend to have more benefits.
- Fewer choruses provide benefits now compared to choruses described in the first-decade study.

***3. Conductors perform a range of roles and responsibilities for their choruses.***

- Artistic programming and commissioning of music remain the principal responsibilities of conductors.
- Conductors meet with singers in each chorus an estimated 84 times over the course of a season, counting both rehearsals and performances.
- Conductors across all chorus types report about 15 performances per season, and expect seasons to remain at that level or grow.
- Most professional and children's choruses have paid administrative support, but across all choruses, only 35 percent have paid administrative support.

***4. Choruses are resilient, and many conductors are founders with long tenures.***

- The founding year for the median chorus conducted by respondents was 1986.
- Respondents have founded more than 135 choruses since the year 2010.
- Respondents are the founders of almost 30 percent of their choruses; conversely, more than 70 percent of choruses have gone through succession one or more times.

***5. Choral conductors maintain a multi-decade commitment to choral leadership.***

- Forty-one percent of respondents set out to become conductors.
- Conductors of all ages intend to stay in the field, but fewer than half of those between the ages of 50 and 65 intend to be conducting 10 years into the future.

***6. Conductor education and training begin early, and continue throughout the career.***

- Conductors most frequently specialized in study of choral conducting, music education, and voice.
- Eighty-eight percent of respondents believe their education prepared them well for their work.

- Most respondents are members of American Choral Directors Association and Chorus America. Conductors who join professional choral music organizations tend to earn more and be more satisfied.
- Conductors invest time and effort to maintain and improve their knowledge and skills in artistic and management topics.

***7. Choral conductors are actively engaged in the arts beyond choral music.***

- Conductors are active in cultural life and are audience members for a variety of arts performances.
- Conductors are generous supporters of charity, giving an estimated annual average of \$4,800 to all causes, and \$2,600 to arts and culture.

## *FIRST- TO SECOND-DECADE CHANGES*

About twelve years passed between the first-decade report and this one. How did choral conducting change in those years? What is the present world in which conductors live, and how has the passage of time affected their professional work? By using an almost identical data gathering tool the second time around, we can note what aspects of conductors' work and experience have remained stable, but also highlight interesting differences where they occur. Here are some of those highlights, with changes presented in more detail in later sections.

### *1. Choral conducting work involves more intense work with fewer choruses.*

- The typical second-decade conductor leads either one or two choruses, where the typical first-decade conductor led either two or three choruses. The second-decade average is 2.1 choruses, compared to 2.3.
- Second-decade conductors met with their singers more often, an estimated 84 times over the course of a season, compared to 74.

### *2. The real income of choral conductors has decreased since the first decade.*

- Average annual total earnings remain in the upper-\$60,000 range, with higher reported incomes for those with doctorates and/or full-time work as educators. Given that consumer prices have increased by more than 30 percent in the intervening years, this represents a decline in conductors' real income.
- Choral music conducting still generates about two-thirds of respondents' total earnings, an average of about \$49,000.
- Employment benefits like health insurance or paid vacation are less common for second-decade respondents compared to those in the first decade.

### *3. The choral ecosystem is lively, with new choruses forming, and existing ones showing endurance.*

- New choruses still come into being, though at a slightly slower pace than in the first decade.



- The median chorus that respondents lead is 35 years old, as in the first-decade report.
- More than 70 percent of choruses have gone through succession, and are no longer led by their founders.

*4. Differences in the experiences of female and male conductors have persisted.*

- The wage gap has not shrunk (or grown): female conductors average income remains at about 74 percent of male conductors, where it was in the first-decade report.
- Male conductors lead proportionally more community, school, volunteer, religious, and professional choruses. Female conductors lead more children's choruses.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this report came from a survey conducted over the internet in two separate waves, in summer 2015 and early 2017. The two waves were aggregated into a single file for analysis, after double responses were removed. The two waves were similar in almost every variable, except that the 2015 wave respondents had higher income.

Data was gathered using SurveyMonkey, an online tool. In this way and in the construction of questions, the second-decade study mirrored the original first-decade study from 2005, to enhance comparison between the two reports. The original survey was designed by Roland Kushner and Arthur C. Brooks, with guidance from the 2005 Chorus America staff and a Board subcommittee on conductors. The 2017 research team decided for efficiency's sake to leave the questions intact except where it was critical to change a question (e.g., refer to 2016, not 2004).

Chorus America announced the availability of the survey in multiple ways, but primarily electronically. This is a contrast with the first-decade study that was promoted by mailing 15,000 letters to members of Chorus America and other choral organizations. Many different communications techniques were used: email blasts, newsletters, social media, emails, listservs, etc. As in the first decade, Chorus America benefited from the support of other organizations in the choral music field who disseminated information about the survey to their communities, particularly ACDA, St. Olaf College, and Westminster Choir College.

How closely does the sample of respondents match the population? Strictly speaking, the results apply precisely only to the respondents, but there is reason to believe that the sample of 621 is adequate for making limited generalizations to the population of choral conductors, especially professionals. In *The Chorus Impact Study*, published in 2009, Chorus America estimated that there are 270,000 choruses, which suggests at most 270,000 conductors. Our finding that the average conductor leads 2.1 choruses implies that there are about more 120,000 conductors in the population, which in turn would imply and that this survey reached almost 0.5 percent of them. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics counts a total of 18,380 workers whose primary occupations are "Music Directors and Composers," with average annual earnings of \$60,360. The survey sample amounted to about three percent of that number.

This survey is subject to the same biases as any other survey: First, is response/non-response bias, which means that people choose whether to respond or not. The first-decade survey was an innovative use of the internet at that time, and the first-decade report shows concerns about that as a new technique, and especially how it might affect response by older conductors. Those concerns have dissipated since 2005, and internet survey technologies are widely used.

To increase participation, we presented questions about age, season length, income, and some other questions in ranges (e.g., “below 30,” “30-39,” etc.) rather than ask respondents to provide their exact age and income. To make estimates based on responses to these questions, the midpoints of various ranges were calculated and assumed to be the value, just for the purpose of making estimates. For example, we converted the age range “30-39” to the midpoint of 34.5. We used this procedure to come up with average figures for age, income, and similarly scaled variables. This technique is imperfect when it comes to reporting results, and estimates should be taken as the midpoint of a range, rather than being an exact calculated number.

Total response counts to questions involving individual conductors ranged from 580 to 621, and involving choruses ranged from 1,089 to 1,143.

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*Society, Nonprofit Management & Leadership, Stanford Social Innovation Review,* and by Brookings Institution Press. Dr. Kushner was managing director of Bethlehem Musikfest, development director for the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, and interim executive director of WDIY-FM. Dr. Kushner prepared the 2005 first-decade report “Choral Conductors Today: A Profile” with Arthur C. Brooks, then professor at Syracuse University, now President and CEO of American Enterprise Institute.

## ***ABOUT CHORUS AMERICA***

***Chorus America empowers singing ensembles to create vibrant communities and effect meaningful change by offering services that promote artistic achievement, organizational strength, and advocacy.***

Chorus America is the advocacy, research, and leadership development organization that advances the choral field. We support and serve choral conductors, administrators, board members, and singers with tools, training, peer networking, and access so that choruses are better able to contribute to their communities.

Chorus America serves more than 6,000 choruses, individuals, businesses, and organizations with a wide array of programs, publications, research, and personal services. These services strengthen their ability to build strong organizations that foster quality choral performances.

Chorus America is governed by a diverse board of accomplished leaders from across North America, and the executive staff is headquartered in Washington DC.

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