

Versatile: Performing Queerness with the Lincoln Queer Choir

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Abstract

The Lincoln Queer Choir was more than just a community ensemble of LGBTQ+ musicians in Lincoln, Nebraska; it was a queer community and a queer space itself which was embodied in the group through membership, repertoire, venues, rehearsals, and performances. Though now disbanded, the Lincoln Queer Choir held a unique position that not only boldly promoted queer community in queer spaces, but also boldly inserted queerness into normative spaces to normative audiences. The Lincoln Queer Choir demonstrated that the Midwest is capable of fostering queer community despite the perception and history of the region as being politically isolating. This article compares the author's experiences of two of the Lincoln Queer Choir's final performances and examines the way that the ensemble navigated distinctly different audiences while still communicating queerness and maintaining their identity as a queer ensemble.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+ organizations, queer choruses, community

I stand on the relatively small and heavily scuffed stage at Das Haus in Lincoln, Nebraska, surrounded by approximately forty other members of the Lincoln Queer Choir as we settle in for our scheduled performance at Star City Pride. "Das" (as it is affectionately referred to by its clientele) is divided into two distinct spaces. The bar area features small gray tiles on the sticky floor, and is compact with black leather lounge chairs on a raised platform across from the long wooden service area. The club space is where the main attraction takes place: the dark and feebly lit room (except for the bright spotlights aimed towards the stage) contains tall tables with not enough chairs, as well as the thirty foot wide stage upon which my friends and I stand. From the stage a runway extends about fifteen feet perpendicularly into the club area, and more performers squeeze their way through the crowd to this T-shaped space.

It is June, Pride Month, and the noisy bar is filled to the brim with folks in glimmering rainbow attire to celebrate the occasion. Many individuals are wearing very little clothing, and there are occasional glints of leather straps and metallic buckles from the crowd and on stage. My personal attire fits in well with the crowd and the ensemble itself; I am wearing the shortest pair of shorts I have ever donned in my life, as well as a leather harness, leather boots, and a shirt that declares in large, bold letters "I HEART SODOMY." There is an abrupt shift in energy as the loud, thumping club music is replaced with the live keyboardist playing the introduction to "Me in the Mirror," the group's queer take on the iconic track by Michael Jackson. Upon hearing the opening riff, the bar erupts in cheers and the conductor cues our first entrance.

Star City Pride, June 8th, 2024

Nearly three weeks later, I am with the same group under a large gazebo in Stransky Park, readying to perform for the Stransky Summer Concert Series along with Lincoln's other LGBTQIA+ ensemble, Star City Chorus, who had performed the first set. The park is a popular location for weddings, as well as photography for special

events. It is located in the relatively wealthy neighborhood of Irvingdale in south Lincoln, and features a large stone water feature and well maintained children's playground. The audience here is much different than that at Das Haus. The Summer Concert Series is popular with families in the area, and the expanse of grass and playground equipment in front of the gazebo is filled with children and their caretakers. Our attire is much different for this performance, with the group wearing non-uniform casual summer clothes and a smattering of queer pride accessories. My attire is much tamer as well; my baseball cap with a brightly embroidered rainbow has done a poor job of keeping the sweating off of my face, but my black shorts (with a conservative six inch inseam) and white shirt is otherwise nondescript. Our setlist contains the same music in a slightly different order, with the live keyboardist's sound projected through a couple of amps that face the crowd. A powerful monitor tinkles the piano in the group's face and Jeem, a local singer-songwriter with a flexible and soulful voice, weaves their way to the front of the choir to polite applause.

Stransky Park Summer Concert Series, June 27th, 2024

The two concerts outlined above were fairly standard performing events for the Lincoln Queer Choir. The Star City Pride event was reflective of (semi-)private concert spaces where the choir typically performed two or three times in a standard season. These events were often in adult spaces to audiences that were almost exclusively queer, and were frequently paired with other decidedly queer modes of performance such as drag. The Stransky Park Summer Concert Series event was representative of the explicitly public appearances of the choir, which accounted for three or four of the choir's concerts in a season. With events spanning both highly public and relatively private spaces, the choir was unique in its navigation of these spaces and its overall presentation to the communities it engaged with. With this paper, I sought to examine how the choir functioned as both a queer community and a queer space in and of itself, and how the ensemble embodied a versatile spectrum by performing queerness across a multitude of spaces through its membership and repertoire.

A Brief History of Queer Performing Ensembles

The Lincoln Queer Choir was just one of many community music ensembles that have been established in the United States since the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (History of GALA Choruses, 2024). Stonewall is often considered the most prominent retaliation against state forces of violence by lesbian, gay, and transgender people in the early days of the gay rights movement. In the foreword to *The Stonewall Reader*, queer novelist Edmund White describes the snowball effect of the Stonewall Riots. He details how "...the sexual revolution, Black Power, and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations had shown the efficacy of protest," and that "Because of the Stonewall uprising, people saw homosexuals no longer as criminal or sinners or mentally ill, but something like members of a minority group. It was an oceanic change in thinking" (White, Baumann, 2019, pg x-xii). Queer music ensembles became established as the visibility of queer people grew and a broader queer community came into national focus (The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus|Our Story, 2026). The Stonewall Chorale, originally the Gotham Male Chorus, was established in 1977 with the explicit goal of connecting queer people with one another through music, the first of many queer performing arts ensembles across the United States, Canada, and South America (The Stonewall Chorale|About, 2026). Queer region bands were also establishing themselves during this time, and the Pride Bands Alliance (formerly the Lesbian and Gay Band Association) along with GALA Choruses (the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses) now associate themselves with nearly 250 ensembles (Pride Bands Alliance, 2024).

The Midwestern United States is no exception to the increasing number of queer performing ensembles. Examples include Windy City Performing Arts in Chicago established in 1983 (Windy City Performing Arts,

2025), the River City Mixed Chorus of Omaha, Nebraska established in 1984 (River City Mixed Chorus, 2025), and the Heartland Men's Chorus in Kansas City, Missouri established in 1986 (Heartland Men's Chorus, 1986). The Midwest serves as a particularly illuminating region in its representation of communities across rural and urban populations, socioeconomic classes, and racial and ethnic groups as reflecting the average person in the United States and their ideals (Manalansan IV et al., 2015). Such representation, however, overgeneralizes midwestern and queer lived experiences. Nebraska specifically has a close connection with the politics of queerness (namely homophobia): Nebraska Senator and Senate Minority Leader Kenneth Wherry (1892-1950) was an early instigator of the Lavender Scare and a proponent of McCarthyism, (Adkins, 2016). Additionally, Nebraska Congressman Arthur L. Miller (1892-1967) authored the notorious Sexual Psychopath Law in 1948 that imprisoned gay men for up to twenty years for acts of sodomy. The unique juxtaposition of vibrant queer communities (in the form of queer choruses) settled in what may be considered an uneasy and hostile isolated setting makes the existence of queer music ensembles especially interesting to examine.

Performing Versatility

Turino (2009) theorized a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing the role of music as a community building force that is helpful in understanding the activities of the Lincoln Queer Choir. Turino discussed how aspects of musical events outside of the "music itself" contribute to community and participation. Similarly, the Lincoln Queer Choir utilized both participatory and presentational modes of music performance depending on the setting and audience, embodying a sense of versatility that was critical to understanding the choir's navigation of public and private spaces.

Public performances of the choir reflected a standard presentational mode of music making. Turino described presentational performance as "...situations where one group of people, the artist, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing" (Turino, 2009, p. 26). The repertoire was presented to the audience in a detailed performance that was varied and contrasting in its timbre and form. Much of the audience was interested in the ritual of the social event, and the distinction between artists and audience was evident. The Lincoln Queer Choir's performances at the Stransky Park Summer Concert Series and similar concert events were very representative of this form of music making. In these normative spaces, audiences witnessed the performances in a distanced manner, divorced from the act of music making. These events were valuable to the greater Lincoln community in the visibility that the ensemble brought to the general public. Few other groups or organizations in the city were both explicitly queer in nature and actively presenting queer art across public spaces. This positioned the ensemble as a liaison between the queer community and the broader Lincoln community.

Gay bars and clubs exist as semi-private spaces for the queer communities they foster (Handhardt, 2016; Mienke, 2016). In the United States, gay bars are often seen as the forefront of queer liberation and central to queer community (Handhardt, 2016). The general public may be invited to enter the space to partake in queer culture through high profile drag performance, brunch, karaoke, or bingo, but those who attend these events rarely seek these spaces out unless they are invited or advertised to. In this way, gay bars have a semipermeable social boundary, and still function essentially as private spaces for queer people (Johnson, 2016).

Queerness was a critical aspect that shaped where the Lincoln Queer Choir performed and rehearsed. The Lincoln Queer Choir rehearsed at Das Haus and had performances in the bar regularly because it was a gay bar. The founder of Lincoln Queer Choir used the location as a space to scout potential members and disseminate information about concerts and rehearsals. As described at the beginning of this paper, the queer community

responded to the choir with the exuberance and excitement of seeing a “family member” giving a spirited performance.

The choir’s presentation and overall demeanor was much more relaxed when in queer spaces like Das Haus compared to public spaces like Stransky Park. It is only in these queer spaces that the choir engaged in what Turino referred to as *participatory music making*. Turino defined participatory music making as “...actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments...community singing...in bars” (Turino, 2008, p. 25–28). While he was likely not referring to organized groups with organized concerts in these spaces, one may extend the logic that Turino would still consider this as participatory performance. He defined participatory performance as “...a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinction, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role”

During performances at Das Haus, the bar was often invited to join in on the songs from the crowd. Following “Me in the Mirror”, the concert continued with “Rainbow Connection” by Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher from the Muppet Movie, “Chosen Family” by Rina Sawayama, and finally Cyndi Lauper’s “True Colors.” Indeed, every song after the opening number involved the people in the bar singing along. Many tunes in the ensemble’s repertoire were well known pop songs that have connections to the queer community. Sawayama wrote “Chosen Family” specifically as a queer anthem, and the song is fairly explicit about this in its lyrics. “True Colors” was not directly tied to the gay rights movement, however Cyndi Lauper later leaned heavily into the song’s adoption into the queer community and later established a non-profit, True Colors United, that supports LGBT youth experiencing homelessness. “Me in the Mirror” and “Rainbow Connection” were appropriated by the queer community due to their depictions of being true to oneself to achieve a higher state of being. Many audience members linked arm-in-arm; this connection of the ensemble to the audience, the audience to the music, and the cumulative community to the space created a powerful atmosphere that dissolved the boundary of the proscenium.

The Impact of the Lincoln Queer Choir

Meinke described the queer community as “a community of people, identical to other American citizens except for the objects of their affections...united by its shared oppression and came together...not to “fit in” but to build their own community for themselves within the enveloping context of American society” (Meinke, 2016, pp. 1–3). Queer community is the overarching factor that made these performances distinct. The choir was not only comprised of queer people but also *performed queerness* through its membership, repertoire, and performance venues. These characteristics of the choir were a welcome reflection of the people for whom they were performing. More accurately, it may be described as performing *with* them through participatory music making. The music reflects the queer community as much as the performers. Some explicitly queer songs such as “Chosen Family” and other tunes that were later appropriated into queer culture such as “True Colors” have a close association with queerness that are projected back onto the audience. Such songs demonstrate a connection of values, artistry, and ultimately identity. Additionally, the queer choir whose members were often frequent patrons of the bar effectively mirror the queer community itself. With these factors compounding upon one another, it is no wonder the metaphysical space between choir and audience becomes so thin and permeable.

The Lincoln Queer Choir is not the only queer ensemble in the city. The Star City Chorus was founded the same year as the Lincoln Queer Choir, and the organizations are similar in that they perform music at community events and designated concerts, and perform music that has queer connotations. The distinguishing characteristic between these ensembles is that Star City Chorus’s members include performers as young as fourteen years old. The locations in which they can perform in are inherently more restrictive than that of the Lincoln Queer Choir, as

venues such as Das Haus are legally prohibited to individuals eighteen years old and younger. However, it may be because of this refuge of the adult venue that the Lincoln Queer Choir was able to foster such a connection with their community. Demonstrably, the Lincoln Queer Choir was a unique asset to both queer community and the city of Lincoln at large.

Conclusion

The Lincoln Queer Choir disbanded after the performances described here due to personal matters in the founding director's life. Its members (including myself) were largely absorbed into the Star City Chorus. The Lincoln Queer Choir demonstrated versatility through the music they performed, the venues where they performed, and the audiences they performed for and with. The choir demonstrated versatility through unique performances in both public and private performance spaces, the performers themselves, and even the clothes the members wore. Their connections with different audiences informed drastically different performance atmospheres, and the choir navigated these spaces tactfully, without sacrificing their identity as a queer performing ensemble. In fact, their visibility as a queer performing ensemble, and especially an amateur community group, was a powerful demonstration of the deep roots of Lincoln's queer community.

The Lincoln Queer Choir embodied versatility through its performances that were either participatory with other queer people, with the patrons of Das Haus merrily singing along, or presentational to the community at large, such as in the park in front of families that may have never heard of a queer choir before. This ensemble reflected the idea queer ensembles can exist and even thrive in spite of extensive historical attempts to criminalize its members. This choir was one of hundreds of ensembles that demonstrate that queerness can be a powerful force that connects us to other queer musicians around the world.

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