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Tonality: Unity through Diversity



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Tonality: Unity through Diversity

Founded in 2016 by Alexander Lloyd Blake, Tonality is a Los Angeles-based professional choral ensemble that aims to connect with audiences by illuminating issues of shared humanity through song. Refreshingly diverse in their backgrounds, the members of Tonality are united under a common goal of social justice as expressed through wide-ranging vocal art. This case study surveys the impetus behind the formation of Tonality. It reviews some of the group's early programs and highlights its ability to stir audiences to action at its performances. Tonality's effectiveness lies in live performance, and the themes it embraces have the power to move audiences beyond Los Angeles. Its director contemplates how touring might work with the group's bold artistic mission.



Alexander Lloyd Blake | A Choral Spectrum

This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson, Associate Professor of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music. The **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.

Profile of a Conductor

Alexander Lloyd Blake was destined for a life in music. By age five, he had joined the adult choir at his church, understanding the nature of the harmony better than some of the choir's seasoned members. He soaked up choral music through his formative years in high school. And even though his school didn't offer an advanced placement course in music, he took the test anyway and passed without any assistance. Moved by his experiences in song, Alex studied vocal performance at Wake Forest University. Graduate studies followed—also in choral conducting—at UCLA and USC.

The year after he graduated Wake Forest, Alex continued to work there full time as an admissions counselor. During this time, he was able to expand his musical interests, venturing into arrangements of choral music while honing his skills as a conductor. A high school in Asheville, North Carolina (about a two-hour drive southwest of Wake Forest) had programmed Alex's arrangement of the African-American spiritual "Deep River" for an upcoming concert. The young black conductor was offered the chance to conduct his own arrangement, which he quickly accepted. After a day's work, he drove to Asheville to stay overnight with a friend before his session the next day. What happened the next morning would change him forever.

When Alex walked toward his car in the morning to retrieve some materials, he noticed that a police car was parked behind him. As the conductor approached his vehicle, a police officer got out of the car and asked him who he was. Alex replied with his name and that he was on his way to teach. The officer did not respond, but rather asked the young man—dressed in a Wake Forest jacket, vest, and tie—to produce identification. The conductor said he did not have ID on him, that it was left inside the house. "I'll wait," the officer said ominously. Alex went back into the house to retrieve his ID. Nothing became of this encounter.

The suburban neighborhood was predominantly white. Alex reflected, "I don't know why, but I guess

someone must have called and reported that I was there. I realize that my experience could have been worse. I also realize that we still have a long way to go in terms of interacting as members of a community." His unjustified brush with law enforcement left the talented musician upset and embarrassed. What, other than the color of his skin, would have caused this incident? What about Alex appeared threatening to someone in the neighborhood? He was sure that this was not the problem of a single officer with poor judgment but instead a social circumstance that was deeply ingrained.

Alex still conducted at the local Asheville high school that day, but the episode that morning could never be erased in his mind. It changed him too. "Unity and social justice have always been interests, but after my encounter [with police] I was more determined to find a way to combat this societal pattern so that I and others could live in a world where we can truly be judged on character alone and not on these things that we decide make it impossible to understand each other."

**"...we still have a long way to go in terms of interacting as members of a community."
– Alex Blake**

Raising Voices of Diversity

Alex Blake began to see the ills of structural racism more clearly as he matured. He remembered being eyed by security in grocery stores and being approached by police officers when gathering with large groups of friends. He had accepted that unfair and uncomfortable state of being for too long. Always a musician, Alex knew his response would have to come through his art.

As a trained choral singer and conductor, Alex noticed hurdles in his own discipline. The lack of racial diversity among elite performers of classical music was glaring. How was he to feel like he belonged when everyone

around him looked different? He had few if any role models as well. He was encouraged though by a performance he saw as an undergraduate at Wake Forest. The performance was of a Bach cantata that included an African-American bass soloist. Seeing a high-caliber artist that looked like him gave Alex a feeling that he belonged in the choral profession and that he could keep pursuit of his goal to excel in the field.

After finishing his education in Los Angeles, Alex wanted to establish a professional choir of his own. He envisioned not only a group that was committed to a high quality vocal sound, but also one that addressed the racial imbalance of the choral landscape. By establishing a choir, Alex would be able to develop relationships with talented singers, offer quality art for communal benefit, and ideally generate positive social impact. Alex already had some singers in mind for the group, but he also asked his colleague Zanaida Robles—a local conductor, singer, and composer—for some names of local musicians. In a message to prospective singers from June 2016, Alex asked if they would be interested in participating in a rehearsal to see whether it would be possible to form a choir that was centered on diversity, unity, and peace. The young conductor was relatively new not just to the Los Angeles area but also to the professional choral world. The L.A. choral community was vibrant already and had no shortage of professional talent. Many of the

city's outstanding singers had several gigs already and were booked heavily.

The response was "ecstatic," Alex recalled. Positive vibes flowed from these prospective singers; many were willing to try out this concept. The maturing

conductor knew he was not the only one who felt a kinship with these people: "Many of us are feeling a need to combat hate with love and want to do our part."

**"Many of us are feeling a need to combat hate with love and want to do our part."
– Zanaida Robles**

With Zanaida's help, Alex assembled a group of 25 like-minded people who took quickly to the director's mission to sing in solidarity around contemporary social issues of urgent importance. The initial meeting was just the beginning of a special ensemble that would soon enrich the artistic landscape of the Greater Los Angeles area. The group was called Tonicity, a choral arts enterprise that serves as an intentional artistic response to issues of racial division in the United States.

Zanaida Robles herself took the opportunity to test out the ensemble and recalled that inaugural rehearsal. "We loved each other," she remembered. Alex reminisced, "All the stresses melted away, and our passion of making music together was what bonded us physically in that space and emotionally in the moment. That is the power of choral music. That is what we can provide for our community. Every voice is special and creates a harmony that speaks louder than any division."

Zanaida emphasized that Tonicity was not a "black organization." The racial composition of the members may even defy the expectation of homogeneity one might have for a black conductor leading a choir. The attention was not on blackness but on the unity reflected in a group of individuals with diverse backgrounds. The inclusiveness did not extend just to racial heritage; the group's members spanned various ages, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations. With his mix of singers, Alex was most interested in revealing the "immediately visible" diversity of racial backgrounds that Tonicity could offer. Zanaida was also quick to point out that the ensemble was more than just a vision of its conductor to bring together top-notch singers from all walks of life; it all changed when he began directing the group in song. "With Alex's hands on it, it became extraordinary," she recalled. Nearly moved to tears from that first rehearsal, Alex likewise recognized the rare gift that was on display.

Early Returns

Within three months of that first rehearsal, Tonicity was ready to share its music in performance. The musicians were of the highest quality already, but their message delivered in song was urgent for the community. Tonicity's first concert was scheduled at St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church, Hollywood in September 2016. The program "Our Voice, Our Call" included music ranging from Johannes Brahms to Melissa Dunphy. Indian composer Reena Esmail, whose works straddle Hindustani classical and western classical music, was commissioned to write *Tuttarana* for the occasion. Esmail was in appearance that evening and confided in Alex that it was one of the few times she had been amid trained classical musicians and did not feel like "the other." Overwhelmingly positive feedback also followed from others in attendance at the inaugural concert. A young audience member told one of the singers in Tonicity that he was having a really bad week, but that the power of the music in that performance "saved his life"! The nascent mission seemed to be working.

The social and political landscape of the United States was both dynamic and increasingly toxic headed into 2017. Unarmed killings of black men at the hands of police were gaining national attention with help from the Black Lives Matter movement, begun in 2014 with the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown

in Ferguson, Missouri. The death of Freddie Gray after severe injuries he sustained from Baltimore police officers sparked violent protests in Baltimore in April 2015, and the shooting of nine African-American churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina later that year by a white supremacist brought further

national unrest. Alex was convinced that Tonicity would need to do more than just sing about uniting Americans. There was an opportunity to use the choral

art to address head-on the issues of social and racial injustice that were tearing the country's fabric apart, along with other serious social matters such as suicide prevention and awareness of sexual assault.

Audiences expanded quickly in the first two years of Tonicity's performances, reflective of the breadth of repertory it could offer. A concert in 2019 on the theme of mental health, for example, featured works by sixteenth-century madrigalist Carlo Gesualdo and popular song arrangements by English singer-songwriter Jessie J. The diversity of the group's members further drew in concertgoers of a wide range, including from different races. An especially poignant concert in October 2017 was titled "Put Your Guns Down." Not only did Alex program works about gun violence, but he would set aside time during the concert for tragic firsthand stories about gun violence. The director further made arrangements with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence to provide resources at the concert for those looking to take a more active role in combatting gun violence on a local level.

The program was eerily timely. Six days before the first gun violence concert, a brutal incident occurred in Las Vegas when a man opened fire on a music festival from his hotel room. 60 people were killed and over 400 were wounded in this devastating mass shooting—still the deadliest mass shooting committed by an individual on U.S. soil to date. The wounds were wide open again, as the public cried out for solutions. The violent rampage hit all too close to Tonicity: a friend of one of the singers died in the event. With the floor open during the concert on gun violence, the singer spoke in his friend's honor during that performance. Audiences were moved by the emotional weight of the singing and the powerful stories told. Alex redoubled his commitment to the power of this art: "I am proud that people consider our concerts as healing (though difficult) experiences that allow those in attendance to emotionally involve themselves in empathy and love for their neighbors."

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More concerts on a wide array of pressing topics were on the horizon. Justice, peace, and other shared values of humanity remained as centering ideals in

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programming. Tonality's ability to demonstrate visibly on stage the issues it sang about brought extra potency to the performances. The group could sing about the concerns of LGBTQ+ people and the lives of immigrants in the United States because some of its members identified with these populations. Tonality's audiences around the Greater Los Angeles area were also included in these groups. Messaging was as important as representation. Alex views his concert programming as "storytelling supported by music." The director is keen on cultivating expressive ways of delivering text. He mused, "When we can pair an African song with a Buddhist text to express prayer, or text from Anne Frank with Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* to convey hope, we start to communicate the human connection we sometimes lose due to the divisions within communities."

Social Justice Concerts with Action

Already in his early career, Alex Blake saw something that many artists did not. He noticed a disparity between many well-intentioned arts organizations that were performing concerts with social justice themes and ones that inspired audiences to act on these themes. Audiences might be moved emotionally at the effect of the art, but they were then released back into the world with no specific plan of action. Having witnessed too many of these missed opportunities in performances, Alex hoped for something different with Tonality's concerts. He wanted listeners not only to be motivated but to take action. As modern programming produces a new canon of works and knocks down barriers to access in the arts, audiences are still often

left with words that may inspire momentarily but do not motivate enough to act after a performance. "It's the difference between intentions and actions," Alex explains. A concert may promote social justice from the stage, but there are no instructions in a musical score on how any audience member is supposed to respond emotionally or physically, whether in the moment or after the performance.

Tonality's talented singers cannot be expected to both perfect their art and deliver real social change. But the group does have the power to focus attention on an issue and then partner with people and institutions who have studied these issues and who have a better shot at turning the affective words and music into action. Like the Brady Campaign's appearance in a concert 2017, Alex wanted to connect audiences to organizations that were in a position to effect change. Speaking out was only a first step toward building a just society; more mobilization for causes was needed.

Under Alex's direction, Tonality could act as a conduit between audience communities and organizations that can

work toward a healthier and more just society. The ensemble's spirited and eclectic concert offerings can be a catalyst for people from the Los Angeles area to consider issues more deeply through an emotional connection that only expressive sound in live performance can bring. Performances of music at a high level demand attention that is above everyday speech and offer an alternative to a cluttered, charged social media environment. Guest speakers from community organizations can then channel these emotions into practical next steps for those who are so moved. A Tonality series from 2018, "Democracy in Action," featured an organization that allowed unregistered voters in the audience to register on

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site. In the 2019 program “You Are Not Alone,” another organization gave audiences steps to take when encountering loved ones who may be having suicidal thoughts.

Tonicity has steadily developed a feel for important issues both within its organization and outwardly in cities and around the United States. As its guiding hand, Alex has helped craft concerts that address pressing challenges of social consequence. At the same time, he knows he is by no means an expert in every thematic area he pursues. Sometimes he is only acquainted with an issue, not having had direct experience with it. Whatever program idea he selects, he has learned to ensure that all voices are heard in developing those topics, especially from others in the choir or community who may have valuable input on concert themes.

In 2018, Alex wanted to shine a light on #MeToo, an international social movement that took aim at powerful men who had sexually abused women and silenced them. In his planning for an all-female concert, Alex solicited advice not just from female singers but also from female composers, directors, and board members. Although he approached them with a broad idea for how this theme might be played out, the group of female voices convinced him to take a narrower tack. Inspired by their counsel, Alex developed a program that focused not on violence and victimization but the triumph of women breaking silence in the wake of these vicious episodes. Alex also wondered about the optics of appearing on the podium for these concerts as the lone man on stage; it might be better to have the program conducted by a woman. His advisors again persuaded him to stay involved in the performance. #MeToo, they reasoned, was not just about women’s victory over predators, but also about men’s awareness of this issue. The concert title “Do You Hear Her?” was not aimed solely at women; men needed to hear this as much as, or even more than, women. True to Alex’s philosophy of partnering with organizations to advance causes raised in concert,

Tonicity collaborated with Me Too International and Women Like Us Foundation, which offered resources on site at the concert and gave audience members the chance to become part of their mailing lists.

Spreading the Word

With his artistic philosophy steady after almost five years of directing Tonicity, Alex Blake had further insight on areas of improvement in modern concert life. Arts organizations are always trying to invent and explore many themes across performance seasons. They bounce from canonical “warhorses” (like Handel’s *Messiah* or Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*) to contemporary commissions on special themes and could toggle related repertory infinitely. As a fledgling music organization in the congested artistic landscape of Los Angeles, Tonicity had to first establish its artistic scope and versatility in its inaugural programs. Alex himself also needed to see what the group could handle. Tonicity’s programs touched on major issues and had already affected thousands of people from Greater Los Angeles. The group could explore more topics on social justice, but Alex was beginning to think that Tonicity did not necessarily need to move on to new themes and programs under that umbrella. “Our themes are not immediately disposable like most concerts you hear. Our performances are around issues. These issues don’t go away, and Tonicity is well equipped to revisit them.” What if Tonicity could speak to a wider audience while returning to its most successful programs?

Alex was intrigued by the idea of reprising concert themes in Tonicity’s existing portfolio of offerings. Outside of Los Angeles, these poignant programs and performances would be entirely new. Tonicity could bring its musical art to performance venues around the United States. Alex wondered if touring with some

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of Tonicity's most powerful concert programs could spread the group's message and influence more broadly. The director believed in the value of live performance. Clips on social media were ephemeral and produced more passive responses than action. On-site concerts seemed to move audiences in a different way.

Professional arts organizations that tour venues in the United States are in contact with hundreds of concert presenters who have the capacity to host groups on dedicated arts series. Relationships with these presenters are crucial to stringing together a promising tour. Because arts organizations typically do not have the capacity to form relationships with a broad range of presenters, booking agents can sometimes assist them with their touring ambitions. But an agent comes at a cost, something to which new artists are often wary to commit. Agents with large portfolios may indeed have wide reach among presenters, but they can also lack the personal touch needed to advocate for an individual artist or program. This last point is crucial in the context of Tonicity. Its concerts are of a high artistic level, but its social justice mission is uncommon among professional touring ensembles. It is unclear whether an agent would be

able to articulate this aspect of Tonicity's pitch. An additional task would also need to be considered if Tonicity took its show on the road: in search of action from its audiences, the choral group would have to ensure that advocates for designated causes were in attendance in whatever cities it visited.

One potential tour city that Alex had on his mind was Asheville, North Carolina, where he conducted a high school choir in his arrangement of "Deep River." It was also, of course, the site of the indelible racial profiling incident that drove Alex toward his life's calling in social justice through the choral art. The conductor mused: "I'd love to take our gun violence concert there, and let people hear the stories of people and the emotions of our musicians. Then we can build empathy, start a conversation, and create real change." He admitted that the thrust of Tonicity's concerts is a different kind of sell to presenters. It was no longer about sheer entertainment but rather about fostering human connections through some of the most difficult issues of contemporary life. Tonicity offered a new brand of artistic excellence that was turning heads in Los Angeles. Could it have a similar effect on audiences in other places? Alex was eager to start contacting arts presenters in North Carolina.

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