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Gender Inclusivity in the ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir



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The Philadelphia-based ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir wove social justice issues into its original mission. With its start coinciding with the social revolutions of the 1970s, the choir performs works by and about women and became the first and longest-running feminist choir in the nation. However, recent social movements prompted the choir to question its internal structures to become more gender inclusive. The choir contended with the meaning of feminism and whether to broaden its conception of gender to include transgender and nonbinary singers. Through a multi-year process, the choir reworked its organizational structure to include a committee on gender inclusion, changed its name and dress code, and sought educational initiatives to address generational differences around the concept of feminism. This study examines the choir's internal work toward gender inclusion and invites readers to weigh decisions around vocal parts due to the choir's new inclusive practices and consider whether such decisions depart from the original mission of the choir. The case concludes by asking readers to establish a long-term plan that keeps the choir focused on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.



This case study was prepared by **Steven Feldman**. Eastman Case Studies are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.



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Creating Safe Spaces for Women

Fueled by the surge of social justice activism across the country in 2020, music organizations in the United States are newly prioritizing internal, reflective work. Among efforts, long-standing classical music institutions are hiring diversity officers and programming works created by minorities. Music organizations and academic departments are examining the field's foundational structures through conversations and research on representation.

Although music organizations are progressing towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, one organization built this work into its mission long ago. Founded in 1975 in Philadelphia, the ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir was created with the intention of uplifting and celebrating the voices of women. With its beginnings coinciding with the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, the Stonewall riots, and the burgeoning

Women's Rights Movement, ANNA Crusis made social justice a central goal. Founder Cathy Roma grew up in an open and progressive Philadelphia Quaker community that openly supported LGBTQ equality. In an interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, she explained, "I was actually putting together these very important things—my Quaker peace and justice sensibilities, my interest in women, my lesbian self, and my classical training." Up until ANNA Crusis' founding, men directed most women's choirs. Similarly, the majority of repertoire performed at women's choir concerts featured works either written by men or depicted stereotypical feminine imagery such as flowers, birds, or heterosexual romance. Roma sought to create a safe space for straight, lesbian, and bisexual women.

Communicating authentic stories about women through musical performances for almost 50 years, ANNA Crusis is the first and longest-running feminist choir in the United States. ANNA Crusis

became a premier choir and leader for women's and feminist choirs nationwide as the first women's choir to become a member of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA). By exceeding what was expected of a feminist choir, ANNA Crusis helped redefine the genre of women's choral music. The choir currently consists of 45 members and performs works such as suffragist anthems, work songs, love songs, and other evocations about the lives of women. It has commissioned pieces from a variety

of notable composers such as Andrea Clearfield, Pauline Oliveros, and Janika Vandervelde. ANNA Crusis also won several awards, including the Brigit Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Despite ANNA Crusis' impact on the choral music landscape, its work around inclusivity continues. In response to the increase in transgender visibility in recent years, the choir undertook a journey of reflection and change. Members within the choir voiced their opinions that an organization that prides itself in its inclusive values should think deeply and critically about how it can accept and welcome transgender and nonbinary singers. How can the choir claim to offer a safe space for all women if transgender women and nonbinary individuals felt excluded or out of place within the choir? To address this, the choir underwent a multi-year process of reflection that included a committee restructuring, educational workshops and panels, changes to membership requirements, and a formal name change for the choir.

Forming the "Body of ANNA"

The process began with reflecting upon the organizational structure within the choir. Before Miriam Davidson joined the choir as its artistic director in 2012, the choir exhibited a patriarchal structure,

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with information and decisions disseminating from the top down to the bottom. When Davidson arrived, she progressively reorganized the organization into a circular structure by creating committees that makeup what is known as “the body of ANNA.” In this structure, choir leadership is spread over several committees, each named after a different body part and with individual responsibilities. Disaggregating responsibility allowed for a more equitable division of power among decision-making bodies. The committee structure and responsibilities are detailed in **Appendix I**. Although social justice values exist in all the committees, members of the choir agreed that it felt insincere to add gender-inclusion work as a sub-responsibility to the preexisting committees. For that reason, in the summer of 2018, they created a new Gender Inclusion Committee to center the work more prominently within the choir. The creation of the committee represented the first step among many in ANNA Crusis’ process towards gender inclusivity.

At its start, the Gender Inclusion Committee had about 17 members. Over time, the group shrunk in size to

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a core group of around five or six members. The committee initially attracted a considerable number of members because some members believed they needed to be on the committee for their voices and concerns to be heard. They worried members would be excluded or

asked to leave the choir. For example, choir member Sarah Darrow joined the committee out of a desire to ensure that the choir would stay on track with its original mission of maintaining a safe space for women. Eventually, some individuals stepped back after realizing their voices would continue to be heard. Ultimately, this allowed the committee to reduce to a smaller size that would allow a dedicated group

of individuals to focus their efforts and streamline decision making. Although none of the choir members identified as transgender at the time, some nonbinary members, as well as members who use they/them pronouns, joined the Gender Inclusion Committee at its start. Cisgender members of the Gender Inclusion Committee welcomed and appreciated the contributions of trans and nonbinary singers in the choir but did not want to burden such members with educating the choir. They worried that trans and nonbinary members would feel expected to become spokespeople for their identities. Once realizing their voices would still be heard as choir members, several of the members who use they/them pronouns stepped back from committee responsibilities.

Teaching Inclusion

Most members of the choir desired to learn more about gender-inclusive practices. However, some of the older members of the choir who grew up through the earlier waves of feminism initially felt unsure about why the choir needed to change. Shelley Collier, a member of the Gender Inclusion Committee, explained that it was important to “provide a brave space where everyone didn’t have to be on the same page, and that’s okay. Ignorance simply means not knowing. It doesn’t mean not wanting to know.”

Similarly, some of the choir members who grew up in the newer wave of feminism, which is deeply tied to the sense of urgency heightened by social media, felt that the pace of change moved too slowly. However, they joined the choir without a full understanding of the history of ANNA Crusis as well as the history of women’s choirs more broadly. To promote understanding, the choir attempted to educate all members on the tenants of feminism and the organization’s historical roots. Throughout the entire educational process, there remained an atmosphere of care and intentionality. Choir member Julie Sheetz shared that “there was a lot of attending to the health of the community as well as to the needs of individual members.” This attention fostered a sense of trust,

which helped members develop a greater capacity for empathy with one another.

According to choir member Estela Noguera-Ortega, there were three distinct periods in the choir's transitional period of growth: education, empathy-building, and action. To assist with the first phase of education around gender identity, gender expression, and trans inclusivity, the choir sought the help of the Transgender Training Institute (TTI). Based in Philadelphia and founded in 2015 by Dr. Eli R. Green, TTI's purpose is to "provide training and consulting services, facilitated by transgender and non-binary people, with the goal of contributing to a more just, equitable and affirming world." TTI offers a variety of services for clients, such as 30 to 90-minute webinars, classes, a two-day in-person or three-day online Ally/Advocate Training Camp, and other customized training.

In the initial stages, Green came in for a weekend workshop on Trans 101 information, which reviewed important terminology and current issues in the transgender community and discussed various ways of supporting and affirming transgender and nonbinary singers. After the initial workshop, Green met with small groups to provide more focused educational support. After the workshops, however, Green told Davidson that he felt he was not the right person to lead these conversations due to his identity and lived experiences. He stepped back and referred the choir to a different member of the TTI team who has more experience with women-identifying communities.

In the second phase, the choir sought help building empathy among choir members. First and foremost, the choir tried to build empathy for transgender and nonbinary communities among its cisgender members. It hosted a panel of trans and nonbinary singers from outside of ANNA Crusis to share their experiences. Several members shared that they

valued this opportunity to learn more specifically from folks with these identities without placing the burden of education onto the trans and nonbinary singers within ANNA Crusis. Additionally, the choir sought to

build empathy for each other by recognizing that people are coming to the group with different levels of understanding and different life experiences.

After several rounds of small group workshops and conversations with TTI, as well as empathy-building activities, the choir now felt ready to put a plan in place to continue

the work on their own, with specific actionable items.

Taking Action

At this point, the choir felt ready to have conversations as a group about specific outcomes to pursue. They decided upon immediate areas for focus: concert dress, repertoire, membership requirements, and the name of the choir.

First, the choir implemented changes to concert dress requirements. For example, accent colors could include bowties in addition to items such as scarfs or jewelry. This allowed more options for folks to express their gender in ways that felt affirming while maintaining consistency with the choir at large.

In terms of repertoire, the choir sought out works by and for transgender singers. While many musical works are not composed for transgender singers specifically, there are choral pieces that feature inclusive voice parts. This is evident not only in what labels are used for the voicings (e.g., soprano/alto vs. upper/lower women) but also in pitch and voicing options in the score's notation. Additionally, they moved away from works with exclusive messaging. In a past concert, the choir sang a song with lyrics that depict a blessing about different parts of a woman's body. Sheetz shared that "on the one hand, it was this

"Ignorance simply means not knowing. It doesn't mean not wanting to know." -Shelley Collier

beautiful affirmation of women's bodies that would be very much in sync with what we want to be doing, but also some of the allusions did not fit the experience of many women." While the song seemed meaningful and important, it also felt disingenuous to perform because some members of the choir may have different relationships with their bodies for reasons that may or may not relate to gender.

When considering membership of the choir, the group discussed adjusting their language from gender identity to voice parts. This spurred conversations about membership. For example, rather than only allowing women to join the choir would they now allow women, transgender men, and nonbinary singers who can sing in the soprano and alto voice range? The choir decided affirmatively upon this change using a vote by ballot, which allowed all members anonymity and inclusion regardless of the outcome. See **Appendix II**. The choir also questioned whether to list trans women as an option; however, a member made it clear that trans women are women and, therefore, are already welcome in the group.

When considering membership of the choir, the group discussed adjusting their language from gendered to voice parts.

The last action item the choir undertook involved a formal name change for the organization. The choir had been operating under the name "ANNA Crusis Women's Choir." After a great deal of discussion about whether a name change would foster inclusivity or if it might erase the organization's history, the group put it to a vote and ultimately decided in favor of a name change. See **Appendix III**. After a first vote, the group did not have a winner based on a three-fourths majority threshold. As a result, they removed the least popular name (option A), took it to a second vote based on highest number of votes, and ended with ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir (option C) as the winner. See **Appendix IV**.

Facing Discord

ANNA Crusis' inclusivity efforts did not occur without complications. Choir members had mixed opinions and feelings about the entire reflection process and the resulting proposed organizational changes. Importantly, there seemed to be a divide among the choir members based loosely, though not entirely, on age. For example, some of the older, longtime members of the choir felt they were pushed too quickly to change and adapt. In contrast, several younger, newer choir members felt changes were occurring too slowly. This disconnect around the desired speed at which progress should occur was not primarily in backlash to the desire to be more trans-inclusive; however, many of the older members of the choir worried that the changes would take away from the original purpose of the organization as a uniquely safe space for women. They worried that the group might become a new organization with different values that had progressed beyond the needs of the older group members.

Choir members had mixed opinions and feelings about the entire reflection process and the resulting proposed organizational changes.

Some worried that the choir would lose members due to this process. In fact, one person did express feelings of being mistreated and left the choir. Additionally, some members also left because of their own gender transition. Based on their own journey of self-discovery, they concluded that ANNA Crusis no longer presented as a space for them, despite the organization's good intentions and positive direction towards change. They left the group amicably and much to the sadness of the other choir members.

Continuing Inclusion Work

ANNA Crusis' transformational work tremendously impacted the culture within the group. By centering transgender and nonbinary individuals, the group

reaffirmed its commitment to Roma's vision of "radical social transformation." By and large, the public responded positively to these changes. Most visible to the public was the organization's name change, which was met with an outpouring of support from concertgoers, friends and family of the choir, and former choir singers. While transgender membership hasn't yet increased, the choir set the groundwork over the past few years for gender inclusivity among its members.

What's next for ANNA Crusis? When asked about how the choir will continue its work as it strives to be more trans-inclusive, Davidson shared that the group would need to think more critically about voicings within the group. Currently, the group is structured as an SSAA choir (Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Alto 1, Alto 2). However, she noted that women tend to sing tenor parts more easily than men can sing soprano or alto parts. While testosterone (the hormone most prescribed for trans men) does lower one's vocal range, testosterone suppressants such as spironolactone (the hormone most prescribed for trans women) do not raise one's vocal range. In other words, both trans women as well as trans men who are on testosterone may have lower vocal ranges than cisgender women and thus may be unable to sing in the soprano or alto range.

How might Davidson address this challenge? If to be more trans-inclusive, the group defines itself based on vocal range alone, should cisgender men be included in the choir? After all, some cisgender men can sing in the upper ranges—countertenors being the most notable example. However, allowing cisgender men into the choir may clash with the group's original purpose of serving as a safe space for folks who have been historically oppressed by cisgender men. What other kinds of structures would promote trans inclusivity

without allowing cisgender men? As demonstrated earlier, major changes within the choir can create conflict, especially between older and newer members of the choir. Members struggled to reconcile the need for progressive change and action with the desire to preserve the history behind its foundation. To mitigate this, the Gender Inclusion Committee could consider creating a conflict resolution guide to aid members in facilitating conversations. What information should be included to instruct or advise members of the choir to handle conflict with one another when it arises? How might the committee encourage active listening and respect while holding individuals accountable?

While ANNA Crusis enacted several positive changes, other avenues exist for fostering inclusivity. One option would be to create a sustainable inclusivity

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plan that includes yearly events, training, discussions, etc. As the artistic director, what specific actionable items should Davidson include in this plan? For example, what topics should trainings cover? Also, how often would the trainings or discussions occur? Who would lead these? Would you seek external expertise such as the Transgender Training Institute, or

would you utilize members of the organization to lead conversations? A truly sustainable plan should also include an outline for semi-regular review to make any necessary adjustments to reflect shifting goals and priorities. How often should choir leaders revisit the inclusivity plan? Should changes need to be made, how should choir members be informed of such changes and/or included in the process of discussing and making the changes?

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Appendix 1: The Body of ANNA



Breath	• Musical considerations with lens on racial and trans justice
Hands	• Membership issues of health, finance, driving, isolation, connection
Face	• Visibility issues for robust online presence and concert footage releases
Muscle	• Performance production issues for live and virtual venues
Heart	• Ensuring ANNA's financial stability and growth
Head	• Social focus on trans inclusion and racial focus
Pulse	• Integrate all of these moving parts

Appendix II

Question: Anna Crusis will continue to welcome new members who are women—both cis and trans. All current members of the choir will continue to be welcome regardless of identity. Going forward:

a) Should Anna Crusis welcome new members who can sing in the soprano/alto range who are nonbinary?

i) Yes – **62 votes**

ii) No – **0 votes**

iii) Abstain – **0 votes**

b) Should Anna Crusis welcome new members who can sing in the soprano/alto range who are transmen?

i) Yes – **49 votes**

ii) No – **12 votes**

iii) Abstain – **1 vote**

Appendix III

Question: Our choir's name is currently Anna Crusis Women's Choir. We have listed below the name options that have come out of choir conversations over the past two years, plus an option to continue generating new ideas. Should our name: (**select all answers you would be happy with)

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| a) Continue to be "ANNA Crusis Women's Choir," both legally and in common usage? – | 18 votes |
| b) Continue to be "ANNA Crusis Women's Choir," legally but do business as "ANNA Crusis?" – | 34 votes |
| c) Legally change to "ANNA Crusis," and change our usage? – | 32 votes |
| d) Legally change to "ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir," and change our usage? – | 33 votes |
| e) Prefer we change our name, but that we wait to decide after more fully considering the options. – | 18 votes |

Appendix IV

Question: Our choir's name is currently Anna Crusis Women's Choir. We have listed below the name options that have come out of choir conversations over the past two years, plus an option to continue generating new ideas. Should our name:

- a) Continue to be "ANNA Crusis Women's Choir," legally but do business as "ANNA Crusis?" – **12 votes**
- b) Legally change to "ANNA Crusis," and change our usage? – **15 votes**
- c) Legally change to "ANNA Crusis Feminist Choir," and change our usage? – **36 votes**



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