

# Stories of Songs, Choral Activism and LGBTQ+ Rights in Europe

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## Abstract

This paper attends to choral activism and LGBTQ+ rights in Europe. Drawing on models in a post-Stonewall US context, LGBTQ+ choirs have appeared since 1982 in urban centres throughout Europe, employing a range of repertoire, adopting innovative performance practices, and enacting public interventions. These choirs can affirm positive LGBTQ+ identities, create safer spaces, build local LGBTQ+ communities, offer sites of healing and sharing about different LGBTQ+ experiences, and increase visibility in the aid of LGBTQ+ rights (Balén 2017; De Quadros 2019; MacLachlan 2020). While LGBTQ+ rights may have become “a powerful symbol of Europe” (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014: 3) in the popular imagination and in the EU public discourse, in the last decade, new nationalist formations, increased violence toward LGBTQ+ people, and divisions within an apparent LGBTQ+ community have rendered queer Europeans at a critical juncture just as the project of Europe itself begins to crumble. As an activist within, and researcher of a European LGBTQ+ choral music scene, I will share with this paper stories of songs, choirs, festivals and choral networks inspired by Rita Felski’s notion of “hooked” (2020). Drawing on several years of ethnographic research in the UK, Italy and Poland, I ask: How have LGBTQ+ choirs shaped and been shaped by the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights locally, nationally and transnationally? What stories do these choirs tell us about the power of songs to bring about wider social transformation? How might LGBTQ+ choirs offer models of care, community and advocacy in a continent in crisis? Discussing an array of issues and cases – the Various Voices festival, the London Gay Men’s Chorus and the Cromatica network – and the potentials of applied methods, I invite us to listen to LGBTQ+ choral singing as a form of activism that continues to transform European 21st century politics and society.

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## Anders als die Andern: Festival, Rights, Europe

Ethnomusicology desperately needs queer orientations.

– Alexander M. Cannon (2019: 136)

I would like to tell you stories. The stories are of songs. The stories are of festivals, choirs, networks and choristers that nourish and give new meanings to these songs. They are stories of singing, joy, struggle, care, solidarity, pandemics, hope. Partly, the stories are mine, but mostly they are those shared by many friends, colleagues, queer kin. By choosing to share these stories with you here, I invite you on a joint journey. Will you listen? Will you join me? How will you honour the stories? How will you honour the songs? My story, divided into three sections, begins a few years ago in a German city at the foothills of the Alps. Various Voices, the European LGBTQ+ choral festival, took place for its 14th edition in 2018 in Munich.<sup>1</sup> Originally conceived in 1984 through a chance encounter between two gay male choirs from Cologne and Amsterdam, the festival has grown dramatically over the last decades. Munich had itself hosted the festival once before in 1997. In the leadup to the 2014 edition in Dublin, a community campaign was launched by a team of members from the several LGBTQ+ choirs in Munich, and the Bavarian capital was voted once again to be the host. Performing an array of concerts at the Gasteig cultural centre, outdoors at Max-Joseph-Platz (see Figure 1), and at Starnberger See, choirs bedazzled audiences with their costumes and choreographies, their camp performances and serious political commentary, and creative choral arrangements of diverse musical genres. These choirs descended from different corners of the continent: Brighton, Lisbon, Dublin, Prague, Brussels, Reykjavik, Krakow, all members of the European LGBTQ+ umbrella network Legato, as well as other parts of the world, including North America, Australia and New Zealand. Two gala concerts spotlighted a selection of the choirs and set the stage for appearances by local and international celebrities, including the famous counter-tenor Andreas Scholl and Eurovision star Conchita Wurst. Countless other events were arranged, not least city tours and a clubbing party. The culmination of the festival was a mammoth sing-along performance by participating choristers as well as local non-LGBTQ+ choirs of *Carmina Burana* at Odeonsplatz by Munich-born composer Carl Orff under the baton of the festival's artistic director, Martin Wettges.

Despite the festival's focus on Orff's work, my attention was drawn to a cabaret song performed at the opening gala concert by the festival orchestra and chorus, under the direction of musicologist, archivist, and feminist and queer musical activist Mary Ellen Kitchens, and whose chorus line resonated in my ear: "Weil wir ja anders als die Andern sind" ("Because we are just different from the others"). The song, "Das lila Lied" ("The Lavender Song"), was written in 1920 and today it is believed to be the first ever queer anthem, sung passionately especially at lesbian nights of the countless Berlin queer

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<sup>1</sup> I base my account of this edition of Various Voices on my own attendance at the festival, the festival programme, and an interview with two of the main organisers, Martin Gerrits and Martina Kohlhuber (2022). For more on LGBTQ+ choral festivals, see Balén (2017: 107–112).



**Figure 1.** Hinseginn Kórinn (from Reykjavík), Max-Joseph-Platz (Munich), 10 May 2018 (photograph by author).

clubs during the dizzy 1920s (Lareau 2005: 16–17; Espinaco-Virseda 2004: 86; Flore 2013). As an ethnomusicologist and queer choral activist, I smiled at the significance of these lyrics, composed by the Jewish lyricist Kurt Schwabach, enjoying its enduring articulation of alterity. A song is never simply a historical document, a quaint trace of lyrical memorabilia of a composer's imagination and bygone era. Rather, a song becomes its own entity, a body with which future musicians flirt, a collage which singers later embellish with their own visions, and an instrument which communities brandish to fight for their own world. Hearing the performance resonated profoundly with the words of Andreas Scholl printed in the festival programme: “Make every effort to show yourselves with your own unique voice” (Various Voices 2018).

The song’s music was composed by Mischa Spoliansky, a Jewish cabaret pianist and composer born of Russian parents in Białystok (now in Poland), who lived in Berlin from 1918 before fleeing to London via Austria in 1933 (Stahrenberg 2012: 99–120). It is the music that propels the lyrics, in its playful march-like spirit, from the minor mode verse to major mode chorus. The lyrics in this section, including the words “Blood,” “Pleasure,” “Play,” seem to honour a queer body, a body that is the same but different, indeed a body that was mobilised and rendered abundantly visible in Munich that

week.<sup>2</sup> Yet I was struck by the overt recourse to law, to the early imaginations of human rights parlance. The song was originally dedicated to the Jewish German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, and the song's chorus is a clear reference to the 1919 film *Anders als die Andern* ("Different from the Others") that Hirschfeld co-wrote, a film that is unique for its time in its favourable depiction of homosexuality (Lareau 2005: 16–17). Considered a key figure in the modern LGBTQ+ movement, Hirschfeld advocated for an array of sexual minority identities (distantly related to today's queer alphabet LGBTQ+), by arguing for their natural and essential identity. The World League for Sexual Reform, which he helped establish in the 1920s, was the first international LGBTQ+ organisation, and his Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexology) established in 1919 in Berlin, served as a sanctuary for queer people before its demolition by the Nazis (*ibid.*). The performance of "Das lila Lied" at Various Voices was made all the more poignant considering that the multi concert hall complex, Gasteig, was itself built on the site of a former beer hall that was home to early Nazi rallies and where Hitler engineered the Munich Putsch in 1923.

It was the lyrics of the chorus which amused me the most: "We are just different from the others / Who are loved only in the lockstep of morality." It was through playing with the Berlin LGBTQ+ orchestra, Concentus Alius from 2011 to 2015 that I personally began to unlock the power of queer communities, to feel that tingling excitement of a life of otherness. This personal transformation continued when in 2017 the local Trondheim (Norway) LGBTQ+ organisation asked me to help build a newly formed queer choir, Kor Hen. "But we do not know what the feeling is / Since we are all children of a different kind of world." I was intrigued by this sense of queer kinship, a kind of shared belonging owing to being born from an alternate existence. "We only love lavender night, who is sultry / Because we are just different from the others!" Lavender, a code for queerness, used especially by lesbian activists. Sultry, "schwül," a word that would inspire the mainstream German term for "gay" ("schwul") used as an affirmative label in the post-Stonewall era.

Participation in Various Voices 2018 helped me dissolve, temporarily, the haze of anxiety and depression that had enveloped me that year, the first year of my current job. I joined my then partner, a singer in one of the London choirs, and communed with members of several of the London choirs whom I had met through research on LGBTQ+ music groups since 2016 (see Figure 2). When minorities take over public spaces, they transform the larger political conversation and in the process do more than just a little bit of therapy work, I recognised. My project – focusing on the cities of London, Rome and Warsaw – attends to LGBTQ+ music making and queer European citizenship. The LGBTQ+ choral network, which has become central to this research, might trace its origins back to the ANNA Crusis Women's Choir, established with a feminist mission in Philadelphia, USA, in 1975. Inspired by social change in a post-Stonewall era, LGBTQ+ choirs formed rapidly over the ensuing years in different North American cities

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<sup>2</sup> The translations I use in my text are mainly based on those offered on Wikipedia (Wikipedia contributors 2022). For another brief analysis of the song, please consult Lareau (2005: 16–17).



**Figure 2.** Pink Singers (from London), Gasteig (Munich),  
12 May 2018 (photograph by the author).

(MacLachlan 2020; Balén 2017). Ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan has posited in her book-length study of North American LGBTQ+ choirs, also called GALA choruses, that LGBTQ+ “choristers continue to uphold the values of [a choral singing] tradition, while at the same time they are expanding its boundaries and redefining its purpose” (MacLachlan 2020: 3). As Julia Balén explains in her slightly earlier ethnographic study of the same network, “[c]horal musicking is, after all, a cultural form, and queer choruses, as we shall see, arguably do as much work to heal and empower those who sing in them as they do to create change in the larger culture” (2017: 93). Following the founding of Stockholm’s Gay Choir in 1982, a European LGBTQ+ choral network began to flourish and Various Voices 2018 evidenced the significance of choral singing for today’s queers of the continent. Participating in the festival as a non-singing delegate, a lover, a friend, a choir representative, and a researcher, I noted the queer sensation of juggling multiple identities.

“We believe in music as a binding element – for a free way of life and for the arts, beyond all national borders” (Various Voices 2018), were the words printed in the programme. While MacLachlan has argued that North American GALA choruses apply “an integrationist rather than a liberationist approach” (MacLachlan 2020: 10), the diversity of membership and the plethora of choirs in vastly different national contexts makes

me wonder whether such a binary is helpful in a European context. In my experience, queer choirs in Europe include a membership that can have widely differing commitments to, and visions of, LGBTQ+ politics, from the supposedly radical to the apolitical. As I immersed myself in the festival, I at times became overwhelmed: seduced by the performances, intoxicated with the sense of liberation, but also haunted by the idea of Europe itself (see Video 1: [Legato Choirs 2018](#)). The continent became manifest in Gasteig, Europe's largest cultural complex, whose internal walls were adorned with placards of each of the 100 participating choirs from 19 countries. While that year's edition had the greatest number of countries represented in the festival's history, they predominantly hailed from Germany, the UK, and the Netherlands. Acknowledging this legacy of North-West European dominance, the Munich Various Voices team conceived from the outset that their festival should do its best to encourage participation by choirs from Southern, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The organisers created a new funding scheme that covered travel and accommodation expenses and waived the registration fee for choirs from specific countries, thereby enabling the first participation of choirs from Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Turkey.

In particular, the festival spotlighted the choir Qwerty Queer from Odessa. This was one of four queer Ukrainian choirs that emerged during the period of the festival's organisation. Contact was established through various longer collaborative projects set up by LGBTQ+ activists in Munich and Ukraine, based on desires for solidarity nurtured through the twin town infrastructures between Munich and Kyiv. Tapping into this wider network of collaboration, the Various Voices team invited Qwerty Queer to different queer choral events in Germany over the years leading up to the festival that have deepened the bonds between choristers in Munich and Odessa. During this time, the choir grew in membership and elicited increasing media exposure in Ukraine. At the festival, Qwerty Queer sang a range of songs from Anglo-American pop to Russian and Ukrainian songs, captivating the packed auditorium. They ended their set with a rendition of the song that won Eurovision in 2016 for Ukraine, "1944" by Jamala. Controversial for its critique of Stalinist imperial violence, "1944" created new layers of meaning of struggle, resistance and hope in Munich. The choir's conductor, Olga Rubtsova, revealed in the programme that "We are singing for our lives." These words take on an even greater urgency in 2022, because since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia many members of the Ukrainian LGBTQ+ choirs have fled the country.

According to the political theorist Phillip Ayoub and sociologist David Paternotte, in the past decade LGBTQ+ rights have become "a powerful symbol of Europe" (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014: 3) in the popular imagination and in the EU public discourse. The emergence of "rainbow Europe," they argue, has placed issues of gender and sexuality at the centre of debates surrounding European citizenship, prescribing new forms of LGBTQ+ activism, cementing older power hierarchies and regional divisions, and also enabling forms of exclusion along lines of "race" and religion. As numerous scholars have long pointed out, the ascendancy of certain White, middle class, cisgender gay, lesbian and bisexual European citizens in the past two decades has rendered divisions within an apparent LGBTQ+ community starker (Puar 2007; Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008;

Duggan 2002). These accounts of “homonormativity” (Duggan 2002) might be helpful to address aspects of the European LGBTQ+ choral scene, considering its high proportion of White middle-class members (MacLachlan 2020: 80–106). As academics, we are often drawn to neat, coherent, even fancy theories to engender us with authority over the chaos of ethnography (see also Cheng 2016: 34–36). And yet my own experiences leave me unable to account for the complexity of the communities with whom I work, of whom I am a part. In the recent ethnomusicology volume *Queering the Field*, Sarah Hankins writes: “As a white woman academic, my privilege has often allowed me to substitute theorizing for actual lived experience” (Hankins 2019: 361). It would be too easy to make the argument that these choirs are spaces of homonormativity and concerned with the politics of respectability. It would be an oversimplification to cast choral members as simply desiring “integration” into heteronormative society, as MacLachlan (2020: 10) does. While hegemonic axes of power within Europe continue to play out in these queer choral contexts, fora such as Various Voices also provide the platform where these dynamics can be addressed and subverted. On the other hand, I’m also wary of literature that romanticises communal singing for its apparent health benefits and contribution to social cohesion (Balsnes 2018). Likewise, I feel uneasy when non-queer colleagues, in supposed allyship, unquestioningly think that all projects for queer musical mobilisation, such as our own choirs, are inherently positive.

Becoming a member of this wider community, not only as researcher but also as a singer, organiser and activist, I see the deeper levels of motivations, hopes, disputes and disappointments within the queer choral scene. I acknowledge and have a deep respect for the huge amounts of labour, often underpaid and unacknowledged, that goes into founding, building and maintaining queer choirs, networks and festivals. After many qualitative interviews (46 to date) and informal conversations, I am constantly overwhelmed by the huge diversity of life experiences, perspectives and backgrounds of the members, amazing people who are necessarily fallible and contradictory. And yet, we are all connected through our love and commitment to the music, community and politics, albeit in unequal measure. We are all, somehow, invested in the power of song and communal singing. In order to capture these intricacies and nuances, I turn in this paper to the notion of “hooked” by the feminist theorist Rita Felski in her latest book (Felski 2020), which invites us into epistemologies of seductive proximity, the messiness of rapture, and aesthetic stickiness.<sup>3</sup> Critiquing modernist conceptions of distance and objectivity and academic concerns for critical detachment, she writes, “the bird’s-eye view will miss crucial details and telling anomalies; it may result in knowing less rather than more” (*ibid.*: 11). Felski’s text is compelling because it chimes with my ethnographic orientation and my desire to honour the range of “attachments,” “engagements,” “identifications” of a musical world that has up until now largely been overlooked by queer theorists (is the attachment too “sticky”?) and ethnomusicologists (is it the wrong type of “stickiness”? ). Moving beyond models of social constructionism and

<sup>3</sup> I thank my colleague and friend Hanna Musiol for suggesting this text as a theoretical model for this paper.

ideology, and building on fields of actor-network-theory and affect, Felski urges us to attend to the plethora of passions that make songs and communal singing powerful, and encourages me to pursue the auto-ethnographic, a genre through which such passions might be shared more compellingly (*ibid.*: 39). Marvelling at the performances at Various Voices, I began to appreciate on a deeper level the musical magic of this scene and my responsibilities in conveying this magic to wider audiences. What does it mean to establish and nurture an LGBTQ+ choir, being mindful of local histories of discrimination, and navigating the fragile resources of the neoliberal present? What is the power of offering musical asylums and building new forms of queer kinship through communal singing? What are my responsibilities, as a White, cisgender, middle-class queer man, in sharing stories of this scene in my own words with wider audiences, just as I am doing here in this paper?

## Glad to be Gay: Choir, Pandemic, Pride

[Q]ueer ethnography is both a critique of orthodoxy and an exploration of what more can be known and articulated.

– Christi-Anne Castro (2019: 188)

“Sing if you’re glad to be gay / Sing if you’re happy that way.” By 30th April 2019, these lyrics had become familiar to my ears, even if the minor mode melody and sombre mood of the song had still not quite captured my queer experience.<sup>4</sup> “Glad to be Gay,” a song originally composed in 1975 by British rock singer Tom Robinson, was rendered audible once again through a performance by the London Gay Men’s Chorus on Old Compton Street, in London’s traditional LGBTQ+ area of Soho (Badger 2010).<sup>5</sup> The performance was part of a collective memorial to mark the 20th anniversary of the nail bomb attack at the Admiral Duncan pub on that very street. Within a three-week period in 1999, a Neo-Nazi carried out three nail bomb attacks in different locations of London – Brixton, Brick Lane, and Soho – targeting London’s Black, Bengali and gay communities respectively, killing 3, injuring 140, and sending shockwaves through British society. Every year since then a memorial ceremony has been held in Soho with representatives from all three communities impacted in a sign of union and solidarity. Two of the several other LGBTQ+ London choirs – the Pink Singers and Diversity Choir – performed minutes later around the corner at St. Anne’s Church, the latter choir being the main host of this event over the preceding years. Witnessing the London Gay Men’s Chorus (LGMC for short) perform on that sunny Spring day in 2019 lent me a new appreciation of the song “Glad to be Gay” and its many levels of signification (see Figure 3).

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<sup>4</sup> I mention this performance as well as some of their other projects in the end of my recent study of the London Gay Men’s Chorus and the Pink Singers (Hilder 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Lyrics and historical facts about the different versions of the song draw from the website by Merrick Badger (2010).



**Figure 3.** London Gay Men’s Chorus, Old Compton Street (London), 30 April 2019 (photograph by the author).

The song, which the queer scholar Jack Halberstam has called a “counter anthem” (2019: 249) slightly out of tune with the wider rock scene from which it emerged, was written for the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) and very much in the spirit of the early days of the post-Stonewall era (Marshall 2013; Mullen 2017).<sup>6</sup> Stonewall was itself a chaotic riot in the Summer of 1969 against police raids at a queer bar, the Stonewall Inn, on Christopher Street, New York, largely led by trans women of colour and sex workers. Stories and images of the event ignited a new toolbox and aesthetics of LGBTQ+ activism. By the following summer, huge parades in numerous North American cities allowed for LGBTQ+ people and their allies to celebrate queer bodies in public spaces marking the first Pride parades. Rebell ing against decades of discrimination and violence, and inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war marches, activists began to demand visibility, rights, and radical social reform sparking a whole new set of LGBTQ+ organisations with differing political ideologies around the world. In the UK, the Gay Liberation Front was established and the first UK Gay Pride Rally took place in London on July 1st 1972. While partial decriminalization of male homosexuality in Eng-

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of this song as an anthem, see Jack Halberstam (2019), in terms of informal sex education, see Marshall (2013), in terms of political activism, see Mullen (2017).

land and Wales took place in 1967, LGBTQ+ communities faced increasing stigmatisation, violence and no legal protection. “Glad to be Gay,” through its ironic lyrics and cynical tone, captures the spirit of defiance and melancholy of this period. The several versions of the song that were released in later years add a different political commentary, thus creating a kind of archive of the UK’s LGBTQ+ movement, albeit cisgender male-centred.

The first official version of the song, originally banned from BBC radio airwaves, was released on Tom Robinson Band’s 1978 album *Power in the Darkness* (Jack Halberstam 2019; Badger 2010). As the band begins to play, Tom Robinson announces a dedication to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and their continued classification of homosexuality as a disease (Badger 2010; Marshall 2013: 600). Once the song starts in earnest, each line takes a swipe at middle-class society in line with the rock group’s politically charged repertoire (see also Jack Halberstam 2019: 249). Violence and bullying marks the first and final stanzas, which recount the continuing raids on gay spaces by the British police. “The British police are the best in the world,” the song begins mockingly. I still have the image in my mind of one of the police overseeing the performance on Old Compton Street in 2019 giving a knowing smirk when hearing this lyric. But I wondered whether this complacency of historical distance suggested in their smile might be presumptuous, considering how certain members of the queer community – people of colour, sex workers, immigrants without papers – continue to feel unsafe in the presence of the police. In 2019, the song’s lyrics still felt relevant.

On a later version from 1987, Tom Robinson included a new stanza that addressed the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Jack Halberstam 2019; Marshall 2013; Badger 2010): “And now there’s a cancer to blame on the gays / it’s brutal and fatal and slowly invades.” First labelled by the medical world in 1981 as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), this deadly virus began to spread globally, impacting gay male communities in the West disproportionately. By 1987 Robinson had himself witnessed three former lovers die of AIDS-related causes (Badger 2010). The official response in the UK, as with many other countries, was silence, stigmatization, and a lack of medical provisions or care for those affected. As a response, the Thatcher-led Conservative party that reigned throughout the 1980s passed a law – Section 28 – in 1988 which forbade the “promotion of homosexuality” in schools. Out of this era of death and suffering emerged many organisations providing community care, not least the LGMC themselves. Their beginnings, as wonderfully recounted in a book by one of the founding members, Robert Offord (2017), can be traced to a diverse mix of gay men who met at a grassroots LGBTQ+ space called London Friend in the late 1980s. At a time when gay men were dying in large numbers from AIDS-related illnesses and the government and tabloids were demonising the gay community, in 1991 this group decided to experiment with new ways of creating community and challenging social stereotypes by singing as a choir (*ibid.*: 7–18). Their very first public performance was at Angel tube station in North London in December that year in order to raise money for the HIV/AIDS charity the Terrence Higgins Trust (*ibid.*: 16–18). Indeed, many of their performances in the early years centred around the



**Figure 4.** London Gay Men's Chorus, Royal Festival Hall (London),  
27 November 2016 (photograph by the author).

HIV/AIDS crisis, singing at patients' wards, memorial services and vigils, as well as an ambitious performance of the newly composed AIDS Requiem by their then pianist John Harold in Manchester's The Free Trade Hall in 1994 (*ibid.*: 28–35).

In his book, Offord confesses, “I optimistically and simplistically felt that people would not be able to reject and discriminate against a group that was singing to them” (*ibid.*: 13). Despite continuing homophobic discrimination and violence, not least a brutal attack on the streets of London on the chorus’ original conductor, Offord’s ideas turned out to not be so optimistic and simplistic after all. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the LGMC grew in numbers and achieved national acclaim through collaborations with big pop stars, including Elton John, and invitations to perform on national TV and radio. Their performances, committed and extravagant, draw on a longer history of camp male personalities in the British popular cultural imagination, though often overshadowing the several other LGBTQ+ choirs in London. When I first met them in 2016, one of their committee members explained that they do not require auditions and have never turned any applicant away, though their waiting list can vary from one to four years depending on their current popularity and the voice part. This “open membership policy” has varied over the years, but for the time being consists of applicants signing up online, being invited for a vocal placement test, and a support system for

those who find the singing challenging.<sup>7</sup> Consisting of around 220 singing and 30 non-singing members/helpers, the LGMC has become the largest choir within the European LGBTQ+ choral network (see Figure 4). In her 2017 book on LGBTQ+ choirs in North America, Julia Balén posits communal singing as providing infrastructures of safety and care, as well as enabling forms of empowerment and “counterstorying” (Balén 2017):

Queer choruses embody in their practice a compelling counterstory, one that challenges some of the most damaging stories used to oppress: that you are alone, that you have no right to commune with others, that all you think about is sex, that sex is not a social good (especially not yours), and that you have no right to life or joy. The practice of actively, publicly, and joyfully offering creative counterstorying that provides mutual pleasuring through sonic beauty is appropriate to the task because in its very form it creates that which such master narratives work to deny (*ibid.*: 131).

These qualities were very much in evidence in my experiences with the LGMC – by attending some of their rehearsals and concerts and interviewing several members and a former chair (see Video 2: [London Gay Men’s Chorus 2016](#)).

“They trampled our feelings till we hid them for shame.” The original version of the song explicitly mentions one underlying theme, shame, of “Glad to be Gay”. Shame has become a powerful term in accounts of LGBTQ+ experience, eliciting countless books, including *Straight Jacket: Overcoming Society’s Legacy of Gay Shame* by Matthew Todd (2018). Surveying the continual mental and physical health impact of homophobia in a post-Stonewall era, this book offers an autopsy of the queer body, with all its scars and contortions, albeit centring a cisgender, male body. “Lie to your workmates, lie to your folks / Put down the queens, tell anti-queer jokes.” Almost unbearably, the diagnosis of internalised homophobia oozes through the lyrics (see also Jack Halberstam 2019: 249). “And he still bears the scars” is a pronouncement of the queer body, imprinted by violence and shame. Interestingly, shame is also an issue that the LGMC have addressed, especially in their 2015 project *Shame Chorus*, involving a collaboration with London’s Freud Museum and the famous psychotherapist Susie Orbach. As part of the project, chorus members were interviewed on the topic of shame and this material became the foundation for 12 pieces. Composed by the artist Jordan McKenzie and the writer Andy White, the resulting work, performed at the museum, dealt with issues of stigma, silence, sexual health, and depression. It is in these moments where I recognise LGBTQ+ choirs as offering what the music sociologist Tia DeNora has termed “musical asylum” (2013), whereby music provides infrastructures of well-being and therapy (see also Hilder 2022).

To mark their silver jubilee in 2016, the LGMC expanded their resumé of collaborations and community engagement. They toured the UK and marched in Prague Pride with the local Czech gay choir, the Doodles. Concern for vulnerable members of the

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<sup>7</sup> I base this on information shared to me by the LGMC’s current acting chair, Martin Brophy (personal communication, 25 September 2022).

LGBTQ+ community inspired their collaboration with the local Mosaic LGBT youth centre, and with Micro Rainbow International, an organisation offering services for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees. I was particularly touched by their concert *U Got Male* at the Royal Festival Hall, forming part of the South Bank Centre's festival *Being a Man*. Taken from Anglo-American pop, musicals and cabaret, each song thematised a particular aspect of masculinity. A rendition of Alice Cooper's "Poison" clearly addressed contemporary discussions on toxic masculinity. Interspersed with each song were video montages comprising interviews with choir members who reflected on their biographies, the choir and their struggles with masculinity.

"The Admiral Duncan, victims of hate / Let's remember the friends we've all lost on the way." A later performance by Tom Robinson of "Glad to be Gay" itself included a line about the 1999 attacks (Badger 2010). Standing in 2019 on the apparently safe streets of Soho, I sensed a heightened awareness of my age, my place in this larger history. I lamented how endemic queer-phobia worked hard to prevent me from learning about a queer British history until I began to research it explicitly. At the same time, my thoughts turned to the increasing incidences of violent attacks toward the queer community in Brexit Britain, especially trans people, and of course the growing pushback against LGBTQ+ rights in many parts of Europe (Butler 2021).

## Bella Ciao: Network, Community, Legacies

Ethnography is already much queerer than we assume. Yet it can be queerer still.  
– William Cheng (2019: 328)

"One morning I awakened, and I found the invader," ring the first lines of the famous song "Bella Ciao." Cromatica, the name of the Italian LGBTQ+ choral association, suggests images of musical and social diversity. First conceived in 2015, it aimed to support the proliferation of, and collaboration between, LGBTQ+ choirs in Italy. Today, it has 13 member choirs, in Milan, Rome, Bologna, Pisa, Florence, Perugia, Padua, Turin, Bergamo, Bari, and Terni. The association's president, Riccardo Strapaghettti, had himself worked for his local LGBTQ+ organisation, helping to found the Perugia choir Omphalos Voices in 2014.<sup>8</sup> When working towards the creation of the Cromatica network, Strapaghettti was concerned by two challenges faced by Italian LGBTQ+ choirs: first, to transmit a message which wider society might be sceptical of; and second, to make local LGBTQ+ organisations around the country recognise the significance of choirs as a meaningful project.

"And if I die as a partisan, then you must bury me." It was back in the Summer of 2006 that the Italian LGBTQ+ choral scene first emerged, almost on the doorstep of the Vatican. Roma Rainbow Choir was founded by the talented chorister and choral conductor Giuseppe Pecce, who clearly recognised the malleability of the institution of the

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful for an interview with Strapaghettti (14 October 2019) in order to understand the history of the Cromatica network and the 2019 edition of the Cromatica festival in Perugia.

community choir in order to serve a local LGBTQ+ community.<sup>9</sup> As the choral scholar and advocate André de Quadros has noted in his global study of choirs, “[p]rotest, advocacy, and mobilization on community issues are central to the ways in which choirs have constructed their mission” (De Quadros 2019: 35). Through Pecce’s musical direction, the choir grew in size and embarked on various brave public performances and interventions. Today, the choir has around 20 members, and holds several concerts a year, especially on significant dates, such as World AIDS Day (1st December) and 27th January, Giorno della Memoria (International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust).

“This is the flower of the partisan who died for freedom.” In order to strengthen Roma Rainbow Choir’s organisation and position within the city, it recently became part of the important local LGBTQ+ organisation Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli. This centre’s name memorialises the Italian queer activist and intellectual Mario Mieli, who in the early 1970s collaborated with the London Gay Liberation Front and helped found in his home city, Turin, the Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano, with the acronym F.U.O.R.I. (“out,” Cristallo 1996; Mastroianni and Miranda 2021; Pedote and Poidimani 2020). With chapters in Turin, Milan, Padova and Rome, F.U.O.R.I. offered a radical vision of gay liberation in Italy shaped by Marxist thought. In 1983, Mario Mieli committed suicide. The Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli took over the work of the previous generation of activism in Rome. Housed in a building near the Basilica San Paulo, Mario Mieli offers support groups for people living with HIV, mental health services and legal counselling as well as hosting numerous social and cultural activities. Networked with various international LGBTQ+ organisations such as ILGA, it has staged Roma Pride since 1994, and in the year 2000 became the first host of World Pride.

Cromatica emerged out of the organisation of the first pan-Italian LGBTQ+ choral festival in Bologna in 2015. The local gay male choir, Komos, had participated in Various Voices Dublin the year before, and aware that they were the only Italian choir at this European event, decided to build an equivalent national Italian festival. As a historical centre for leftist politics since the days of partisan resistance, and home to the beautiful LGBTQ+ centre Cassero, Bologna proved an obvious site for the festival. In attendance at the first edition of Cromatica were seven Italian choirs and one from Paris. The following year, the festival was held in Milan, this time with nine Italian choirs. But only six choirs joined for the third edition in Naples. In 2018, the Italian choral activists formalised the organisation of Cromatica to secure a structure that would make festival production and choral exchange as efficient and enriching as possible. Perugia was selected as the next host, and their organising committee, using their experience from Various Voices Munich, set about curating the festival in 2019 in a way that could also celebrate the 50th anniversary of Stonewall.

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful for an interview with Pecce (19 February 2020) in order to understand the history of Roma Rainbow Choir.



**Figure 5.** Cromatica Chorus, Teatro Morlacchi (Perugia), 27 April 2019 (photograph by Gian Domenico Troiano, used with permission from Cromatica).

Despite the challenges of organising in a smaller city, the festival was a resounding success, though unfortunately one that I couldn't witness myself.<sup>10</sup> With 12 participating LGBTQ+ choirs and five local non-LGBTQ+ choirs, totalling about 550 singing delegates, Cromatica Perugia became the biggest edition of the festival. Concerts on Friday evening invited the public to wander through the city, scheduled as they were at different times in five separate locations: Aula Magna dell'Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Sala Sant'Anna, Auditorium Santa Cecilia, Sala Visconti del Cinema Postmodernissimo, and Domus Pauperum. On Saturday, members of all the LGBTQ+ choirs came together in one big rehearsal, known as the festival *atelier*, in order to prepare for the evening gala concert in the lavish Teatro Morlacchi.

Attracting LGBTQ+ crowds from different parts of Italy, the gala concert was a chance for all of the choirs to perform one song individually and come together in one big final festival chorus (see Figure 5). Considering the lack of Italian LGBTQ+ songs, the hosting choir, Omphalos Voices, decided to commission a composition to sing and began to search for texts by Italian poets. They ended up choosing lines from the works of the Perugia-born philosopher, Aldo Captini, famous for his Gandhi-inspired pacifist activism and founding in the 1960s of the annual Perugia-Assisi peace march. Eventually,

<sup>10</sup> The LGBTQ+ Music Study Group which I chair had scheduled its annual symposium on the same weekend that year. I thus base my account of the festival on an interview with Riccardo Strappaghetti (14 October 2019) and further correspondence with him in 2022.

the successful Roman composer Stefano Puri set the lines of texts to music, creating the work “Per Amore” (“Through Love”) a stirring piece for an eight-part chorus and four-handed piano, which I had the honour of singing briefly when I visited Perugia earlier that year. Riccardo Strappaghetti was keen to share with me the significance of the work’s lyrics, which emphasise the shared human experience of, and duty to love: “Only in this way is the world renewed: through love. Each piece of music has begun before waiting for everyone to listen, and whoever is in love does not wait for others to fall in love. What is more my own than love?”<sup>11</sup>

The central song of the gala concert was, however, a commissioned arrangement of “We Shall Overcome” by local Perugian composer Enrico Bindocci (see Video 3: [Cromatica Chorus 2019](#)). As a song that became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, and was also sung at the original Stonewall riots, “We Shall Overcome” provided a fitting choice to mark Stonewall’s 50th anniversary. Bindocci’s arrangement for chorus, piano, horn and soprano soloist began during a poetic speech by a drag queen, Nikita Magno, who recounted the story of the riots on Christopher Street, New York in late June 1969. With unassuming piano accompaniment, Nikita Magno introduced in her recitation the significance of the song “We Shall Overcome” before the horn player, with a plaintive motive, announced the beginning of the song proper. Gradually the 350 singers in the Cromatica Chorus, consisting of members from all participating LGBTQ+ choirs, joined the soloist Federica Agostinelli in incanting lines familiar to the original song but now in a new contemplative, but nonetheless rousing setting. It was this performance that concluded the evening’s show, rendering history into communal song and thus vouchsafing Stonewall as queer collective memory.

On the final day of the festival, flash mobs were arranged in different corners of the city: choirs performed impromptu songs of their own repertoire, gradually making their way closer to the central historic square, Piazza IV Novembre, in front of the Medieval cathedral. Once all the choirs had congregated, they joined forces in song, brandishing rainbow flags and Cromatica banners (see Figure 6). The four songs unleashed on the soundscapes of the Umbrian capital that afternoon each captivated the spirit and desired message of the festival. Continuing the marking of Stonewall’s 50th anniversary, one of these four songs for collective singing was “We Shall Overcome,” but now in its original version. “Bread and Roses,” whose text emerged from the Woman’s Suffrage movement in Chicago, was no less potent an anthem considering its appearance in a pivotal scene of the award-winning British queer film *Pride*. More surprising is perhaps the choice of the “Ode to Joy,” taken from Beethoven’s 9th Symphony and the anthem of the European Union, which was included to symbolize European unity and a cry for equality despite the increasingly visible holes in the European project and its supposed ideals of Enlightenment values.

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<sup>11</sup> The original Italian lyrics are: “Solo così si rinnova il mondo: per amore. Ogni musica ha cominciato prima di aspettare che tutti ascoltassero, e chi è innamorato non aspetta che gli altri s’innamorino. Che cos’ho di più mio dell’amore?”



**Figure 6.** Cromatica Chorus, Piazza IV Novembre (Perugia), 28 April 2019 (photograph by Gian Domenico Troiano, used with permission from Cromatica).

However, it was “Bella Ciao” that was perhaps the most political and unifying song Cromatica performed that day, a song whose lyrics I have already foreshadowed in my text. The origins of the song “Bella Ciao” are still contested, but evidence suggests that an earlier version with different lyrics was sung in the early 20th century among women rice field workers in the Po Valley region of Northern Italy (Bermani 2020). During Mussolini’s regime and subsequent Nazi occupation during World War II, the song acquired a new text and significance from Italian partisans in their fight against fascism, especially during the final years of the war (*ibid.*). The song has been rearranged and translated into different contexts, most often to symbolise resistance against oppressive forces, becoming today an international anthem and global earworm (Bermani 2020; Spinetti, Schoop, and Hofman 2021: 2–3; Malara 2019). Yet, it retains a strong leftist political message in Italy, indeed, so much so that it was banned in various regions in Northern Italy in 2016 by local far-right political powers. With this overdetermined meaning, the song has potentially been seen as too political by various members of Italian LGBTQ+ choirs. But with the resurgence of threats from the right, “Bella Ciao” proved to be a poignant choice for Cromatica. The performance, in a canon arrangement in Perugia’s central square, reminded the city of its strong leftist tradition since World War II, but also forewarned the province’s turn towards populist right-wing powers later that year.

I joined friends a month later for Roma Pride, to which Cromatica had invited all of the Italian choirs. Under the sweltering sun, we paraded through the city centre, starting from Piazza della Repubblica and ending just before Piazza Venezia. Sheets with the lyrics of the four flash mob songs from Perugia were passed around. Passing the Colosseum at one point, the choristers halted and, bearing a large Cromatica banner, began to sing “Bella Ciao.” The day’s atmospheric buzz, the abundant celebrations, and the desire to sing carried on into the evening, when the restaurant where we ate on Rome’s “gay street” erupted into renditions of “Bella Ciao,” helped ever so slightly by my queer choral colleagues. When, a year later, Italy had become engulfed in the COVID pandemic, Cromatica decided to make their own virtual choir video in order to maintain musical activity and a sense of community. Enlisting the participation of all 13 Italian choirs and the support of several others, including the London Gay Men’s Chorus, they sang “Bella Ciao” once again. The video was released on social media to mark 17th May, known as IDAHOBIT (International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia), indeed marking that date in 1990 when the WHO finally removed homosexuality from its list of diseases (see Video 4: [Cromatica Chorus 2020](#)).

## Queer Love, Solidarities, Futures

Being a native ethnographer means understanding one’s position intimately and using it as a vehicle for embodying the complex, expressive, and conflicted lives of ourselves and our subject(s).

– Amber R. Clifford-Napoleone (2019: 285)

The pandemic seriously limited LGBTQ+ choral singing and hit the LGBTQ+ community hard.<sup>12</sup> Loneliness and crises are common experiences for queer people. Perhaps this explains my witnessing a huge resilience and resourcefulness among my queer siblings since the first lockdown. During the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, queer people performed radical care, and some still have traumas from this period. Key to the history of LGBTQ+ activism has been the creation of private spaces to unite in person and to present ourselves visibly as a community in public spaces. Studies have shown that many young LGBTQ+ people have felt unsafe in their homes and that mental health issues have increased considerably during the pandemic (Jowett 2020). Pausing our research, teaching and community engagement has also been a chance for academics to reflect, rethink, and transform their ethics and practice, not least through the critiques of music studies following Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 (Brown 2020; Ewell 2021). As I wondered what the future of my work might be, I began to see more clearly the weaknesses in normative research methods, the care we have to take when we recourse to potentially alienating complex theories, and the often exclusionary modes of research dissemination I have been taught in academia. When I’ve returned to ideas of decolonising methods with students these last semesters, I have been

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<sup>12</sup> The ensuing four sentences are paraphrased from a collective blogpost I wrote (Hilder 2020).

particularly struck by the Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's proposal that "research is a humble and humbling activity" (1999: 5). When we as scholars embark on projects with communities long excluded from the academy, we, as Smith (1999) implores, have to develop new ways of carrying out research and disseminating findings based on principles of respect, dialogue, and reciprocity, and through which research can contribute to the needs of those communities. Being a member of the queer choral community has not necessarily made this task easier, and our identities as an academic, activist and artist are often out of sync with each other (see Clifford-Napoleone 2019). And, as William Cheng (2016: 100) reminds us, those of us with greater privileges and access to resources, like myself, have a great responsible of care toward others. Recognising that our work is of the greatest value to the communities we work with invites both a humility and creativity that can be transformative both to our sense of self as scholars, but also the ethics and practice of our work.

Over the last two and a half years, I have understood on a deeper level how being an academic is much more than writing an article and teaching a curriculum. Through our networks, skills, access to resources and communication channels, we can strive to work in ways that promote collaboration, sharing, infrastructure building, community engagement, and caring, ethics and practices which are often overlooked, dismissed and sometimes actively dissuaded in academia. I am so grateful for the beautiful collaborations with committee members of the LGBTQ+ Music Study Group which I chair – I will mention them all by name: Marie Bennett, David Bretherton, Rachel Cowgill, Robert Crowe, George Haggett, Naomi Orrell, Ryan Persadie, Danielle Sofer, and Flo Toch. Together we have created a platform for queer musical scholarship and a support network for LGBTQ+ scholars and musicians, not least through our events, blogs, podcasts and Queer Mutual Mentoring scheme. Through these infrastructures, I have engaged in collaborative writing and curated dialogues with queer choral colleagues about our struggles and mutual caring during the pandemic (Hilder 2020), and I am embarking on a new podcast for Legato.<sup>13</sup> I am thankful to those students who are willing to take part in some of my pedagogical experiments, which have taken us outside the classroom, including a visit to the local Trondheim feminist music festival, Feminalen. I very much appreciated supervising MA students such as Snorre Sletten, who in their recently completed MA thesis (2021), offered recommendations to Norwegian student choirs to make them more trans inclusive. I am also indebted to collaborations with other queer and feminist scholars, for example Holly Patch who is attending to the particular needs of trans singers through her work with the Trans Chorus of Los Angeles (Patch 2022; forthcoming; Patch and König 2018). And I am blessed to have a deeply wise and caring network of friends/colleagues; our mutual mentoring pushes me to think and practice beyond the structures and modes set by our disciplines, jobs, and institutions. In particular, I thank local colleagues Jennifer Branlat, Jill Halstead, Hanna Musiol, and Libe Garcia Zarranz. I am also grateful to our own queer choir, Kor Hen, for nurturing a musical haven for queers in Trondheim. Being an academic means

<sup>13</sup> See also [LGBTQ+ Music Study Group \(2022\)](#).

building communities, imagining pedagogy that extends beyond the walls of the university, and inviting vulnerability as a scholar in ways that confuse the boundaries between our public work, hobbies, and private selves. As the musicologist William Cheng has written, “[e]thnography is already much queerer than we assume. Yet it can be queerer still” (2019: 328). It aligns with notions of queer methodology, which are necessarily messy, unorthodox, and personally transformative (Holliday 2000: 517; Judith Halberstam 1998: 13; Rooke 2009; Browne and Nash 2010). Today, I embrace that instability, fluidity, and vulnerability, and dare to live, alongside other scholars such as William Cheng (2016) and Javier Rivas (2021), by an ethics of “radical care” (Hobart and Kneese 2020).

As COVID restrictions have been lifted, LGBTQ+ choirs have resumed and expanded their own radical care work. We offer musical asylums to those of us living with mental health issues and those of us rejected by families and society. By demanding public attention and resources, we in turn have a degree of agency to transform society and welfare infrastructures. And in committing to collaborations and inviting wider society to sing along, we offer solidarity to those of us more marginalised than ourselves. Balén writes: “Queer choral musickers express moments of sharing profound joy, moments of ecstasy, with all the power usually associated with religious experience, but without the religion. These are experiences that make our hearts skip a beat, with a knowledge in our cells that we are part of something much larger than we comprehend, whose beauty makes us hold our breath, for which the exhale is the embodied expression of joy. Such qualities keep singers and audience members returning to this place of what I believe is, at its best, sacredly erotic communing” (2017: 166). I am reminded of the work with socialist choirs in the former Yugoslav region by the ethnomusicologist Ana Hofman, who writes: “affective solidarities produced through the collective experience of singing and listening foster new forms of social organization, making choirs’ activities an important vehicle for both thinking about and practicing alternative social relations, transforming political imaginaries, and emancipating potentials” (Hofman 2020: 103). Returning to Felski, I am reminded of how the melodies and lyrics of “The Lavender Song,” “Glad to be Gay,” and “Bella Ciao” hooked both myself and our larger communities along lines of affect in addition to “ethical, political, intellectual, or other bonds” (Felski 2020: 1). They “invite and enlist us” (*ibid.*: 6) as we sing for queer futures.

Yet, LGBTQ+ choirs are also messy fora in which divisions within the LGBTQ+ community may play out and alternative visions of queerness may collide. Andrea Bohlman (2019), in her study of protest song in the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s, asks us to listen to the competing voices of the crowds in spite of their apparently unified political goal. Precisely at this moment in European history, new nationalist formations, an aggressive revalorisation of the White heteronormative nuclear family, and increased violence toward LGBTQ+ people are taking grip of many parts of the continent (Butler 2021). As the ethnomusicologist Dafni Tragaki, has written, “the fragmented European self appears more and more cracked, if not shattered” (2013: 20). While we in the queer community demand a piece of the system, we have to be mindful of our newly found privileges within that system. Likewise, we have to keep in mind the potential

limitations of our work. As De Quadros reminds us, “[c]horal music’s early history, stretching through to the second half of the last century, largely served white, middle-class interests and social norms” (2019: 27). While the queer choral work I have presented here highlights the powerful ways in which social norms and political structures can be challenged through song, many other forms of activism and advocacy are necessary, and we as a queer choral community have to welcome critique and be ready to revise our practice and goals as the challenges we face change and particular members of our community are exposed to vulnerabilities. Likewise, the longer I continue this research, the more aware I become of how my own identities impact on who feels comfortable to participate in interviews with me, the types of conversations I can have, and leaves me wondering which stories are not for my ears; thus, I recognise how my own work unwittingly reproduces classical hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community along lines of gender, class, ability and race, which methodological experiments in collaboration, dialogue and sharing might never overcome. The songs I have shared with you here continue to vibrate in me and remind me to heed the queer voices of the past – those memorialised or forgotten at Stonewall and other pivotal moments in LGBTQ+ history – and to take stock of the competing visions of joy in the queer voices of the present with whom I continue to sing.

I will close by underscoring my own attachments and indebtedness to the friendship and trust of my queer kin in the LGBTQ+ music world, particularly friends in Diversity Choir, the Fourth Choir, the London Gay Men’s Chorus, Parruccoro, the Pink Singers, Roma Rainbow Choir, Voces Gaudii, Hsien Chew of Proud Voices and Riccardo Strappaghetti of Cromatica. In particular, I wish my Italian colleagues well in organising the next Various Voices in Bologna 2023. Only last Autumn, the Italian Senate dismissed a new proposed bill, “Ddl Zan,” that would have outlawed discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.<sup>14</sup> As I make my final edits to this paper, the fascist party Brothers of Italy have just won the largest proportion of votes in the Italian general election, rendering any vision of queer futures more fragile.

I’m reminded of the final day of Various Voices Munich. On leaving the festival area and walking to the expansive Englischer Garten (“English Garden”) with my then partner, a sense of melancholy overcame me. The queerness, created through huge labour and love, that had encompassed us the whole week, faded as we returned to the straight cis world.

Oh partisan carry me away  
Because I feel death approaching.  
– “Bella Ciao”

But soon, listen up, all of a sudden, our sun will be shining too.  
– “The Lavender Song”

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<sup>14</sup> “Ddl Zan” stands for “disegno di legge” and “Zan” refers to Alessandro Zan, the openly gay member of the Chamber of Deputies who was the bill’s rapporteur.

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Thomas R. Hilder is associate professor in ethnomusicology at NTNU. His scholarship, pedagogy, and community engagement attend to musical activism, community music and well-being, shaped by feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives. He is author

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