

History of the Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund

Gift of German Music

No language in the world has a larger treasury of beautiful songs to exhibit than the German language. Germany and Austria have given birth to the most and best composers in the history of music. No day passes wherein the three great "B's" - Bach, Beethoven and Brahms - are not performed somewhere in the world or on radio and television; not to mention the numberless other German composers; above all, the choral composers whose works have become immortal. And from Haydn, Händel, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Bruckner and Schubert to the Strauss', Lehar, Weill, Kalman and Stolz, immeasurable musical treasures have been bequeathed to the generations.

It is no small wonder that German-speaking immigrants of this brilliant cultural heritage have planted, cultivated, fostered and protected this devotion to, and love for, this music in the United States. Some came for religious freedom, some came for political freedom, and some came for greater economic opportunities. Whatever their reason, over 5 million German immigrants have entered the United States since the 1600s. Today, nearly 45 million Americans consider themselves German-Americans. With pride, we continue the tradition of song which our forefathers and we brought to this great land.

In 1789, Dr. Benjamin Rush, in a report about the German residents of Pennsylvania noted, "The Germans of both sexes have a strong predilection for song as well as instrumental music. They excel all other religious groups in Pennsylvania in the singing of Psalms." We can safely assume that these early German immigrants carried this love of song into singing the secular songs of their homeland, an art form that has engendered devotion and support ever since.

With so many Americans of German descent, it is not surprising that German singing societies are found everywhere in the continental United States. It is also no surprise, since Germans formed the largest group of immigrants between 1840 and 1880, that many singing societies and the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund* were founded in this time period.

First German-American Singing Societies

The *Philadelphia Männerchor*, founded on January 15, 1835 by German immigrant Phillip Matthias Wohlseiffer, is generally considered the first German-American singing society in the United States, and existed until 1962. One year later, in 1836, Herr Wohlseiffer, an accomplished musician from the Rhineland, moved to Baltimore where he founded the *Baltimore Lieder-*

kranz. In 1837, these German singing societies paid each other a visit. The first *Sängerfest* or Song Festival in the musical history of the United States occurred when the *Liederkrantz* visited Philadelphia on March 13 and on March 28 when the *Männerchor* visited Baltimore. The *Liederkrantz* was also the first singing society to accept women singers in 1838, forming a mixed voice chorus. These two singing societies often visited each other and performed concerts together. When they invited the public to a joint *Sängerfest* in 1846, the idea of continuing song festivals was considered.

Growth of Singing Societies

As Germans arrived in America and gathered to sing, singing societies appeared everywhere they settled. In particular, the settlement of the Ohio River valley provided for the growth of the German population. In 1838, *Der deutsche Gesangverein* of Cincinnati was founded. In 1846 a festival was held in the open by the United Singers of Cincinnati, holding a celebration at "Bald Hill." The Cincinnati *Liedertafel* and *Gesang und Bildungsverein* took part in this celebration. In 1848, singing societies were organized in Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. In Louisville, Kentucky the *Liederkrantz* was founded. Historical notes suggest that the German singing societies avoided sacred selections which they felt belonged in the domain of other organizations be-

ing not suited to the more jovial and social character of their clubs! Soon after, German singing societies are founded in Madison, Indiana; Columbus, Ohio, and Saginaw, Michigan. The singing societies in St. Louis and Milwaukee begin a rise to prominence.

In 1849, all known singing societies were invited to gather in Cincinnati, Ohio for a *Sängerfest* under the leadership of Fritz Volkmar, founder of the Louisville *Liederkrantz*. Five choruses accepted the invitation: the three from Cincinnati: (*Liedertafel*, *Gesang und Bildungsverein* and the *Schweizerverein*; one from Madison, Indiana; and one from Louisville, Kentucky. The 118 singers performed in the first Song Festival and created the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund*. The Eastern organizations subsequently form a union of their own.

A National Song Festival was held every year, from 1849 to 1860, only to be interrupted for 5 years by the Civil War. The efforts of all of the singing societies were directed to spreading and fostering choral singing and, through Song Festivals, offering to the public a chance to hear the beauty and glories of German choral works and folk songs. In the second half of the 19th century, regional or district organizations began holding their own festivals. For this reason, the national festivals became biennial

events in 1868. In 1890, they assumed their current triennial format.

Formation of Singers' Unions

It quickly became evident that due to the great distances between cities in the United States, it was nearly impossible to get the widely-scattered choruses together at one annual Song Festival. As a result, rather than a nationwide association, in 1850, in Philadelphia, the Eastern choruses formed a singers' union. As a result there were two singing society unions: the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund*, in the "West," and the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Sängerbund von Nordamerika*, in the East. At that point a controversy erupted over whether the names used were proper for rival, regional organizations! The Western societies changed their title to *Erster Deutscher Sängerbund von Nordamerika* or First German Singers' Union of North America. The other organization changed to *Nordöstlicher Sängerbund von Nordamerika* or Northeastern Singers' Union of North America. Further associations included the New England Singing Association; the New York Choruses founded the New York State Singers Association; the Texans formed the Texas Singing Association; the Northwestern states formed the Singers Association of the Northwest and the Pacific Singers Association covered choruses in the California area. Since then, the various regional

singing associations have held their own Song Festivals.

During the Song Festival of the North American Singers' Association at Louisville, Kentucky in 1877, delegates debated that too much homage was paid to high classic singing at the expense of "Volkslieder", and that as a result, the smaller singing societies with a limited number of voices could not participate in the average Song Festival. The singers from Columbus and Chillicothe championed the cause of "Volkslieder", but there was no decision to change direction. In 1888, a letter was sent to all Choruses from a Director that the Songs would be too hard for average singers and that therefore only semi-professional singers should participate in two of the songs!

Twentieth Century Challenges

The 20th century was to present unique problems for the NASB. Twice in that century, America went to war against Germany. During both wars, German-Americans and German activity came under much scrutiny. World War I brought much anti-German sentiment to the United States. After the 1914 national song festival, activity was curtailed drastically. In fact, no national festival was held again until the Chicago *Sängerfest* of 1924, organized to coincide with the 75th Anniversary of the NASB. Slowly, interest in German song and activities revived. Chicago hosted the song festival in 1938, which is the largest Fes-

tival to date with 181 choruses in attendance and over 5,880 singers participating. Notably, 1,500 ladies voices participated and the Central-Ohio district was represented by over 1,000 singers - both men and women!

These boom years were once again halted by World War II. This time, the anti-German sentiment was so great that the IRS went so far as to declare the NASB an 'unpatriotic organization' in 1944 and took away our non-profit status. Similarly, local choruses were challenged as un-American. The IRS' declaration could have been fatal to the NASB, but an appeal documenting the participation of German-Americans in the war effort against Germany was successful. The IRS recanted and the national festivals resumed in 1949, with Chicago hosting the 100th Anniversary Song Festival. Four of the songs were presented by the female singers. In 1949, records show that the ladies' choruses organized and elected Wilhelmine Schwartz as their first president.

During the following years, the men's singing societies and ladies' choruses were each organized into two separate organizations that would work together for each *Sängerfest*. It is interesting to note the inclusion of songs sung by the ladies and the inclusion of mixed voice music. At the Cincinnati *Sängerfest* the ladies sang four songs; in Detroit, three songs; New Orleans,

three and a mixed selection. In 1964, St. Louis, the ladies sang six songs and two mixed voice songs were sung!

Restructuring the NASB for the Future

With the number of choruses in the NASB declining to only 69 by 1983, several changes were considered to solidify the existence of the organization. In 1986, two major innovations were approved. First, the issue of having a separate umbrella organization for men and women was called into question. The primary impetus was the question of how mixed-voice choruses were to be represented. Previously, male representatives sat in the men's meetings and females sat in the ladies' meetings. Then there would be a combined meeting of all delegates to discuss what was decided in each room. This was hardly the best solution to conduct business and provide for the betterment of German Song. As more mixed-voice choruses came into being, this separation became more and more of a problem. Second, it was decided to hold delegates' meetings, a Singers' Day, the *Sängertag*, the year prior to the national Song Festival or *Sängerfest*. This would allow for better discussion of business matters and remove the burden of perhaps lengthy business meetings and discussions during the Song Festival. The first of the *Sängertage* was held in Evansville, Indiana in 1988 with others in Monroeville, Pennsylvania; Toledo, Ohio; Peoria,

Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; Cincinnati, Ohio, and returning to Pittsburgh in 2009.

During that first *Sängertag*, a new Constitution and By-laws was approved giving full rights and membership in the NASB, previously a male organization. This created one Board of Directors that serves male voice choruses, ladies' choruses and mixed-voice choruses. The transition to one organization has given both male and female singing societies the added confidence to grow in their singing, while maintaining the German heritage. Angela Thomas, of Columbus, Ohio, served as the last president of the ladies' association.

The changes proved to be somewhat beneficial, as the number of member choruses rose from 69 to 103 in nine short years. Today, membership has stabilized at about 80 choruses. Other pages on this website document the number of our choruses and our geographical dispersion.

Today, German choral singing continues as a robust activity, which draws thousands of enthusiastic participants and listeners from coast to coast.

