

The Choralis Foundation

by Choralis Grants in FY22 Operating Support
Grant Application - Long Form (over \$50,000
Budget)

Organizational Profile History, Mission, Relevance

Describe the applicant organization's mission

The Choralis Foundation was established by Artistic Director Gretchen Kuhrmann in 2000 to nurture a passion for choral music through excellent choral performances, professional development opportunities for young soloists and conductors, education and training for young choristers, and community outreach events. Nearly 110 singers perform across two ensembles: Choralis, an auditioned SATB chorus and Échos, a semi-professional chamber group. Choralis is committed to programming that includes not only the classical choral repertoire, but compositions of living composers and world music. Choralis exposes audiences to both artistic excellence and community service partners, reinforcing the transformational role of arts in society.

Describe the applicant organization's history.

Choralis was founded in 2000 by current Artistic Director, Gretchen Kuhrmann. From a single choir of 20 singers, Choralis has grown into two performing ensembles that provide opportunities for more than 110 singers to engage throughout the year in rehearsals, public performances, and special community events. The ensembles are: Choralis, an auditioned, intergenerational 100+-voice SATB (mixed voice) chorus with professional section leaders and a High School Singing Scholars program; and a 20-member chamber music ensemble Echos (ee-kos). Choralis performs four concerts annually and Echos holds one concert yearly, while also performing shorter works or solos as part of Choralis concerts. In addition to performances, Choralis sponsors choral workshops, community sing alongs, competitions for emerging soloists, choral conductor training, and collaborations with area choirs. Since 2019 Choralis has dedicated each concert to a partner in the human or social/environmental service field to raise awareness of community needs in our area. Choral collaborations have included award programs for excellence in choral singing, outreach to high school choirs, and most recently a coalition of metro area choirs (Choruses for Care and Compassion) to support food banks during the pandemic.

What is your organization's geographic service area?

Choralis serves the greater Washington DC metro area, with most activities taking place in Northern Virginia. Our rehearsals normally take place in the City of Falls Church and the City of Fairfax. The majority of our singers and audience members reside in Fairfax County, and we occasionally offer programs in Washington DC and Arlington County based on venue needs and availability.

Ability to create quality, mission-driven work that engages and inspires its community including aesthetic attributes of risk-taking, resourcefulness, sensory experiences, sustained resonance, impact, and value

1. Describe your organization's programs and activities and their connection to your organization's mission, values and goals, specifically those that will occur from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022.

The Choralis Foundation's FY22 season will follow public health safety guidelines. Intentionally flexible to allow for the return to live rehearsals and performances, some programs may need to remain virtual. We will continue offering programs that keep our singers engaged with patrons, fellow choristers, the broader public, and choral community leaders.

Ongoing:

- **Musicology Series (virtual) with Artistic Staff exploring the history and influence of master composers on the progression of choral music; an example theme offered this season: "What Happened When Beethoven Met Mozart?"**
- **Choral Leaders Interview Series: Initiated last fall by the conductors of Choralis, National Philharmonic Chorale, and Cantate Chamber Singers, this Series features live-streamed interviews with choral community luminaries. One highlighted Craig Hella Johnson, choral conductor, composer, and arranger, who shared his journey in composing "Considering Matthew Shepard," honoring the life, death, and legacy of Matthew Shepard, the openly gay student murdered in 1998. Another featured Joel Thompson's new work "The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed," relating the final words of young African American men killed in the streets.**
- **Professional Training: Choralis is hosting virtual sessions led by experts in vocal training.**
- **Support for area community service organizations: Choralis continues its commitment to raise awareness for local non-profit organizations that provide direct services to the community. Since 2019, we dedicate each concert to a different charity to focus on the needs they serve. During the pandemic, we formed "Choruses for Care and Compassion" to support families most impacted by COVID-19. The first collaboration was a fundraising campaign for the Capital Area Food Bank.**
- **Weekly rehearsals: virtual sessions for full choir and breakouts with four voice section leaders; we hope to resume in-person rehearsals, starting with smaller groups.**

Season Specific:

- **Summer 2021: Singalong Fairfax Presbyterian Church's glebe; offering choral favorites for broad audiences, similar to our indoor (pre-pandemic) "Summer Sings."**
- **October 2021: "Move Him into the Sun" Concert, featuring world-renowned British Composer Bob Chilcott to perform his titular piece with the Children's Choir of Washington, and "Chichester Psalms" by Leonard Bernstein, a program rescheduled from March 2020. Mr. Chilcott's visit includes a Choral Workshop for the public. Depending on health directives, programs may be conducted outdoors at Fairfax**

Presbyterian Church.

- **December 2021:** We hope to resume in-person Christmas concerts, possibly hosting smaller concerts -- with subsets of singers and audiences -- at Fairfax Presbyterian Church. We are exploring recording a CD with the Classic Brass ensemble, with whom we have performed for 20 years. Choralis hopes to collaborate again with WETA on a series of holiday offerings aired throughout December 2020.
- **March 2022:** Choralis will perform Brahms' "Ein deutsches Requiem" in support of all who lost loved ones during the pandemic.
- **April/May Young Artist Competition:** Emerging young soloists will compete at Fairfax Presbyterian Church to be guest artists at a future Choralis concert.
- **April/May 2022:** We hope to resume our annual Gala/Silent Auction, a major revenue source; our fallback is a virtual event, as held in October 2020.

Program and Activities Table

[FY22_OS_Activity Table.xlsx](#)

2. Describe your efforts to improve program quality. How are artists, as well as your constituents of the geographic area of service, involved in the programmatic development and evaluation of the resulting artistic or programmatic activities?

High artistic standards ensure Choralis attracts top talent. Singers for both ensembles audition each year and rehearse throughout the season. Our artistic staff, including paid section leaders, work closely with singers to enhance their musical understanding, strengthen vocal performance skills, and develop ensemble blend. The artistic staff are highly respected in the region; our programs attract choral director peers who provide feedback on program quality. That respect extends to international choral composers, such as Bob Chilcott and Francis Pott who have each selected Choralis to perform commissions and premieres of their compositions.

We support our artistic staff's excellence and innovation by participation in professional development programs offered by organizations like American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) and Chorus America.

The Choralis season planning process is led by the artistic staff, which presents a proposal for the upcoming season to the Board each January. Proposals reflect our commitment to collaborate with other musicians and to ensure a season appealing to both patrons and singers. The Board reviews the proposed season and associated budget requirements.

While our program choices include classic choral repertoire with broad appeal, we take risks by including less familiar selections and introduce audiences to works by living composers and those that reflect the aesthetic of minority cultures or themes that provoke reflection. We have performed works by Adolphus Hailstork and Dierdre Robinson, two living African American composers as well as a work by Native American composer Brent Michael Davids which was featured in our first virtual concert last fall "The Best of Choralis". The centerpiece of our March 2021 Concert, "Move Him into the Sun," is a composition set to the poetry of Wilfred Owen, a young gay Briton who died in 1918 and whose verses search for love and beauty in the horror and futility of war.

3. Please give one recent example of an organizational success and explain why it is considered successful.

One initiative of Choralis during the pandemic, when normal programming was suspended, is our musicology lecture series, offered online to singers, patrons and the general public. Dubbed “G&T Time” (after our artistic staff Gretchen Kuhrmann and Todd Fickley), this monthly series offers expert presentations on music history, composers, and famous choral works.

Topics include “The History of Choral Music”; “What Happened When Beethoven Met Mozart?”; “Do You Hear Music in Your Head?”—exploring the composition process, even if the composer is deaf; “What Really Happened between Clara and Johannes?” examining the life-long relationship of soul mates Clara Shumann and Johannes Brahms; and “Were British Composers on Vacation until 1880?” about the dominance of German composition until a surge of British talent at the end of the 19th century.

These musicology lectures feature live-streamed presentations led by the Choralis senior artistic staff with time for discussion and audience Q&A. Unlike rehearsals, these presentations are offered as a cocktail hour respite from the demands of the pandemic work day, where Choralis members and patrons can enjoy invigorating lessons in music history in a setting that is relaxing and socially connected. Steady attendance at our musicology series since it was launched in December 2020 indicates a strong appreciation for the resourcefulness and flexibility of our artistic staff in keeping our online profile active and in raising morale of singers and patrons alike in an otherwise socially distant season.

Community
Engagement

an organization's ability to meaningfully engage with its community to achieve its mission

4. What distinctive cultural roles do your programs and services play in Fairfax County and/or it's communities? Define the ways your organization understands, works with, and responds intentionally to your diverse constituency.

Choralis offers symphonic chorus performances of exceptional quality at affordable fees in locations convenient for Fairfax County residents. Although a group of Choralis's size will not fit into many community sites (particularly with an orchestra), we ensure that venues are easily accessible to Fairfax County residents. An audience survey conducted in December 2018 indicated that 50 percent of our audience comprised residents of Fairfax County, Fairfax City and Falls Church.

Choralis is unique among Northern Virginia choruses in our support for the development of young soloists and conductors, seen in the Young Artists Competition and Conducting Fellow position. Investment in young professionals adds to the wealth of cultural resources available to Fairfax County over time.

Our High School Singing Scholars program is also unique whereby students participate as full members of the adult chorus. Choralis offers them rich experiences performing masterworks and new compositions that may be beyond the financial ability and skill level of school choirs. Scholars come from area schools, including Fairfax County's George Mason and McLean High Schools.

A new tool to process feedback is a survey feature tied to our online ticketing platform where patrons complete a short survey following each program. Current season events were free of charge, but we continue to evaluate responses on program value.

The concerts planned for this season were slated to partner with community organizations that help children thrive, a collaboration reinforced by artistic outreach to youth choirs, such as the fall concert with the Washington Children's Chorus.

5. Describe the partnerships with arts or non-arts organizations from the partnership table and how these partnerships serve or advance your community engagement?

Arts partnerships are central to programming -- collaborating with choirs, orchestras, music departments, and emerging artists. Our fall concert will feature the “Children’s Choir of Washington” and attract new audiences and future High School Singing Scholars. The Young Artists Competition is advertised among music programs at area universities, including George Mason University.

In 2010, we launched the “Greater Washington Area Choral Excellence (Ovation) Awards” which brought together choral music professionals to nominate and select awardees and celebrate the contributions of local choirs. Although the program transitioned in 2019, the ” J. Reilly Lewis Award for Outstanding Contributions to Choral Music” is given annually at our gala, which in 2019 featured Stan Engebretson, Director of GMU Choral Studies.

Non-profit partnerships are key to our mission, as Choralis concerts feature a charity and encourage in-kind donations to promote awareness. Those active in Fairfax County include FACETS, which assists the homeless, and Lions Eyeglasses Recycling Center of Northern Virginia. Upcoming service partners include Hungry for Music which reconditions donated musical instruments to youth who otherwise would not have access to one.

Other non-profit partners include the churches that provide free or reduced rehearsal and performance space, especially Fairfax Presbyterian Church and the Falls Church Episcopal.

Media partners provide exposure to our programs and mission. WETA radio interviewed Maestra Kuhrmann for a month-long series on Women in the Arts, and Choralis was selected to provide three video recordings for the widely publicized WETA Arts: Washington Voices “Songs of the Season” December holiday TV specials.

Partnerships Table

[FY22_OS_Partnership Table.xlsx](#)

6. Describe your mission-related engagement of the community beyond programs and services.

Choralis regularly reaches out to the community for both financial and in-kind support, and has programming and marketing practices specifically to increase awareness of Choralis and interest in our activities:

We annually visit area businesses to sell advertising in our concert programs and also reach out to businesses for donations of items to be raffled off or featured in our Silent Auction.

We regularly send information about Choralis to middle and high school choral directors as well as private voice teachers in Northern Virginia to ensure they are aware of our High School Singing Scholars program and our ticket giveaway program for high school choir members.

Our event marketing team takes full advantage of online event calendars as well as the free “community calendar” listings in newspapers such as the Fairfax Times and Falls Church News Press to promote our concerts and other programs.

When we resume mailings, our lists reach patrons, donors, area businesses, senior living facilities, and music directors of local schools and churches. Feedback we receive from schools and senior living managers help us gauge the value of our ticket giveaways.

We also offer and advertise several programs that are open to the community at minimal or no cost, including our Summer Sings series, the Young Artist Competition (public can attend) and choral workshops. During the pandemic, all virtual events were free to the public, with voluntary donations optional. Our partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank last summer attracted publicity for our organization and its mission.

7. As part of a broader effort to serve a diverse range of audiences and provide access to programs, how does your organization meet the needs of patrons with disabilities?

**wheelchair ramps/seating
large print programs/labels
other**

For other, include tools used to identify populations and document activities, new or enhanced programs, and engagement efforts like focus groups, planning and outreach strategies.

we are looking at continuing virtual offerings or streamed programming in the future which will allow for a range of audiences to enjoy our performances

8. How does your organization inform the community about your activities? Please describe use of ArtsFairfax's and other websites, social media, print, TV/Radio, paid advertisements etc.

In a normal season, Choralis publicizes activities in multiple ways. In 2018 we launched a new website that makes it easy to learn about our activities, register for events, and purchase tickets. We also have an Event Marketing Team that develops and executes a multi-faceted marketing calendar, including direct mailing of a season brochure and concert postcards to 1800 addresses (although mail was suspended when in person events were cancelled). We are expanding use of digital advertising using local resources such as Falls Church News Press, Fairfax Times, and Fairfax County Events Calendar; print ads in The Washington Post; radio spots on WETA; Singers Source and Choralis email-based advertising; program and email "ad swaps" with other performing arts groups; and regular Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram postings. We advertise our events on the ArtsFairfax Events Calendar.

In the past year, we benefited from "earned" media on several occasions. WETA radio's March 2020 focus on Women in the Arts included interviews with Choralis founding director and conductor Gretchen Kuhrmann, which aired multiple times that month. Later in the year, WETA TV produced a holiday concert series featuring taped performances of choirs in the DC area that ran the full month of December 2020. Choralis was fortunate to have three selections chosen for this special. Finally, when we helped launch "Choruses for Care and Compassion" to help community organizations serving the most needy families during the pandemic, WJLA television and AARP magazine (online) covered this pivot from performing to community support.

Organizational Effectiveness

ability to successfully manage resources

9. How is the staffing structure (staff, artists, Board, volunteers, partners) currently successful in carrying out the mission and goals and/or strategic plan?

The Choralis board, staff and membership have been regularly involved in navigating the challenges of managing during the pandemic. While the board had implemented a 5-year strategic plan in September 2019, it needed to recalibrate immediately after the March 2020 shutdown.

The board worked closely with the artistic staff to remap the remainder of the FY 20 season and plan for the FY21 programming without in-person events. This recalibration involved the staff consulting with volunteers from the chorus to transition to virtual programs, and required hiring a technical consultant. The artistic staff took advantage of their musicology skills to create a series of webinars on the history and hallmarks of choral music.

Choralis shifted to virtual weekly meetings led by the artistic director who solicited opinions and ideas about next steps. Changes were needed to the website to accommodate new event reservations, and the administrative and artistic staff supervised the creation of programs from the archives for three events: “Best of Choralis”, a live-streamed Christmas concert.

Among the many adjustments required of staff was the need to plan and implement virtual rehearsals by section leaders, who had no previous expertise in online video conferencing technology. Their feedback and support from the technical consultant helped shape and fine tune those virtual rehearsals. And when our artistic director was incapacitated by COVID-19 for most of February, the artistic staff, especially the section leaders, helped keep rehearsals and programs on track.

10. How does your staffing (board, staff, artists, volunteers) reflect the population of your geographic area of service?

Choralis is one of the few intergenerational choirs with singers aged 13-80. We provide a supportive community for singers on both ends of that spectrum, with accommodations for those with mobility issues, disabilities, or special challenges. Our members warmly engage with a High School Singing Scholar who is gender-questioning and assist another Scholar who has learning disabilities that make following a music score difficult.

In the male-dominated field of symphonic conductors, our artistic director serves as a role model for women in artistic leadership. Maestra Kuhrmann was featured by WETA during women's history month as one of the area's preeminent female conductors. The Choralis staff includes members of racial minorities and the LGBTQ community.

Choralis' youth training programs provide scholarships for singers whose families may have little access to classical music. The instrumentalists we hire represent a diverse professional talent pool, and our collaborations with music programs such as GMU reach emerging artists from the county's diverse population.

Our collaborations are a tool to diversify our concert audiences. Partnerships with human service organizations emphasize inclusion of the disabled and homeless. We will perform with the Washington Children's Choir in October, reaching a new network. We reinforce outreach to youth and senior audiences through ticket giveaways to high school choirs and low-income senior housing facilities.

Programming during the pandemic has been intentionally free, allowing for new and less advantaged audiences. Initiating the choral consortium to support local food banks strove to deal with equity issues involving unemployed and low income families.

11. How are challenges and opportunities affecting the operation of your organization routinely identified and addressed, and what evaluation procedures are in place to measure and align growth of the organization with its mission?

Choralis' board meets monthly to review operations, financial updates, and program plans. Since the shutdown the board worked with the artistic staff to realign programs to a virtual format. Given the challenges of online events, the board recruited and hired a technical consultant to navigate the virtual demands of meetings, rehearsals, and events.

The board recognized the need to pivot from traditional marketing and communications and recruited a communications manager, who is working as a volunteer. The artistic and operations staff have responsibility to identify, design and implement taking our programs from the stage to the computer screen. The board and artistic staff consult on shifting artistic strategies, and what areas require expertise beyond current capacity. This occurred when we moved our annual silent auction/gala from a live event to online, and an auction consultant and platform, not previously planned for, were needed.

Artistic staff, including section leaders, had weekly interaction with the choristers through meetings and sectional rehearsals via Zoom and included surveys of the singers about health concerns, status of vaccinations, willingness to return to in-person rehearsals, etc. We seek regular feedback from singers and patrons on the value of revised program ideas and future plans. The board and staff evaluate the technical demands of options like virtual choir platforms, which until present have not been available.

In a regular season, we conduct audience surveys and we have implemented a survey feature with our online ticketing platform (OvationTix) and will monitor that option in the coming season.

12. What are the top three priorities of your organization for the next three years?

Choralis engaged in short-term scenario planning during the pandemic to ensure that we had funds to cover staff when regularly scheduled events were cancelled. We pivoted to on-line programming and rehearsals, transformed fundraisers from larger in-person events to smaller, morale building experiences. We used planning as a period of reflection by updating our by-laws and Board Roles and Responsibilities. We recruited three board members to help grow our bench and seek to move away from the working board model to establish a stronger administrative base.

Our top three goals for the next three years are: building financial security, growing the Choralis audience, and being a force for good by sharing the Choralis product with underserved populations and continually seeking out community needs. Building financial security includes maintaining a reserve fund, which along with grants support is helping us through this challenging time. We are recruiting additional Board Members and supporters who can enhance fundraising and audience development strategies. Growing the Choralis audience includes programming and outreach that resonates with a broader interest base. We will also continue our standard for choral excellence. Being a force for good means having an understanding of community needs and serving through artistic offerings.

Financials

Attach your organization's balance sheet and a profit and loss statement or complete financial statements for your organization's most recent completed fiscal year.

Financial Upload

[FY20_financials_Choralis.pdf](#)

13. Explain each component of the financial upload and differences between the previous year's budget and the current fiscal year budget.

Choralis's current financial condition is stable. Sources of revenue are limited since we cannot currently perform. Support from Arts Fairfax is more important than ever to ensure that Choralis is able to continue to serve as a community resource.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our activities and finances. Revenue decreased 44% in FY20 compared to FY19 due to having to cancel several concerts and fundraising events. We anticipate that FY21 income will decrease 27% from FY20. Choralis ended FY20 with an operating deficit due in part to the fact that we were unable to hold our annual fundraising gala scheduled for April 2020 during the fiscal year. We used a portion of our board reserves to cover the deficit.

Our balance sheet reflects about \$19,000 in deferred revenue from concert ticket sales and event registration fees for events that were cancelled in spring 2020. These funds are restricted until the events can be rescheduled. Another \$75,000 is temporarily restricted net assets. This includes our organizational reserve fund.

While we did not have costs associated with concerts (venue, orchestra, soloists) during the 2020-2021 season, ongoing costs include staff salaries, administration, and online webinar software necessary to carry out our mission and to engage with our audience and singers. We produced several virtual concerts using archival recordings and hosted educational webinars but did not charge admission to ensure that cost was not a barrier to participation for patrons impacted economically and in other ways by the pandemic. We held a gala and other online fundraising events and also received individual donations and singer dues.

In our 2021-2022 season, we anticipate that we will again earn revenue from concerts and events but anticipate that it may be another year before performances return to pre-COVID parameters.

14. Explain steps undertaken to remain financially solvent during the pandemic and preparations for future resumption of programs and activities when it ends.

Choralis received COVID relief grants from the Virginia Commission for the Arts, Arts Fairfax and the Community Business Partnership. These funds allowed us to continue to pay staff salaries during 2020. In addition, Choralis drew on our reserve funds. We are currently planning for a modified concert season in 2021-2022. This may include performances held outside or several smaller scale concerts with limited audiences. The priority for these events will be to encourage audiences to return to attending live events so ticket prices may be reduced. We anticipate that the typical scope and range of our concert season will not return until 2022-2023.