

Bringing a Love for Singing to America: The History of the *Madison Männerchor*

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Singing has a long tradition in Germany. Choirs can be found in almost every town and city, including choirs for male voices, so-called *Männerchöre*. When Germans immigrated to the United States in the 1800s, they brought their singing traditions with them. It was a group of German immigrants that formed the *Madison Männerchor* (MMC) in 1852, the oldest German men's choir in Wisconsin, and the second oldest continuously active German men's choir in the United States. The *Columbus Männerchor* of Columbus, OH, which was established in 1848, is the oldest. The primary goal was to gather for the enjoyment of German *Lieder* and to arrange concerts and musical entertainment for the furtherance of music in general. Only a year after its inception, in February 1853, the MMC performed its first

concert at the Baptist Church on Carroll Street in Madison.

From 1857 to 1869 the MMC was affiliated with the *Schützenverein* or rifle club consisting of members with previous military training in Germany. When the Civil War broke out, all able-bodied men of the MMC *Schützenverein* fought for the Union, and those who survived the conflict and returned to Madison re-established themselves with the MMC.

After the Civil War, the *Männerchor* joined the newly established *Northwestern Sängerbund*, which included 50 to 60 choirs in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Nebraska. They hosted yearly singing competitions, and in 1879 the MMC won the "Loving Cup of Gold" trophy. Because of the MMC's success, the *Sängerfest* was brought to Madison in 1881 with 1,200 singers participating in the

competition held in the Assembly Chambers of the Wisconsin Capitol Building. In addition, 6,000 visitors came to Madison to listen to the music.

Another memorable event came in 1887 when the *Männerchor* performed a midnight serenade for President Grover Cleveland and his wife who were visiting Madison. The President was very pleased with the performance and announced that he, too, was a member of a German singing society, the *Buffalo Liederkranz*, a German men's choir in Buffalo, NY.

At the beginning of World War I, the choir went through significant changes and turmoil. Between 1912 and 1917, the ranks of the MMC continued to swell, but after the American entry into the war, many young members enlisted and left to fight in the war. Rehearsals and concerts continued during this time, but the enthusiasm of the earlier years had faded. When the war was over, it took the choir a decade to regain its former strength, but in 1927, the MMC celebrated its 75th anniversary at the Madison Masonic Temple.

In 1936, the MMC played a prominent role in the Wisconsin Centennial celebration by leading the German section in the International Cavalcade. Things once again began to look up for the choir. Only four years later, in November of 1940, however, tragedy struck. A fire destroyed Turner Hall, the home of the MMC. Spirits were crushed as every treasured possession of the choir was



lost, including its Steinway grand piano, the entire music library that had been assembled over 90 years, as well as all flags, banners, *Sängerfest* trophies, records, and photographs.

In 1952, the MMC celebrated its 100th anniversary at the old Central High School auditorium in Madison, but membership continued to decline. By 1956 only 12 active singers remained, a reflection of a lack of interest in ethnic activities among young Americans. The *Männerchor*, however, did not just quietly disappear. Thanks to the choir's strong efforts to promote its activities and the German *Männerchor* tradition, the MMC was back to 36 members in 1967 and has continued to grow and evolve.


Under the leadership of its president, Paul Essert, new events and activities were planned, such as annual spring and Christmas concerts, and participation in the singing competitions of the Wisconsin *Sängerbezirk* (WSB), (Wisconsin Singers District). This competition, called *Kommers*, is still being held today, bringing German-American choirs together to celebrate their common heritage.

A highlight in the MMC's history was a singing trip to Germany in 1984, together with a German men's choir from Denver. In 1977, the MMC celebrated its 125th anniversary with a grand concert. Even the president of the German Singing Federation came from Germany to attend the event. In 2002, on the occasion of its 150th anniversary, the *Männerchor* celebrated with a gala *Sängerfest* in Madison, including a concert at the Wisconsin Capitol Rotunda, and an *Oktoberfest* at Madison's Essen Haus. Over 250 singers

from Wisconsin and Illinois helped the MMC celebrate. Ten years later, MMC's 160th anniversary featured a special spring concert at Madison Turner Hall and a performance in the Wisconsin Capitol Rotunda. The choir was honored by the State of Wisconsin as 2012 was proclaimed "the year of the *Madison Männerchor*."

One of the choir's cherished traditions is the annual cemetery sing. Every summer, singers visit three local cemeteries where former members have been laid to rest, honoring their memories by telling their stories and singing two or three songs. 2013 was a special year, when the *Nordamerikanische Sängerbund* (NASB) held the national *Sängerfest* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The *Madison Männerchor* joined several thousand singers from all over the country in a joyous gathering.

Although the MMC remains strong, it faces new challenges, primarily an aging membership. Therefore, the choir is working to recruit new and younger voices while at the same time retaining its traditions that go back to 1852.

For more information, go to www.madisonmaennerchor.org 

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