

Louisville has rich choral community

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(Photo: David R. Lutman/Special to The Courier-Journal)

"There's a real desire in people to sing," said Frank Heller. Heller is a longstanding member of the Louisville choral community, having led the [Louisville Youth Choir](http://louyouthchoir.org/) for years before moving on more than 20 years ago to found [Voces Novae](http://www.voces-novae.org/concert-information/), a chorus dedicated to singing the works of living American composers.

Louisville's choral music scene embodies a range of people, including singers in church, community and student choirs. Some are part of the 75-year-old [Louisville Chorus](http://www.louisvillechorus.org/Pages/default.aspx), led by Daniel Spurlock, which sings a gamut of music from master works to Broadway hits. And there's the [Thoroughbred Chorus](http://www.thoroughbredchorus.com/), the men's a cappella chorus founded in 1945 that sings barbershop

harmony.

"We've always had a strong community of choral singing, in part because of the strength of the church choirs in the city who wanted to sing with community groups," Heller added.

The singers involved in these groups likely numbers in the hundreds, and these days their leaders are mostly a close group who have worked together from time to time over decades.

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Likely one of the longest-standing members was Melvin Dickinson, who with his wife, Margaret, founded the [Louisville Bach Society](http://www.louisvillebachsociety.org/) in 1964 and closed it in 2011. Many singers and some of Louisville's choral leaders cite him as one of the first people who inspired their love of choral music via his group's concerts featuring works by Bach and other Baroque composers.

That includes Mark Walker, who now leads the singers in [Louisville Master Chorale](http://www.louisvillemasterchorale.org/) that was founded just over three years ago.

Walker said he remembers talking with another influential leader Jim Rightmyer, the choirmaster at [St. Francis in the Fields Episcopal Church](http://www.stfrancisinthefields.org/StaffDirectoryDetail.asp?id=22) in 1995 founded the [Choral Arts Society](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuSgQ0Hrtf0J8ihEy9ZQNTw), which had an 18-year run and closed last year. During that time, it performed 143 pieces, including challenging works from Bach and Mozart to Benjamin Britten and John Adams.

"When I was getting started Jim said, 'This is a singing community,'" Walker remembered recently.

But he and others also talked about the role of music educators, especially Kent Hatteberg who came to the [University of Louisville](http://louisville.edu/music/faculty-staff/Faculty/kent-hatteberg) in 1996 and is its director of choral activities. Some of the strongest choral high school programs in the Louisville area are led by younger educators who were taught by Hatteberg.

"What he has done has been phenomenal, particularly for this area," Heller said.

Meanwhile, Louisville has seen several closures in recent years of venerated choirs, including the Bach Society and the Choral Arts Society.

"The closing of Choral Arts Society was a big loss for the community and (the society had been) a great opportunity for singers, particularly graduates of the university," Hatteberg recently said.

Despite that, most who sing in choruses in the community keep going and there have been leaders willing to start new groups. Hatteberg worked to start [Louisville Chamber Choir](http://www.louisvillechamberchoir.org/) last year, and the Bellarmine University's [Louisville Vocal Project](https://www.facebook.com/LouisvilleVocalProject) was founded nearly four years ago by [Timothy Glasscock](http://www.bellarmino.edu/cas/music/faculty/).

Composer [Richard Burchard](http://www.richardburchard.com/) (<http://www.richardburchard.com/>), who also teaches at Bellarmine University and studied with Dickinson at U of L nearly 30 years ago, said that over time he has seen a choral scene that is not just dominated by a chorus that sings with the [Louisville Orchestra](https://www.louisvilleorchestra.org/) (<https://www.louisvilleorchestra.org/>) or the Louisville Bach Society. Instead, Louisville has a diverse group of choruses, many of which today are chamber choral groups.

These, he said, offer audiences a sense of intimacy and often are easier to manage financially.

"There's just a love for music, choral music and singing," Burchard said. "And we are all different and singing different repertoire."

The popularity of choral music in Louisville shows the city in harmony with the rest of the country. The [National Endowment for the Arts](http://arts.gov/) (<http://arts.gov/>) and the organization [Chorus America](https://www.chorusamerica.org/advocacy-research) (<https://www.chorusamerica.org/advocacy-research>) have conducted research that estimates more than 42 million people sing in choirs, making singing the most popular form of arts participation in the country.

This month and the rest of the arts season attest to the strength of choral music in Louisville. But it is this week that kicks it off, with the Louisville Orchestra's concert featuring a range of choral works and the Louisville Master Chorale's concert that both honors Dickinson and premieres a new work by Burchard.

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