

## Carrying a tune: Coast Guard Headquarters Chorus

Usually when you hear a chorus of CG-9 voices, they are debating the merits of a particular acquisition strategy or negotiating the details of a contract. But several CG-9 voices can also be heard as part of the volunteer Coast Guard Headquarters Chorus.

The Headquarters Chorus exists to serve and support the Coast Guard and the federal workforce in the National Capital Region (NCR). This chorus was brought to life in 1988 by civilian employee Wayne Rardon (now deceased) to be mostly a recreational activity within Morale, Welfare and Recreation.

But word spread about these songbirds and soon they were asked to perform at headquarters ceremonies and at prayer breakfasts. In 1991, Don Johnson assumed the director role, which he currently still holds as a non-appropriated fund employee, having retired from Coast Guard Headquarters. Johnson states the chorus's primary song list consists of patriotic songs like "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "Semper Paratus," as they mostly perform at military ceremonies such as retirements and changes of command. But for the past six years, military members of the chorus have performed the national anthem and "God Bless America" at Coast Guard Night at Nationals Park and with the Headquarters Jazz Band at the annual holiday concert in December. They also occasionally perform pop songs, depending on the event. Current members are Johnson, Cmdr. Amanda Fahrig (CG-7611) as chorus manager, and singers Jenny Espiritu (CG-459), James Hotsko (CG-922), Laura Small (CG-9326) and Kira Swayne (CG-9323).

Fahrig, who sings alto, has managed the chorus for three years as a creative outlet and states her time with this worthy endeavor has been "a highlight of my time at headquarters." Her volunteerism came from a desire to maintain the chorus for future military and civilians working on the St. Elizabeths campus who may want to express their musical ability or who simply want to be a part of something fulfilling. Fahrig speaks fondly of her exposure to music growing up in New Orleans as a participant in her high school choir as well as various bands and an orchestra group, and in Glee Club at the Coast Guard Academy. She finds that being a chorus member allows her to network and find others who hold an appreciation for music.

Small, who found out about the chorus through the Base NCR Special Notices page, has been a member since 2016. As a child, she grew up watching musicals and sang in the church choir while in grade school. For those who may be curious about joining, Small recommends showing up to a few weekly practices to learn how to sing in synch with the group, then signing up to support one of the booked gigs from the chorus manager. "Sometimes, the volunteers are only needed to support the beginning of a ceremony," stated Small, "so the commitment might only be for 15 or 30 minutes." But there are other events that require multiple songs, necessitating staying until performance



The Coast Guard Chorus in 1994 with then-Secretary of Transportation Federico Peña. Photo courtesy of Cmdr. Amanda Fahrig.

### Chorus 101

Ask any person on the street today what the word chorus means, and they would probably say a group of people singing together, but the history is more convoluted. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word chorus is taken from the Greek word *khoros*, which is defined as a "round dance; dancing place." Yet, in Ancient Greece, a chorus was a group of people who participated in actor dialog and sang sporadically about the protagonist's actions during a play. You can see an example of this in the 1986 comedy musical film "Little Shop of Horrors." The 1960s three-girl, doo-wop chorus interact with poor Seymour Krelborn and sing about him and his "interesting plant," Audrey II, at various stages in the story.

The first use of polyphony, or multi-part music, in churches is reflected in 15th century Italian manuscripts, according to Britannica.com. Choirs with as many as 50 to 60 voices and alternating soloists gradually became the norm, replacing plainsong, or Gregorian chant singing. The transition to secular or minimally religious choirs began with the growth of operas in 16th and 17th century Italy; professional singers provided the choral portions of an oratorio, a large-scale musical composition normally based on scripture that is strictly a concert piece with no actors (the opposite of an opera). A good example is George Frideric Handel's 1741 well-known masterpiece, "Messiah" or Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah."

Over the centuries, choruses or choirs evolved to what we hear and see today: a group of people with various levels of musical ability singing religious or secular songs together either in a church or a community setting. Some of the biggest names in music entertainment perfected their voice and/or instrument playing while in a church choir, like Flavor Flav and Avril Lavigne (voice, drums, piano, guitar); Anderson .Paak (voice, drums); Ed Sheeran and Katy Perry (voice, guitar); Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake (voice); and John Legend, Jamie Foxx and even Snoop Dogg (voice, piano).

According to research by the University of Oxford (Oxford), the positive benefits of singing in a choir can be felt physiologically and psychologically. Physiologically, music impacts brain functioning, with each part responding to music differently. For example, a study by the University of South Florida provides a reason why Alzheimer patients can still play an instrument but can't recognize a loved one: Playing an instrument is like "muscle memory" for the cerebellum, which coordinates movement and serves as memory storage; length of time playing improves that muscle memory. Music can also trigger emotions in the amygdala; it can affect emotion responses after retrieving a memory in the hippocampus and can increase positive neurotransmitters such as  $\beta$ -endorphin, serotonin and dopamine, the last one making music, technically, as addictive as a drug. It's these increased neurotransmitter levels, according to the Oxford research, that lead to the positive psychological effects of happiness and well-being, thus reducing stress through joyous social interaction and being part of a group or a "pack."

Mission execution begins *here*.

NEXT

end and can vary in location (on campus versus offsite).

Volunteers decide for themselves whether they can fit the event into their schedule. “We perform at award ceremonies, promotions, retirements, commemorative events and days of cultural significance,” said Small. “When we agree to support an event, we’re committing ourselves to making the occasion feel as special as possible for the people who are at the center of the event. I’ve learned a lot about military culture and Coast Guard traditions from attending ceremonies over the years.”

Swayne, the newest member of the chorus at three months and who learned about it from Small, joined because of her passion for singing and her positive experiences as a chorus member in middle school. Of all the events she has performed for thus far, the one that left a lasting impression was her debut at the Juneteenth celebration. Though Swayne was nervous about performing in front of a large audience, the significance of the holiday, the enthusiastic audience turnout and the attendance of her two daughters inspired her and allowed her to move past her apprehension.

To be a member of the chorus, the requirement is simple: Have a willingness to sing. Plus, there is no tryout! “Musical talent doesn’t play as big a part as you might think because everyone sounds better in a group!” quipped Small. Basically, people just need to show up for the first two rehearsals in order to be added to the roster. The group meets weekly for a one-hour rehearsal and averages 12-15 performances a year. Because this is a volunteer group, “not everyone is readily available due to other obligations at headquarters, so we appreciate additional singers for all parts to provide flexibility and further opportunities in our scheduling,” stated Fahrig.

Want more information about joining the chorus? Email Fahrig at [Amanda.L.Fahrig@uscg.mil](mailto:Amanda.L.Fahrig@uscg.mil). To request a chorus performance, email Fahrig with the event details and the type of group needed (i.e., soloist, quartet or full chorus). For smaller events that don’t require a soloist, Johnson states he needs a minimum of four singers for the soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts.

For those who enjoy music, there really are no downsides to joining the chorus. Participants don’t need to have professional-level skill, the time commitment is flexible and the ability to read music is not required. One only need possess a yearning to serve the community while expressing the secret song in one’s heart. ■



The Coast Guard Headquarters Chorus at a recent performance. Courtesy photo.



The Coast Guard Headquarters Chorus at Nationals Park in 2023. Photo courtesy of Cmdr. Amanda Fahrig.

### If singing isn’t your thing...

consider joining other musical groups, such as the Headquarters Jazz Band. Contact Tim Meyers at [Timothy.E.Meyers@uscg.mil](mailto:Timothy.E.Meyers@uscg.mil) or Julie Miller at [Julie.E.Miller4@uscg.mil](mailto:Julie.E.Miller4@uscg.mil) for more information on that group.