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THE RIGHT
COMPETITION
FOR YOUR
SHOW CHOIR

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SINGERS:
WHAT
STARTS HERE
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Cover photo courtesy University of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Singers
Wisconsin Singers
COLLEGIATE SHOW CHOIR AT ITS BEST

by Robin Whitty-Novotny

Wisconsin Singers, featuring the top talents of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was one of the first collegiate show choirs in the country. From performing at the White House to doing USO and other international tours, the Singers has thrived for nearly five decades as one of the elite college show choirs in the country, finding creative ways to keep the program strong through the challenges of funding cuts and economic downturns. Wisconsin Singers has raised more than one million dollars in scholarships for UW students as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars for music and service organizations through family friendly, spectacular music revues of the past forty years of pop music. Those who love to perform, take pride in their university, and look towards developing their skills beyond what they experience in the classroom find Wisconsin Singers an unparalleled opportunity.
As a primarily student-run organization sponsored by the Dean of Students at the UW, Wisconsin Singers performs for more than 40,000 annually. Maintaining the excellence of the student experience by hiring skilled choreographers, arrangers and costume designers has been the trademark of Wisconsin Singers’ continued appeal to UW students.

The Singers show is a blend of classic rock, jazz, top forty, musical theater and acappella. Professionally choreographed, the show moves quickly through more than sixty songs from the past decades of American popular music. The Singers band is an integral part of the show, memorizing the full 75 minutes of music and taking the stage in band features that have the horns moving around like a mini-version of Blast! Students take the stage nearly forty times per year, work annually with more than 1,000 students in clinics, and enjoy the fun and family feeling that elevates a “touring ensemble” to an exceptional collegiate experience that defines their UW careers.

Auditions are drawing students from a host of majors across the campus, many of whom would love to make a career of performing but are working on their “back up” plan in case a performance career does not pan out. No longer does the troupe include primarily music majors, but instead draws those passionate for the stage from majors across campus, pulling together the best of the best who love to perform, love to represent their Badger pride in communities across the state and nation, and who go back to their college lives during the week to excel in everything from research to academics. Wisconsin Singers GPA’s are consistently above the campus norm, and many are on the UW Dean’s list. While the students receive class credit and scholarship dollars for their efforts, what drives them is the music, the people they share the stage with, and the fun they have performing in a different community every time they take their show on the road.

A Bit of History

The “University Singers” was formed in 1967 to showcase students in a different light than the Vietnam War protests going on at the UW campus did. Shows centered around stock arrangements of music by the Mommas and Poppas, John Denver and Broadway shows such as Fiddler on the Roof and Sound of Music. The troupe was small, numbering around 20 undergraduate/graduate students who sang and often doubled as instrumentalists on guitar or horns. The Singers band consisted of only a rhythm section, and the show was simply staged with very little movement. With more than 70 shows a year, and under the sponsorship of the Wisconsin Alumni Association, the Singers made a name for itself as an outreach arm of the UW, performing for alumni chapters and corporate conventions. To distinguish itself from other collegiate groups, the Singers were renamed “Wisconsin Singers” in 1972.

With the 70’s came disco music and big Broadway productions where dance took center stage. The Singers hired its first choreographer, Tom Terrien, and added a full horn section. As the size of the group grew, so did the variety of musical styles and technical requirements. It became necessary to amplify the vocals to balance them with the band, and the Singers purchased 5 wired mics and a small soundboard. Participating students now represented a variety of majors across the campus.

Singers continued to book dozens of shows throughout the 80’s, keeping the troupe members on the road nearly every weekend throughout the academic year, all while remaining full time students. Trips took them from Florida to Mexico as their role of “Official Ambassadors of Goodwill for the UW” kept the troupe busy. Singers continued
to reflect the trends of the day, but the show always included pop and Broadway favorites dating back to the 40’s and 50’s. Choreography by LA professional, Jim Bates, now included working out the intricate web of corded microphones that amplified the trademark vocal style of the Singers. Performing in everything from convention halls to school gymnasiums, the troupe traveled with a full compliment of sound and lighting equipment. The Singers developed a small student staff that worked with the Wisconsin Alumni Association to manage the troupe while doubling as performers and technicians.

And then, in 1994, the Singers faced the first of many financial hurdles. The School of Music faced a large state budget cut, and choosing to remain closely aligned with a classical music curriculum, subsequently withdrew financial support of the Singers program. Many other similar collegiate groups realized the same fate but the Singers Director, Robin Whitty Novotny, refused to let the funding cut define the Singers’ future. With the help of a number of UW alumni, Singers alums and parents, a non profit organization was formed to fund the group, and the SOM agreed to provide rehearsal and office space as well as class credit, subject to annual approval by the School. The new Friends of Wisconsin Singers

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was to lead the charge to maintain the $200,000+ annual fundraising campaign to keep the Singers on the road.

And so it went...the program was now responsible for everything from booking, marketing, and graphic design to touring arrangements and theater coordination with only one adult professional to make it all happen. The student staff grew from 3 to 10 and now included a production manager, tech director, company manager, PR and graphic arts interns and music staff, all of whom were students that took on the responsibility of managing a 30-member touring group still bearing the name “Official Ambassadors of Goodwill.” Bookings poured in and the troupe began to perform in more and more high schools, partnering with booster groups and service organizations to raise dollars for their programs.

In an effort to serve the local schools in an even more meaningful way, the Singers started offering free workshops while on concert site. Dance clinics, show polishing workshops, and shared performance opportunities connected the Singers to local music educators and their students. And, perhaps most important, Singers encouraged area show choirs/jazz groups to open the shows, allowing everyone the chance to share the stage in a non-competitive atmosphere during a time when show choir competitions were growing around the nation by leaps and bounds.

Never losing sight of the importance of providing UW students the chance to work with guest artists, mentors, and professional choreographers, the production value of the Singers exploded with energy and expertise. Broadway, Universal Studios, and Radio City Music Hall dancers joined the creative team and to this day continue to create brilliant staging that marks the Singers as a “Broadway caliber” show. Professional arrangers, including most recently several who worked with Glee and The Sing Off! write the show. Singers provides those involved in the theater technology side of production work with mentors who help develop invaluable skills, as the sound, lighting and stage crew must adjust to a new venue with each show.

Then in 2008, the economy hit the skids, and the entertainment dollar was no longer a “given.” Schools and service organizations were no longer willing to accept the risk of signing a show contract. Total bookings dropped by 25% and the Singers were faced with yet another challenge — how to maintain the excellence of the show AND continue to meet organizational budgets. Thus, the Wisconsin Singers business team was born and the concept of “Singers Partnered Shows” became a reality.

SPS shows offer schools reluctant to take financial risk the opportunity to have the Singers perform in their community with the Singers organization taking on the majority of the work and the bulk of the financial responsibility. Student interns are now designated as “project managers” who work closely with adult volunteers to organize show events, make media contacts, facilitate ticket sales, and fill the house. Performers still do the free workshop, and guest groups still take the stage to open the show but now, UW students learn how to take charge of coordinating and facilitating the success of SPS shows, gaining invaluable experience in management, budgeting, media relations and motivating volunteers. Internships provide real-world experience that extends learning beyond the classroom and provides leadership experience that sets them head and shoulders above many of their collegiate peers.

The Here and Now of Being a Top Collegiate Show Choir
As we enter the upcoming 49th season of Wisconsin Singers, the Singers continue to evolve. Interns, performers, and theater techs work to stay on the cutting edge of everything from marketing the shows via social media, to changing up dance and vocal stylizing according to the music in the show.
formats change from year to year to keep the offerings to music programs fresh and innovative, and the Singers find themselves working with younger students, some as little as 6-7 years old. Student staff has grown to 16, involving students in internships that focus on entertainment management, music, marketing and graphic arts. Audience numbers are rebounding as the economy takes an upturn and the Singers Partnered Shows continue to grow in financial success for both the partnering organizations and the Singers program itself.

And much remains the same. The voices are still magnificent, the instrumentalists still rock the house, and the theater techs continue to produce a professional music event that receives consistent standing ovations. Singers remains nationally renowned for its “family friendly” show that is written to engage audiences of all ages, from toddlers to senior citizens. And the students themselves thrive on the busy schedule, maintain their academic standards and network throughout the year with tens of thousands of audiences, sponsors, and alumni.

As an “exemplary student organization” the students have recently developed a set of core values that speak directly to the priorities they have for the program, the students with whom they work in clinics, and the show itself – Professionalism, Education, Service, Accountability, Family, and Enjoyment. They not only experience the excitement of working with Broadway choreographers and arrangers, but plan leadership training and community building for all participants. And, while the non-profit support group, Friends of Wisconsin Singers, would prefer not to have to ask them, the students work at every show to articulate the program’s need to raise the $200,000+ to keep the Singers program alive. Donations are a grassroots process with no corporate or university funding. There is a real pride in moving audiences to give to the program so that the Singers can return to communities time and again.

Singers alumni have gone on to perform on Broadway, starred on television series, won Tony awards, and entertained throughout the world. Mac Huff and John Jacobson, both alumni of the Singers, have taken the show choir world of arranging and choreography by storm. Additionally, due to the many Singers alums who have majored in everything from pre-med to engineering, graduates have a world-wide network of connections whether they choose to go on into performing or pursue a career outside of the entertainment business.

Students come to the Singers for the performing experience and stay because of the people. A recent Singers alumna summed it up like this: “It’s so weird being involved in something where every person you interact with is passionate about what they’re doing, and no matter how hard things get in college, troupe members always go the extra mile for each other. As an alumna, I definitely miss that feeling of unconditional support from everyone around me. In Singers, you just feel so IMPORTANT- important, because you ARE important...we love what we do, it’s what gets us through the week of classes, and then we’re together again in another community, teaching young kids the fun of performing and showing them that they can keep music in their lives in college too.”

Wisconsin Singers remains a strong tradition, alive with energy, willing to meet the challenge of self-funding and committed to providing an outstanding experience in collegiate show choir...and so much more. Check us out at www.WisconsinSingers.com for more information.

Robin Whitty-Novotny was Director of the Wisconsin Singers for twenty-five years. She is now serving as a consultant to this nationally renowned University of Wisconsin entertainment company. Robin received her master’s degree in Music Education with a concentration in voice from the UW.