

Putting Our Future Into Focus:
Toward a 2020 Vision for the Holden Choruses

This past summer, I read through a file containing dozens of letters that Elliot Forbes, F. John Adams, and Jim Marvin wrote to alumni/ae of the Collegium, Glee Club, and Choral Society over a span of nearly fifty years. These annual reports provided a treasure trove of insights into our shared history which simultaneously celebrated the many triumphs and focused attention on the many challenges which the Holden choruses experienced over a half century. I empathized with my predecessors in both their enthusiasm and concerns for choral music at Harvard. As I begin my fourth year at Harvard, I would like to revive this tradition of “conductor letters” and to take this opportunity to share some of our future plans with you.

In 1912, the Harvard Glee Club asked Professor Archibald T. Davison to coach them as a faculty advisor and in 1919 “Doc” officially became the ensemble’s music director and America’s first collegiate choral conductor. Doc transformed what was then largely a social activity into an artistic practice through the performance of more classical repertoire and the cultivation of musicianship, all the while preserving the communal spirit that was such a significant part of the ensemble’s experience. Following Harvard’s lead, similar groups around the country likewise refocused their priorities on artistic excellence while continuing to cultivate a dynamic and nurturing social experience. We can proudly credit Doc Davison and his Harvard students for defining the model for collegiate choral music that held sway on university campuses around the country for the better part of the last century.

Though my summer reading did not include any “conductor letters” authored by Doc, I wondered what he would write on the present state of choral music at Harvard if he were the Director of Choral Activities today. Specifically, would he recognize the Harvard choral program, and music at Harvard more generally, as it now exists? We live in a vastly different world than Doc and are forced to face obstacles that challenge our work in a host of different ways. We face unprecedented demands on our students’ time and

attention through the staggering proliferation of vocal ensembles, competition from hundreds of other extra-curricular opportunities, escalating course conflicts, increased pressures on academic performances as a consequence of a shrinking job market, and declining numbers at auditions and in our audiences. The demography at Harvard has also changed radically such that many of our students arrive without having had any serious exposure to music as part of their education. Singing in our ensembles thus requires what may now be described as counter-cultural prerequisites: focused concentration, long-term commitment, self-sacrifice, and an audience willing to listen. In the context of our world, one might conclude, sadly, that choral music has never been more anachronistic.

At the same time, Doc would also not recognize the unprecedented opportunities before us today. In many ways has never been a more promising and conducive atmosphere for the Arts at Harvard. University President Faust's Arts Task Force Report of 2009 proposed new paradigms and bold recommendations for art making at our university. Some of these have already been implemented, including offering faculty-led ensembles for credit. Teaching itself has changed radically, becoming more experiential and interdisciplinary. In addition, Doc never could have dreamed of the technological innovations that have become a part of our daily lives and the pedagogy of our time, presenting exciting possibilities that have yet to be fully explored or even envisioned.

As I begin my fourth year at Harvard, I see the landscape very differently than I did when I arrived. Over the past decades, our students, our institution, and our culture have indeed changed significantly; however, for generations, our choral program has remained essentially the same. Should we regard this "tradition" as "calm rising through change and through storm," or is it instead holding us back from seizing the extraordinary opportunities the current moment presents?

Though it would be easy to fear that our choral program will continue to slowly atrophy, in line with the hand wringing that dominates conversations about the future of classical music and the arts more generally throughout the century. Yet, I am profoundly

optimistic about our future. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink our purpose and our vision. Our society continues to look to Harvard for leadership and our history compels us to consider new possibilities. Just as Doc Davison established the model for the twentieth century choral program, we should strive, together, to create a new blueprint for choral music for this new century.

Here are a few of the questions I believe we must consider:

- Doc's appointment as the first conductor of our choruses forged a new relationship between the academic and extracurricular. How can we capitalize on the current innovations of teaching and learning to enhance the educational opportunities we give to our students?
- In 1921, Doc led an unprecedented concert tour of Europe, and experience repeated at regular intervals for each subsequent generation of Holden choral singers. In what ways does modern technology provide new means to disseminate and contextualize our music today?
- Doc's concerts featured what was then largely unexplored repertoire. How do we redefine our concert experience and engage the vast cultural and intellectual resources at Harvard?
- Doc saw choral singing as a vehicle to change the world through publications, concerts, and recordings. What opportunities exist for our groups to impact our world through service and outreach?
- Doc initiated the regular performance collaborations between the Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society. How do we leverage an even closer synergy between not only the three Holden choruses but also their respective alumni foundations while not losing sight of the particular strengths and traditions of each of the constituent groups?

I've asked HGC alumnus Robert Fox AB '86 to help me assemble a "strategy team" of students and alumni representing the three Holden choruses to analyze the current work

of the program, dream up new opportunities, and set a course for the future. The “Holden 2020” group will aim to develop a long-range plan for the years 2015-2020.

How do you fit in? We will draw upon the experience, expertise, and passion of our alumni throughout this process. In the next year, we will be soliciting your input through a variety of means. Stay tuned for more specifics and updates from our Holden 2020 planning group!

A century ago, Doc Davison envisioned choral music as it could be, rather than as it was. It’s time for us to do the same, seizing new opportunities with audacity and imagination, and sustaining the best of our traditions as we advance our choral program into the future.

I look forward to the exciting journey that lies ahead.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Andy".