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## Reaching Across the Concert Hall Aisle

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The Capital Hearings

With this week's government shutdown dominating the news, it's no secret that the political environment in Washington is divided. While some groups work to forge common ground, opposing voices seem content to stay in their own camps rather than explore new perspectives.

The same could be said of the city's music scene.

In addition to being the political center of the country, D.C. boasts one of the most vibrant arts sectors of any city in America (it's the choral music capital of the nation, according to Chorus America). Whatever music helps you get your groove on, chances are good you can find performers catering to your tastes in the nation's Capital.

In a city with such a wealth of musical offerings, most of D.C.'s choirs, orchestras, bands, and vocal groups are content -- or even feel it necessary for survival -- to brand themselves within specific stylistic lines. Playing it safe is less risky, and often more lucrative, than crossing boundaries or blending genres. A large chorus will always have an easier time selling tickets to Mozart's *Requiem* than to a concert of lesser-known compositions, even if the latter is every bit as enjoyable and artistically worthwhile. So the baroque orchestras stick to Bach, and the jazz ensembles don't stray too far from Duke Ellington. Audiences want things that are easy to categorize, and the District's cultural institutions are eager to give them what they want.

Rarely do you see an ensemble challenging you to broaden your perspective and take in multiple styles of music in one show - or even within a single song.

Enter The Capital Hearings, a 12-voice *a cappella* ensemble that came on the scene in 2010. We began as a group of friends who wanted to broaden our own musical horizons and take our audiences along for the ride. Since the early days spent sifting through arrangements and experimenting with our sound over drinks in the casual confines of friends' apartments, we have evolved into a group that thrives on breaking boundaries and shaking things up in the orderly Washington arts community.

While our appropriately "punny" name for a D.C.-based group helps attract attention, we strive to create music that offers much more than novelty. We don't just embrace variety; we celebrate the threads that connect different genres by exploring universal themes -- transformation, coping with fear, connection with the natural world, conflicts between good and evil, faith and doubt, darkness and light - that bind music together across centuries and styles. Our shows span the spectrum of musical styles and eras, mixing renaissance music with modern classical works, jazz tunes with pop and rock songs, folk ballads with doo-wop. We believe great music belongs together, regardless of genre.

One of the biggest steps in our growth as a new ensemble was the decision to record a debut album. With the wide range of musical ground that we cover, it felt like a daunting task to construct something that was cohesive, but also represented our versatility and love of crossing musical "party lines". We wanted to go beyond simply hitting "shuffle" on an eclectic playlist and calling it a day. With this project, we dared to mix genres and styles not just from track to track, but within individual songs. For

example, our take on George Harrison's *Here Comes the Sun* was inspired by James Taylor and Yo Yo Ma's re-imagined version, and then adds some silky jazz harmonies and an homage to immortal composer Claude Debussy with a "Clair de Lune" intro. Even the way we recorded the album was a challenging nut to crack, but the dilemmas we faced led to innovation. We incorporated techniques typically used for pop *a cappella* and applied them to jazz and classical songs, and vice-versa.

We took the idea of fusion and ran with it as far as we could go. In the end, we gave our debut album a title that expressed the essence of our conformity and our rebellion in the D.C. arts scene, all at once: *Opening Statement*.

It's exciting to see other groups emerging to help audiences taste different types of music than they might otherwise experience. Ensembles like the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Singers and the New Orchestra of Washington have also successfully formed set lists around themes like nature, darkness and light, love, and other ideas that allow them to explore and present music in many different styles in a single show. Even long-established groups like The Choral Arts Society of Washington are programming thematic concerts (their concert in June will celebrate America's diverse choral heritage). We are proud to be one of the leaders of this movement, among such great company.

Above all, we take pride in the fact that our concerts are one of the few places you're likely to see Republicans and Democrats, classical aficionados, jazz lovers, and indie-rock fans, sitting side-by-side and enjoying the show.

As Washington politics remain divided, so too will performing groups always be tempted to "play to their base." But as with governing, most artistic progress occurs somewhere in the center. When those with different perspectives come together to explore new ideas and find common ground, great things can happen.

*The Capital Hearings perform at All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, October 5, at 8pm. The program, "Opening Statement," features songs spanning many styles including jazz, folk, rock, classical, and pop, and including several selections from their debut album of the same name. Tickets are available at the door or at [www.TheCapitalHearings.com](http://www.TheCapitalHearings.com), and furloughed federal employees receive free admission with ID.*

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