On Campus

Sing, Lion, Sing

A new exhibition celebrates 140 years of singing groups at Columbia.

By
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|
Summer 2011

In 2008, tryouts were held for the Columbia Glee Club, the oldest extant student organization on campus. One person showed up.

American culture had changed. In 1963, 90 years after the first Columbia glee club was convened, the outfit reached a crescendo. The singers had already performed at the Eisenhower White House, and were about to become the first college vocal group to appear at Philharmonic Hall (now Avery Fisher Hall). They even released LPs, like the one shown here, of an assortment of choral delights — a Finnish lullaby, an Italian folk song, spirituals, sea chanteys, Columbia anthems, a Mozart cantata written for the Vienna Freemason Lodge. The repertoire was sung by upwards of 75 men three times per year: at Homecoming, during the Christmas season, and at an annual spring concert at Town Hall.

Then the Beatles happened, as did the rest of the ’60s, and the clean-cut college harmonizers in their tuxes and blazers seemed to go the way of Eisenhower, Dylan’s acoustic guitar, and Grayson Kirk. Glee had turned to gall.

There were other singing groups on campus, of course — the King’s Men (now the Kingsmen), the Blue Notes (now Notes & Keys) — but the Glee Club was the most democratic, explains

Gerald Weale ’57CC, associate conductor of the organization from 1959 to 1965. The club provided a forum where singers “who didn’t have years of training could reach people,” Weale says. “Columbia students picked up things quickly and very intuitively.”

A new exhibition at the Columbia Alumni Center celebrates 140 years of singing groups at Columbia, with photos, record albums, newspaper clippings, and other relics that reflect the University's vibrant vocal tradition.

In 2009, students and alumni, inspired by Glee alumnus Nicholas Rudd '64CC, '67BUS, worked to revive the Glee Club. This time, 100 people responded, says current conductor David Harris. Was it the popular new TV show *Glee* that stimulated such interest? Or were more students simply in the mood to sing in 2009?

Whatever the reason, there will be no swan song in the Glee Club's repertoire anytime soon. Singing is booming at Columbia. There are more than a dozen active a cappella groups, as well as the Columbia Alumni Singers, which Rudd and Michael Garrett '66CC, '69LAW, '70BUS helped assemble for the 2010 Alumni Weekend Reunion. (It's now a yearly event.) Weale and Bruce Trinkley '66CC, '68GSAS served as music directors.

For Weale, at least, the glee resurgence is no mystery.

"Choral music," he says, "is one of the great gifts of God Almighty."

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