

# L. A. MASTER CHORALE

## *Chamber Singers:* Americana Music

**Art Form: Music**

**Style: Traditional and Folk Music**

**Culture: American**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

**Los Angeles Master Chorale** makes its home in the celebrated Walt Disney Concert Hall. Recognized as one of Los Angeles' cultural treasures, the Chorale has received accolades for its innovative programming and its commitment to commissioning new works. In June 2008, the Master Chorale received the prestigious Chorus America Education Outreach Award. Grant Gershon has been its music director since 2001, succeeding Paul Salamunovich. The Master Chorale performs about fifteen times per year in its own season, as well as appearing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic from time to time. The *Los Angeles Master Chorale Chamber Singers* are a group of eight singers selected as the finest and most versatile voices from the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Using a school assembly format, the *LA Master Chorale Chamber Singers* present this engaging 45-minute informative performance of varied genres and styles of American music. American popular music of today has its roots in genres such as folk music, spirituals, ragtime and blues. *Americana Music* brings to life this musical history in a live performance with interactive activities for the student audience. Important historical facts and musical concepts will be interwoven throughout the performance bringing a relevant standards-based education component to the concert.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The songs presented by the *LA Master Chorale Chamber Singers* represent folk music, spirituals, jazz, swing and marches.

**Folk Songs** – Learning a song through hearing it sung is the way folk songs are remembered and passed down from generation to generation. This tradition leads to changes made by individual singers over time, which in turn leads to several different versions of the same folk song. The variations may include different words, sometimes a different subject, changes in melody, the addition of new phrases and changes in the harmony. Although some definitions of folk music maintain that the distinctive element of folk song is the fact that the original composer is unknown, it is also true that many experts prefer to define folk music as that which is created through communal use as a song that is passed from one person to another. The people who sing them are the “owners and composers.”

**Spirituals** – The lyrics of spirituals are tightly linked with the lives of the African slaves who sang them. While work songs dealt with their daily life, spirituals were inspired by the Gospel. They are different from hymns and psalms, because they were a way of sharing the hard condition of being a slave. Many slaves would try to escape to a “free country” that was on the Northern side of the Ohio River that they called “Jordan.” Some spirituals refer to the Underground

Railroad, an organization helping slaves to escape and emancipate. There were several ways of making their way to the north. They walked (“waded”) in water so that dogs could not smell their tracks. They also jumped into a chariot where they could hide and ride away. So, spirituals like “Wade in the Water,” “The Gospel Train” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” directly refer to the Underground Railroad.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What impressed students most about the performance?
- Which songs did the students feel were powerful, funny, heartfelt, sad or confusing?
- What were the genres of music performed and what made them different?
- Have your students name other American songs or patriotic songs they learned growing up. What would be examples of patriotic songs from other countries and cultures?
- Have your students ever sung in a choir? Have they ever seen a group of singers perform live or on television? What are the important things to remember when singing with other people?
- Ask students to name popular singing groups who utilized choral singing in their music. (Examples could include Backstreet Boys, N'Sync, 98 Degrees, Destiny's Child, The Jonas Brothers). Are there any popular groups now that use choral music?



## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Have your students write their own current patriotic song. What does patriotism mean to them? First, choose a melody that they can rewrite the lyrics to – something that has a chorus and verses. You could use a traditional patriotic song melody or find a contemporary pop song melody. Divide your class up into groups of 4 to 6 students each. Have each group work on writing a separate verse for the song. A verse tells a story – the who, what, where, and why of the song. Through different writing exercises have the students create the lyrics for the verses. You can have a separate group of students or the entire class write the lyrics for the chorus. The chorus tells the emotion of the story – it allows time to comprehend the verses and brings unity to the song.
  - *Decide what is patriotic to them;*
  - *What do they want to convey in the song?*
  - *Is there a setting for the song?*
  - *Is it about someone or some age group in particular?*
  - *Whom are they trying to reach with this song?*

- ⊗ Help students define the four voices they heard in the performance:

- *Soprano: The highest singing voice for women and children*
- *Alto: The lowest singing voice for women and children*
- *Tenor: The highest singing voice for men*
- *Bass: The lowest singing voice for men*

Take a sample song like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and have the boys and girls sing it separately. Was there any difference? Discuss.

- ❖ Demonstrate the idea of the folk song aural tradition by playing a game called “Whisper Down the Lane.” Seat students in a line or circle. Ask one student to create and write down a sentence that contains a small story. The student should then whisper the sentence in the ear of the next student. Each student should whisper the sentence to the next, trying to keep the message they hear intact, word for word. The last student should write the sentence down. Read the original and final sentences out loud. Discuss how the sentence changed and grew during its passage from one person to another.
- ▶ Ask students to research patriotic songs from different countries and cultures. What are the origins of these songs? What do they tell us about the language and history of the culture, the dreams and wishes of the people? What are the musical styles used?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC. SCIENCE:

Study the history of famous American Patriotic Songs (see suggestions below). When were they written and why were they written? Where did the lyrics come from and who wrote the music? Often melodies written by English composers were used (The Star Spangled Banner, Yankee Doodle). Explore what was happening in America and around the world when these songs were written. What events were these songs originally used for, and at what current events do you hear them? What popular songs today might be considered patriotic songs – do they have a different sentiment than the traditional patriotic songs?

### Suggested songs:

*The Star Spangled Banner*  
*America the Beautiful*  
*God Bless America*  
*Yankee Doodle*  
*The Liberty Song*  
*My Country, 'Tis of Thee*  
*Battle Hymn of the Republic*  
*God Bless the USA*



- Legend:
- ⊗ Artistic perception
  - ❖ Creative expression
  - ▶ Historical & cultural context
  - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
  - \* Connections, Relations, Applications

# LOS ANGELES MASTER CHORALE CHAMBER SINGERS: AMERICANA MUSIC REPERTOIRE & VOCABULARY

## Repertoire:

- 1 - *I'm a train*
- 2 - *Ben and Me* (Voices Within Student Composition – jazz)
- 3 - *America the Beautiful* (patriotic)
- 4 - *Witness* (spiritual)
- 5 - *Shenandoah* (folksong)
- 6 - *Polly Wolly Doodle* (folksong)
- 7 - *Yonder Come Day* (work song)
- 8 - *Alleluia* (classical)
- 9 - *Washington Post March* (march)
- 10 - *Tell Him Not to Talk too Long* (jazz)
- 11 - *Battle of Jericho* (spiritual)

## Vocabulary:

- Blues** American form of folk music related to jazz. It is based on a simple, repetitive, poetic-musical structure.
- Choir** A group of singers who usually sing in parts with several voices on each part.
- Conductor** the leader of a musical ensemble
- Ensemble** French for “together;” a group of musicians that play or sing a piece of music together
- Folksong** A term used to describe music of the common people that has been passed on by memorization or repetition rather than by writing
- Jazz** African-American musical form developed from the blues and ragtime
- March** A processional or military air especially suited to parades, or processions
- Ragtime** An American style of music characterized by "ragged" or syncopated rhythms.
- Spirituals** a type of folksong that is based on church music
- Swing** American style of jazz music originating in the 1930's