



Elaine Brown

Breaking Down Barriers through Song

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*"Music is a great glue: it holds us
all together." Elaine Brown*

Elaine Brown (1910-1997) is recognized as one of the outstanding choral directors of the twentieth century in the United States. She dedicated her musical gifts to the solution of humanity's persistent dilemma: How can various racial and cultural backgrounds and religious persuasions achieve a measure of peace and harmony in their daily relationships with one another? Believing that music is a force for democracy and community, Elaine Brown devoted all of her time and energy to search for ways to help people understand one another.

She had an impact on a local and international level to break down social barriers, fighting for equality and integration through the medium of choral music. A search of the *Choral Journal* index shows only a few mentions of her name, none a main feature article and no articles or references later than her "In Memoriam," which appeared in 1997. In this article, published in the twentieth anniversary year since her passing, the wider ACDA audience will learn about a conductor whose legacy lives on today, extending beyond the choral profession.



Photographs and letters in this article are courtesy of the Elaine Brown archives, housed at the ACDA National Office in Oklahoma.

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Biography

Elaine (Isaacson) Brown was born in Ridgway, Pennsylvania, on March 10, 1910. Her mother was a choral director and organist who taught Elaine piano at a young age. “I was brought up with musical parents,” she wrote. “My mother, had she been trained beyond what she was, would have been a very fine musician. My father was a singer.”¹ At the age of sixteen, she left to pursue a music education degree at the Bush Conservatory in Chicago. She started her first teaching job in 1929 in Jamestown, New York. After attending a performance from Westminster Choir College under the direction of John Finley Williamson, she left teaching to pursue a bachelor’s degree at Westminster (1934), going on to receive a master’s from Temple University (1945). It was at that time she joined the faculty at Temple, where she stayed until 1956. Elaine left Temple to devote herself full time to Singing City, and Robert Page became the new director of choral activities.

Singing City

During her tenure at Temple, Elaine Brown was asked to lead a volunteer community choir at Fellowship House, an agency in Philadelphia bringing people of all backgrounds together in sixty-seven programs. In the chapter on Elaine in the book *Wisdom, Wit, and Will: Women Choral Conductors on Their Art* (2009), Joan Whittemore writes, “Fellowship House agreed to sponsor the choir, providing rehearsal space and a budget of fifty dollars. The first year, the choir gave six public performances. By Elaine Brown’s own account the choir was not very good, but she was committed to it because everyone felt there was a need for it in the community. The new choir had two basses, four tenors, and thirty-four women.”² Under Elaine’s leadership, The Fellowship House Choir was soon presenting over forty performances each year.³

In 1948, Elaine transformed the Fellowship House Choir into Singing City—today one of the most respected cultural institutions in Philadelphia. She reorganized the program, hired two voice teachers, and by 1957, the choir boasted one hundred members and an annual budget of six thousand dollars.

Temple University’s connection to Singing City was established with encouragement and cooperation from



Elaine Brown with Julius Herford

Temple administrators and staff. Elaine had designed and directed Temple’s first baccalaureate degree with a major in choral conducting. As part of the undergraduate program, conducting students were expected to participate in Singing City, exposing them to an interracial, interfaith choir whose excellence was at the highest level. The choir comprised singers who represented professionals, teachers, domestics, lawyers, housewives, and even graduate students. They were people of color, people of various faiths, people of varying economic means, people who shared their differences with each other. Music sung represented various faiths and countries, and of course Negro spirituals, as they were then called.

Singing City soon became a premier group in Philadelphia, singing regularly with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and community orchestras. There were summer and winter workshops; the summer events were held at Crozier Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, and featured Julius Herford, who presented in-depth studies of composers such as J.S. Bach, Josquin des Prez, Orlande di Lasso, and Claudio Monteverdi. As part of these workshops, attendees were introduced to Jane Hardester, Joseph Flummerfelt, Graeme Cowen, Richard Bloesch, Robert Molison, and others who became interns in Singing City.

In 1955—just one year after Brown vs. Board of Education, the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision to desegregate the public schools—Elaine planned a choir tour to the South. She arranged for the singers to go through training sessions to help them better understand the at-

mosphere they would encounter. When they arrived, it was clear that the people there were unaccustomed to seeing a racially mixed group of singers. The group faced difficulties such as rest rooms and water fountains designated for "colored" and "white." To address this discrimination, the singers all chose the "colored" facilities, hoping that others would witness their strong dedication to the mission of integration and social awareness.

Singing City's program featured a concert-drama titled "Hello World," a story weaving narration and choral music into a tale about an unborn child about to be born into a world of war, disease, hatred, and hunger. She asks what the world will be like and, after hearing the hard facts of the times, announces that she does not want to be born. As the story develops, she is told of the hope for the future as people learn to understand each other and learn to sing and dance together the music of the people. Hope becomes a reality for the child, and she says loudly, "I shall be born!" The choir ended with the last two movements of Randall Thompson's: "Peaceable Kingdom: Have Ye Not Known, Have Ye Not Heard" and "Ye Shall Have a Song."

Singing City's concert-drama taught that from their differences people could learn and respect each other, and they could grow together by joining voices in singing

texts that had meaning for all. It was a bold statement to make, especially in 1955. Elaine Brown and her singers believed that the power of music could bring people together and change minds and hearts. As in Philadelphia, the choir demonstrated something beyond the perfor-

Open Letter to Choir Members

In the following "open letter" to Choir members, Elaine Brown examines the significance of the recent Southern tour, noting what it means to Singing City at the moment, and suggesting what its impact on individuals can mean in shaping the future.

Dear Choir Member:

The purpose of Singing City is often said to be "human relations through music." The words "man" and "music" are often linked in attempts to describe the work of Singing City.

Because words, written or spoken, can be empty without the accompanying experience of their true meaning, the users of words are constantly charged with the responsibility of weighing and evaluating their choice of them.

Good human relations is the product of a process, not a jargon. Good music well sung or played is likewise a process, creative and communicative. In neither case is there room for empty lip service. Music is not talk, nor is it a compilation of techniques which become ends in themselves. It lives, breathes, and pulsates with ideas that reflect human experience, involvement, identification.

It behooves us to again ask ourselves questions we have asked before, remembering that the search for their answers is our "raison d'être."

Education, religion, and politics, are more than information or sets of rules or the institutions and systems which enjoin them. And love is love, not pretense: peace is peace and war is war; community is "where community happens", not merely natural or unnatural geographical or economic boundary lines.

As conductors and singers we need to ask: Does the music we make reflect integrity? Does it still relate to life, and where and how life is lived? Does it still possess the spontaneity and wonder of a child? Is it so permeated with sober awareness that it affects a musician who cares and relates to life around him so much that he can never again be invulnerable, immune, or oblivious?

Motivation is important. Man either wants, more than anything else in the world, to find meaning in life, or he doesn't. If we decide that life has no meaning, we must live with our decision. Does it not seem likely then, that the music we experience together would accordingly reflect our purpose, or our lack of it?

The Choir's presentation of the "Story of the Unborn Child" numerous times in recent weeks, both in the South and in the North, has revitalized our own sense of urgency to "make the truth come true." You, and many of our listeners, have tried to say this in your accounts of the trip. The proof of its impact will be evident in the ways we plan for doing things that matter. We know, to quote Norman Cousins, that "... sudden spurts in the condition of a society come about as the result of small achievements with high symbolic content." We must plan for such achievements.

One of you called my attention to the following excerpt from Awakened by Margaret Abrams as you tried to describe that wonderfully pregnant silence that was felt by audience and singers alike at the conclusion of "Hello, World!" in Atlanta. "There are times when it does not seem to be the voice that sings, or the ears that listen, and what is beautiful leaves one's heart and enters the hearts of others, and before applause there is the breathless silence of knowing this was so. -- But it does not happen often, and it is never forgotten -- or ever quite remembered as it was."

That was true communication and identification, and we all knew it. It seemed to say, "They are a part of us, and we, of them." I'm for it! How about you?

It all sounds like serious business, and it is. But this relatedness, this direction and its discovery, is the source of a kind of joy that knows no limit. Let's look for it with new eagerness; let's provide for it in planning immediate and future steps in Singing City's program. The suggestion box is always open to you to make your ideas known.

Love,

Elaine Brown

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mance that created a mutual feeling of understanding, respect, and acceptance.

Nearly a decade later, fifty singers from the Singing City Choir and Chorale would tour the American South once more. One choir member who participated in both tours said:

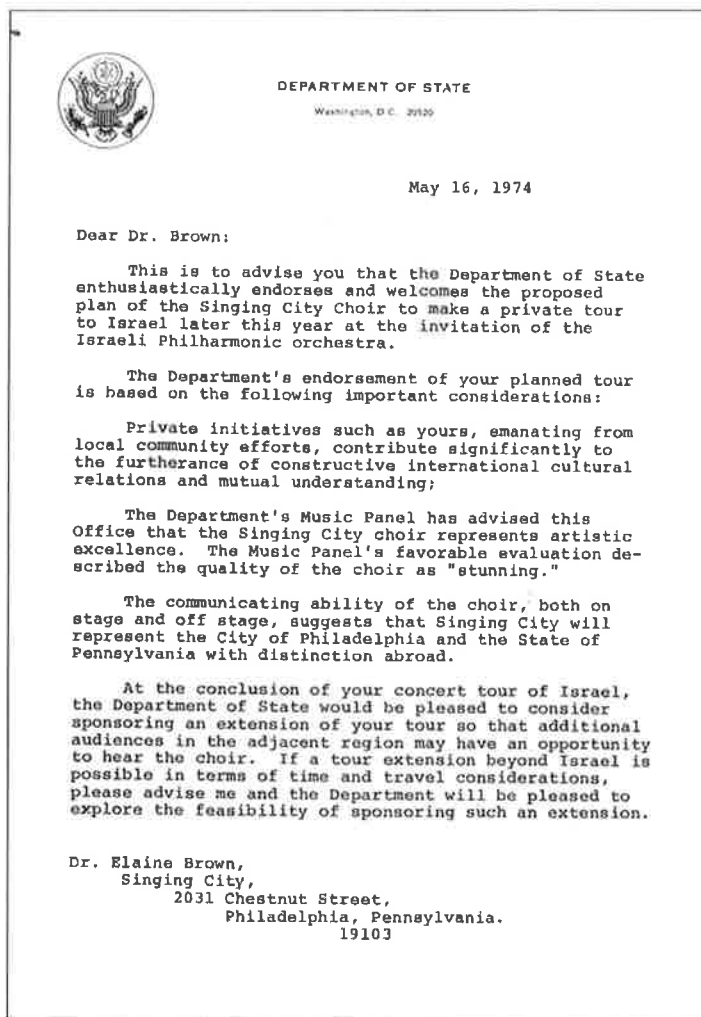
“The first tour in 1955 was a rough tour. We rode in a bus half the day, or all day, and as you might suspect conditions were bad, but you learned how to cope with them. In 1964 we would fly into a town, like Louisville, Kentucky, and all of the officials and dignitaries would meet us at the airport. There was a different feeling entirely.”⁴

The Elaine Brown collection in the ACDA archives contains an “Open Letter to Choir Members,” which is dated June 1964 and contains some thoughts from Elaine Brown that she shared with her choir regarding the Southern tour. A copy of this letter is printed on page 27.

The Singing City program continued to expand, and Singing City’s budget increased to twenty-five thousand dollars. In 1956, Elaine established the Singing City Chorale, a selective auditioned choir of forty voices. The following year, she hired Sonya Garfinkle as her assistant and Janet Yamron as bookkeeper and librarian. Both women became Elaine’s close friends and later champions of her legacy. Together they collaborated with James Jordan on a book about the life and music making of Elaine Brown, titled “Lighting a Candle” and published by GIA in 2015.⁵ In 1962, a Singing City Youth Choir was born, with forty to fifty high school students. The Singing City Children’s Choir came to life in June 2010, open to singers in grades 4-8.

In 1974, at the invitation of Zubin Mehta and the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, Singing City was invited to sing the first performance of *Messiah* in Israel. The United States Department of State wrote Elaine a letter stating their endorsement of the trip (see an excerpt of the letter to the left). Choir members raised money through bake sales, flea markets, and other fundraising projects to ensure that everyone would be able to afford the trip. After the Six-Day War, Israel had no relations with any of the Arab countries, and since Elaine wanted to be sure that the choir also visited an Arab country, the United States Department of State made arrangements for the choir to sing in Jordan. The singers were well prepared with knowledge of the Mideast conflict and, with a required second passport, crossed the Allenby Bridge into Jordan for concerts in Amman, bringing songs from America and singing in Arabic with members of the audience. The *Messiah* performances were received so enthusiastically that the audience refused to stop their applause.

In 1977, the choir was invited to sing at the American Choral Directors Association’s Nation-





Elaine Brown walking to a barge where Singing City was presenting a concert on the Delaware River.

al Conference in Dallas, Texas. Having just performed the *B Minor Mass* with Helmuth Rilling in Philadelphia, the choir was able to have Rilling conduct four choruses at the convention with Elaine Kligerman, a superb pianist, as accompanist. The program in Dallas exemplified what Singing City called a “community concert.” It included a sight-sound show taken in the Middle East, with repertoire representing various faiths and folk music of the people. Ten years later, Singing City was again asked to perform with the Israeli Philharmonic and Zubin Mehta. This time the tour included Cairo, Egypt, just three weeks after the assassination of Anwar Sadat. An evening concert was held at the well-lit Sphinx for twenty-five hundred people.

Consistent professional performances and repeated critical acclaim gave Singing City the opportunity to

perform with leading orchestras including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) Philharmonic. Conductors included Leonard Bernstein, Erich Leinsdorf, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Riccardo Muti, Eugene Ormandy, Helmuth Rilling, Leopold Stokowski, and Igor Stravinsky.

Creating Community

“Community is where community happens,” a well-known quote of philosopher Martin Buber, was a statement Singing City singers and students often heard in the many seminars that Elaine Brown conducted. She held the belief that when people come together in thought and spirit, choral music transcends, reaching out across the footlights. Community concerts occurred not only in concert halls but crisscrossed the community into schools, homes for the elderly, prisons, neighborhood centers, and even street corners. As part of these programs, audiences always joined the choir in songs. Community concerts were often requested from city agencies that might be trying to integrate a segregated community, a condition prevalent in the 1950s and ‘60s.

When asked about planning her performances, Elaine said, “[Singing City] will sometimes give a concert in a culturally deprived neighborhood where there are people who would not always be able to go downtown for such a concert. We did a concert [where] the choir moved down off the stage into the audience. In a dignified but carefully planned way we involved the audience in singing with us. Then we came back and resumed the concert on the stage.”⁶ Repertoire included folk music, often representing various countries, spirituals, Broadway tunes, and rounds and canons.

Rehearsals themselves were often spiritual experiences, always striving to tap the relationships of text and music, always reaching for those “plus” elements, as she would say. She imparted the importance of communication to her singers, emphasizing that excellence equaled the caring of each individual. “As conductor of the university chorus, [Elaine] Brown placed as much emphasis on where students sat as on how they sang. By being placed next to different people at each

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rehearsal, they were able to make strong connections with each other.”⁷

“Elaine created a kind of blueprint for a rehearsal that’s both musical and human,” says James Jordan. He uses her approach in the rehearsals he conducts at Westminster Choir College.⁸ She was always concerned with the balance of leading such a large-scale program while maintaining a small, family-like connection between singers. She said in an interview for Carole Glenn’s series “In Quest of Answers”:

With as many as 180 people, it is impossible for them to know everyone, and the ingredient of being at home with each other is such a big part of the choral experience. It has so much to do with the end result—the spontaneity and joy with which they sing... We break the large

groups into smaller groups so that the singers can learn to know each other... It’s a wonderful thing that a program can involve many people. But then it takes stamina and careful planning and help so that it doesn’t become dehumanized. If a singer feels autonomous, he’s not making music no matter how well he sings.⁹

Her own lecture notes, housed at the National ACDA Archives in Oklahoma City as part of the Elaine Brown Collection, also show her passion for the bond between a choral singer and the conductor. She wrote: “Choral singers and their conductors, if they have a consistently honest experience together, become the very fabric of one another’s lives. This also happens in turn to the community they serve” (See note below).

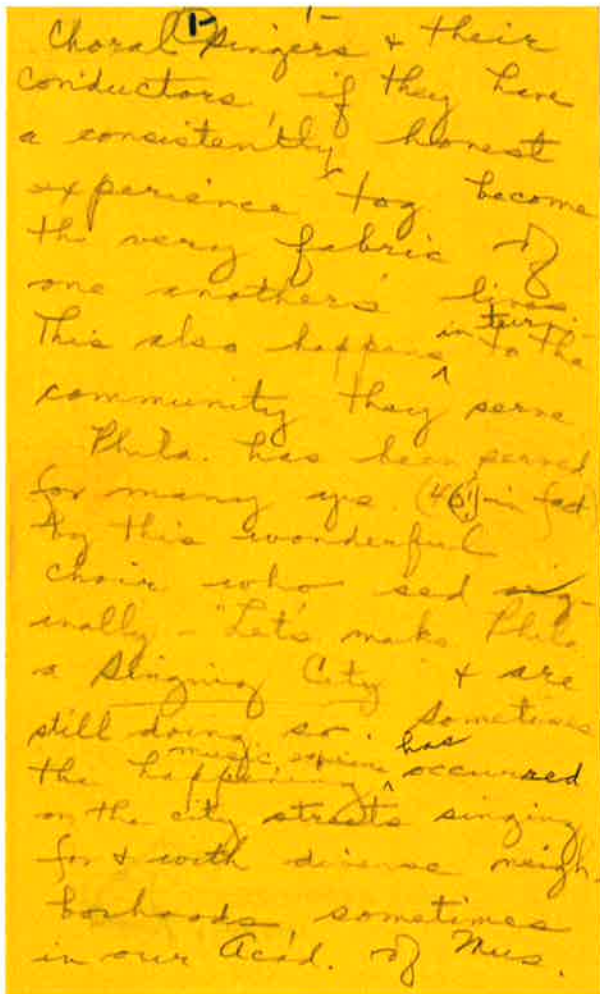
Leaving a Legacy

As a freshman at Temple, Janet Yamron met Elaine Brown for the first time. After entering the newly adopted choral conducting curriculum, Elaine said: “You are a part of Singing City.” Janet replied, “What’s that?” Her answer: “You’ll find out.”

So, what is Singing City? In Elaine’s own words:

The Singing City program grew out of the needs of the community. The very first choir was a witness to an interracial group of people working together. This was years ago when it was just not done. Part of our evening was rehearsing, and the other part was going out for coffee afterwards. More than once we were turned out of a restaurant... It’s a big job because it’s where the people are. It’s not a physical building or set program. The program changes from year to year depending on the direction we ought to go or the emphasis that’s needed.¹⁰

Singing City represents people of many racial, religious, and nationality backgrounds and is a concept that is evidenced through the art of choral music. Boyce Budd, a choir member and former president of the Singing City Board, stated:





Elaine Brown conducting a choir rehearsal.

Each of us, if we are fortunate, meets someone during our lives who seems a little larger than life, who has a touch of greatness and who has a major impact on our lives. For me, and for many, Elaine Brown was such a person. Her choirs were living proof of her message. Our uncommon thread was that Singing City was made up of poor, rich, all colors and ethnic mixes, and all occupations. Our common thread was that we all loved music. When we were at our best, the power of this bond showed through the music.

Elaine Brown remained director and guiding spirit of Singing City until her retirement in 1987. She passed away on September 6, 1997, at the age of eighty-seven. She was an active member of ACDA from its beginnings, and in 1998, the Pennsylvania chapter instituted the Elaine Brown Award for Choral Excellence to honor “an individual for outstanding lifelong work in the choral art.” In 2015, as a result of a several-year fund-raising effort, graduates and friends established the Elaine Brown Chair in Choral Music at Temple, the university’s first endowed chair in the arts. Janet Yamron and Sonya Garfinkle, both Temple alums themselves, led this effort.

Elaine Brown received many awards and honors, from both musical and humanitarian organizations.

She was also the first American woman to conduct The Philadelphia Orchestra. The ACDA archives holds donated records, photographs, and other memorabilia. When asked if she ever encountered difficulties as a female conductor in a male-dominated profession, she replied, “I’ve never stopped to think about it, but I know that many times it’s been very subtle. And too many times I’ve had to be better than the men around me in order to keep going. Of course the strength, the energy, the tenacity, and the emotional balance require a great deal of anyone.”¹¹

Elaine’s legacy continues to live on well beyond her immediate circle and even beyond choral music. In an era when society insisted on building barriers, Elaine Brown’s passion for justice and equality led her to create a racially integrated choir for the community. Her passion took the choir around the world, sharing their mission and inspiring others to break down barriers of their own. The impact she made on the choral world will long be remembered because she dared to use choral music as a driving force to bring people together. Her wisdom and strength, superior musical judgement, energy, and love of people have changed the lives of many across the country and around the world.

The exciting part about being a musician is that we are artists of all of life. Music can be a force, not a specialty. The world has now become too dangerous for anything but the truth—too small for anything but love. Involvement, not tokenism, is the key, but it goes without saying that creative involvement will require much energy and not a little risk. There will be many times when we will have to whistle up our spirit. This is where action and the heart go together. Don’t be afraid of commitment. Music describes the contours of an inward landscape that is accessible and enriching for work in the world.¹²

—Elaine Brown, 1991

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For more insight from Elaine Brown and the history of Singing City

Brown, Elaine, "How My Mind Has Changed (or not) In the Last Fifteen Years," *Choral Journal* 14 no. 1 (September 1973), 9.

Garfinkle, Sonya, "A City Sings," *Choral Journal* 13 no 5 (January 1973), 12-14.

Glenn, Carole, "In Quest of Answers." This is a series of interviews to established choral conductors on various questions of concern to choral musicians, including the voice of Elaine Brown, et al. There are 14 total installments from November 1974 to May 1976, each dealing with one specific question to the same interviewees.

Skinner, Jane, "Singing City: Its Choirs and Its Concept," *Choral Journal* 2 no. 2 (November 1961), 3.

Lighting a Candle: The Writings and Wisdom of Elaine Brown, ed. Sonya Garfinkle, Janet Yamron, and James Jordan (GIA Publications, 2015). Also included is a DVD of Elaine speaking at Westminster Choir College about her philosophy of music making and its positive effect on communities. 

NOTES

- ¹ Carole Glenn, ed., "In Quest of Answers," *Choral Journal* 16, no 8 (April 1976), 27.
- ² Joan Whitemore, *Wisdom, Wit, and Will: Women Choral Conductors on Their Art*, ed. Joan Catoni Conlon (GIA Publications, 2009), 352.
- ³ Singing City, "History, Mission, and Vision," <http://www.singingcity.org/history-and-mission.html>.
- ⁴ Sonya Garfinkle and Janet Yamron, letter spring 2007, as cited in James Ewing, *Elaine Brown and Singing City: The Choral Art as a Communicative Force*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, 1976), 53, 131.
- ⁵ *Lighting a Candle: The Writings and Wisdom of Elaine Brown*, ed. Sonya Garfinkle, Janet Yamron, and James Jordan (GIA Publications, 2015).
- ⁶ Carole Glenn, ed., "In Quest of Answers," *Choral Journal* 15 no. 4 (December 1974), 22
- ⁷ Erica B. Fajge, "In Pursuit of Harmony," *Temple University Magazine* (Fall 2015), 13.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Carole Glenn, ed., "In Quest of Answers," *Choral Journal* 16, no. 9 (May 1976), 15.
- ¹⁰ Carole Glenn, ed., "In Quest of Answers," *Choral Journal* 15, no. 5 (January 1975), 7.
- ¹¹ Carole Glenn, ed., "In Quest of Answers," *Choral Journal* 16, no. 4 (December 1975), 24.
- ¹² Elaine Brown, speech for the American Choral Directors Association, "Music in Worship: A Language for Our Time," Phoenix, Arizona, 1991. Full transcript available as part of the Elaine Brown collection, stored in the ACDA archives at the National Office in Oklahoma City.