

“Adeste Fideles”--The Associated Glee Clubs of America (1925)

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Essay by Lloyd Winstead (guest post)*



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Original label

The radio waves were filled with sounds of vocal and instrumental music in 1925. You could tune in to WNYC, New York, to hear “Songs and Stories of New Zealand” hosted by Irma Karon; WBZ, Springfield, Massachusetts, to hear a soprano performance by Violet Gridley; WJY, New York, for concerts by the St. Cecelia Club (direct from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel) and the Knickerbocker Orchestra; WEEL, Boston, for the Sinfonians Orchestra; WMBF, Miami Beach, Florida, for the Rosebrook’s Serenaders; KFI, Los Angeles, for the Varsity Trio and Melody Girls; or WSB, Atlanta, for the Seven Aces Orchestra. These were just a small selection of the choices available to listeners for the evening of March 31, 1925.

“The Eveready Hour,” the first commercially sponsored variety program in the history of broadcasting, sponsored the performance of the Associated Glee Clubs of America, which was broadcast at 9pm over station WEA, New York, and, as the “New York Times” noted in its Today’s Radio Programs for March 31, 1925, “direct from the Metropolitan Opera House.” Owing to both the significance and popularity of the event, the broadcast also was carried simultaneously on WCCO, Minneapolis-St. Paul; WFI, Philadelphia; WOC, Davenport, Iowa; WJAR, Providence; WEEL, Boston; WGR, Buffalo; WEAR, Cleveland; WSAI, Cincinnati; WWJ, Detroit; and WCAE, Pittsburgh, among others.¹ The popularity of the concert was readily apparent. The historical significance of the moment, as one of the first electronically captured musical performances, was not.

Choral and glee club singing was hugely popular in the early part of the 20th century. The appeal of vocal performances benefitted from the novelty of radio and the steady advances of the

¹ “Today’s Radio Program,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file) (New York, N.Y.), Mar 31, 1925. 24.

fledgling recording industry. The newly constituted Associated Glee Clubs of America, founded in part by conductor, educator and composer Walter Damrosch of the musical Damrosch dynasty, took advantage of technological developments of broadcast and recording. Damrosch realized the advantages of sharing music through both radio and recordings. With the breakthroughs in broadcasting and recording technologies, music could reach a much wider audience. Damrosch later channeled that enthusiasm by hosting the “NBC Music Appreciation Hour” radio program from 1928 to 1942 before it was discontinued due to World War II and amid the push for revenue producing programs.²

The idea of a mass concert itself took shape in 1924, the year prior, when 500 men representing 12 leading metropolitan glee clubs gave the first mass glee club concert at Carnegie Hall. The Metropolitan Opera House gave them more room to accommodate 800 plus singers with roughly 4,000 in the audience.³

The Associated Glee Clubs of America was an alliance of glee clubs dedicated to promoting “the extension of fine chorus singing among the men and boys of America, for the education, benefit and pleasure of America and the advancement of musical art.” The association encouraged older glee clubs to foster junior glee clubs with hopes of expanding into high schools, and thus, constructing “a continuous stream of singing men reaching from adolescence to the evening of life.” It aimed to create “an old-world enjoyment of good music worth of all the rest of America’s great developments and to make good singing spontaneous among America’s men.”⁴

As Damrosch noted in his remarks as spokesperson for the event, the ultimate goal was a “vast chorus of America’s singing men reaching from coast to coast, all cooperating the great work of making our nation as great in music as she is in wealth and world power.” Damrosch further declared that “English-speaking nations, back to the reign of Queen Elizabeth, had spread a tradition of choral singing.” “America could not become a musical people” he stated, “until its citizens practiced music, not as a profession, but because they loved it and carried the pleasure of it to the Pacific, to Canada and Mexico in a brotherhood of song.”⁵

Twelve different conductors representing 15 clubs took turns leading the massed chorus including directors Arthur D. Woodruff, George Gartlan, Marshall Bartholomew, John Hyatt Brewer, Mark Andrews, Bruno Huhn, and Ralph Baldwin. Participating vocal groups included the Apollo Club of Brooklyn, Banks Glee Club of New York, Friendly Sons Glee Club of New York, Glee Club of Nutley, Glee Club of the Oranges, Hartford Choral Society, Mendelssohn

² Sondra Wieland Howe, “The NBC Music Appreciation Hour: Radio broadcasts of Walter Damrosch, 1928-1942,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2003). 64-66, 74.

³ “From Associated Glee Club of America,” *Music Supervisors’ Journal* 11, no. 4 (1925). 6.

⁴ “Associated Glee Clubs of America Show Rapid Gain in Membership During Year,” *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), February 15, 1925; “Nation-Wide Glee Club is Proposed,” *The Ogden Standard-Examiner* (Ogden, Utah), February 8, 1925. 26.

⁵ “900 American Voices in a Gala Concert: Associated Glee Clubs of America Sing at the Metropolitan Under Changing Leadership,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file) (New York, N.Y.), April 1, 1925. 20; “Chorus of 850 Heard,” *The Birmingham News* (Birmingham, Alabama), April 19, 1925. 20.

Glee Club of New York, Men's Glee Club of Mt. Vernon, Montclair Glee Club, Orpheus Club of Newark, Orpheus Glee Club of Flushing, Singer's Club of New York, Summit Glee Club, University Glee Club of Brooklyn, and the University Glee Club of New York City.

Organizers of the event included Clayton W. Old, chairman of the Associated Glee Clubs, George H. Gartlan, director of music for New York City Board of Education, musicologist Sigmund Spaeth, and other leaders in American music.⁶

The radio broadcast featured an hour of the concert, which exceeded twice that. The combined chorus filled 856 chairs on stage. The "New York Times" recounted the concert the following day:

Bruno Huhn of the Banks Glee was first at the baton with an old Lutheran melody. Mark Andrew conducted as an "extra" his song, "John Peel." Arthur Woodruff, leading the hunting song from De Koven's "Robin Hood," was greeted with rising cheers, and Ralph Baldwin closed with the Latin "Adeste Fidelis," in which the audience joined from the book of words in English.

A program of contrasts alternated the rollicking old glees with music of tender sentiment, such as the well-remembered Wilhelm Gericke's "Autumn Sea," led by Frank Kasschau; Horatio Parker's "Lamp in the West," under Ralph Grosvenor; Cadman's "Land of the Sky Blue Water," in which John Hyatt Brewster captured a moment of beauty, and Palmgren's "Summer Evening," the choice of Edward Zeiner. Marshall Bartholomew and Theodore Van Yorx led other songs, while Joseph Donnelly marked a popular climax with "The Sword of Ferrara" and H. Thompson Rodman capped that with one roaring unison in "A Plainsman's Song."⁷

Following the performance, the singers gathered for a smoker at the Princeton Club.

Due to the success of the first two concerts, the Associated Glee Clubs of America would go on to assemble a staff with composer Kenneth S. Clark as executive secretary and an office in Chickering Hall in Manhattan. The following year, the third annual concert expanded to 1,200 singers at the Seventy-First Regiment Armory in New York hosting an audience of 10,000.

Reports noted that the concert would again be broadcast by radio and "most of its numbers perpetuated in talking machine records."⁸ Associated Glee Clubs continued the mass

⁶ "From Associated Glee Club of America." 6; "Massed Glee Clubs and Grand Opera on Schedule for Broadcasting at WCAE," *The Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), March 31 1925. 10.

⁷ "900 American Voices in a Gala Concert: Associated Glee Clubs of America Sing at the Metropolitan Under Changing Leadership." 20.

⁸ "Associated Glee Clubs Announce Plans for 1925-26 Season," *The Standard Union* (Brooklyn, New York), November 1, 1925. 10.

performances through the decade with a concert in Madison Square Garden in 1929 that numbered nearly 4,000 singers from 70 groups before an audience of 15,000.⁹

In the early 20th century, record companies experimented with electric recording in order to replace the limited properties of the acoustic recording horn, but with poor results. The engineers at Bell Labs-Western Electric perfected the process and, in the fall of 1924, offered their process to both Victor and Columbia. Columbia signed with Western Electric in March of 1925, with electrical recording at Columbia beginning on a regular basis in April. The most remarkable early electric recording was the field recording of the aforementioned performance of the Associated Glee Clubs of America at the Metropolitan Opera House on March 31, 1925.

Surprisingly, neither Columbia nor Victor billed their new releases as electrically recorded until 1926. This, by design, gave dealers time to sell off their inventory of older acoustic discs. The quality of the electric process was readily apparent compared to acoustic recordings. “Even on cursory listening,” one scholar noted, “the records *sounded* different, fuller and with much more bass, just like radio.” The recording industry was born anew.¹⁰

Columbia aggressively promoted the glee club recording following the event. An advertisement in the “Fort Worth Star-Telegram” for June 1925 proclaimed:

4,850 Voices on One Record! The Most Unusual Phonograph Record Ever Made with Adeste Fidelis and John Peel. For \$1.25.

And as they sang, Columbia caught their music and preserved it for the ages on a phonograph record.

You should hear this record! It marks the highest attainment in the reproduction of human voice. Heretofore it has been considered unusual to get a good reproduction of an ordinary sized chorus. On this record you hear nearly 5,000 voices and all of their power and beauty is flawlessly retained.

Columbia billed its product as “phonographs and *new process* records” and the source for “the most original and pleasing interpretation of the popular music of the day.”¹¹ The ad further noted the availability for purchase of the recordings of “Discovery” and “A Plainsman’s Song,” each recorded as part of the same concert.

Philip L. Miller, Chief of the Music Division of the New York Public Library in the 1960s, described the significance best in the liner notes of Columbia’s 1964 issue of a compilation of

⁹ “4,000 Singers Thrill Throng in Garden: Choruses of Associated Glee Clubs of America Applauded in Madison Square,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file) (New York, N.Y.), May 25, 1929. 23.

¹⁰ Tim Brooks, “High Drama in the Record Industry: Columbia Records, 1901-1934,” *ARSC Journal* 33, no. 1 (2002). 45-46.

¹¹ “4,850 Voice on One Record,” Advertisement, *Fort-Worth Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, Texas), June 5 1925. 9.

“legendary recordings,” which included the 1925 recording of “John Peel” by the Associated Glee Clubs of America:

The year 1925 saw perhaps the most dramatic and most far-reaching development in recording history, for it marked the end of the acoustic recording horn and the substitution of the microphone. For several years the very existence of the phonograph had been threatened by a new household instrument known as radio, and engineers at the Bell Laboratories had been working on the application of new radio techniques to recording. The first electrical Columbia record to be issued was made at a public concert of the Associated Glee Clubs of America (850 voices) in the Metropolitan Opera House.

“In its day ‘John Peel’ was incredible and overpowering,” Miller noted, “it has not lost its excitement today.”¹²

Most listeners and critics were similarly impressed with Columbia’s feat, which showcased the leap from acoustical to electrical recordings through improved sound quality and dynamic range. It is not surprising that these records caused a sensation. A more tempered review, written shortly after Columbia’s release in 1925, acknowledged the power and quality of the recording of both “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “John Peel,” but was less impressed with the expressive interpretation of “John Peel.” “But, oh! the rhythm in ‘John Peel’! If this is the fashionable *rubaaaaahto*,” the writer noted, “give me strict metronomic dealing all the time for music of this sort.”¹³ The first electronic recordings were marvels of their time, but even with the advancements in technology, beauty was sometimes in the ear of the beholder.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

¹² Giuseppe Campanari et al., *The sound of genius: legendary recordings, 1903-1956* (New York: Columbia Record Club, 1964). Album notes.

¹³ Discus, “Gramophone Notes,” *The Musical Times* 66, no. 992 (1925).; George Taylor, “Some Notes on Those 850 (or was it 4850) Voices,” *Historic Record* 49, no. October (1998). 916.

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