

CREATING CHANGE THROUGH MUSIC

The Bangkok Gay Men's Chorus wants to change perceptions about LGBTI one song at a time

STORY: **SUWITCHA CHAIYONG**

**CELEBRATING
PRIDE MONTH**



Noom* auditioned for many singing groups, but he was always rejected since he did not have a degree in singing. Meanwhile, at a tender age, Ton* experienced an embarrassing moment while singing onstage as his trousers were unzipped and the audience laughed at him. Since then, he has given up singing in public.

However, when Noom and Ton sent in their demo recordings, they were selected to join the first-ever Bangkok Gay Men's Chorus (BK GMC). They joined 30 BK GMC members who participated in recent performances at the Goethe-Institut Thailand. It took the members four months to prepare for their performance featuring two songs — *She* by Elvis Costello and *Can You Feel The Love Tonight* by Elton John. BK GMC also recently performed as

the opening act at “The Enchanted Night Of The Opera” by Shyam Choir, led by Vuthiphand Pongtanalert, head of The Bellavoice Society Thailand and vocal coach and artistic director of BK

GMC. Donations at the performance were sent to the Holy Foundation for the Blind in Thailand under the Royal Patronage Ban Dek Ramintra School.

Founded in late 2022, BK GMC was formed by Vitaya Saeng-Aroon, who has worked with the LGBTI community for several decades. The idea of the chorus was inspired by San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (SF GMC), which was the world's first openly gay chorus founded in 1978. One of SF GMC's goals was to evolve society's views towards LGBTI people.

Sarawut Burapapat, executive director of BK GMC, explained that the organisation wants to build an LGBTI



The Bangkok Gay Men's Chorus at its debut performance at the Goethe Institute.

community through music.

"Vitaya, the founder of BK GMC, believes that music is a medium that people can easily relate to since most people enjoy it. Even people who initially do not like gay men can listen to and enjoy our chorus. They may come to accept us and we can convey other information about LGBTI through our music. We have planned that a



Sarawut Burapapat.



Vitaya Saeng-Aroon.



Vuthiphand Pongtanalert.



milestone for us will be a musical performance which incorporates information about the LGBTI community. Our social communication differs from other groups which use rallies or parades to connect with people. We hope people will see gay men in a different light. Our aim is to encourage mutual respect among individuals which leads to greater acceptance and understanding" Sarawut said.

Life spoke to Sarawut about BK GMC's debut performance and LGBTI communities.

What are some of the criteria for BK GMC's members?

Aspiring singers are selected from demo recordings by Vitaya and Vuthiphand, who is the vocal coach and artistic director. Singers must have the ability to hit the right notes. After that, they will be divided into groups of bass and tenor based on their vocal tones. Members should listen to feedback from the vocal coach and have a passion for improving their singing abilities. Members should also have a volunteer mindset because they do not earn money from BK GMC. They will also have to spend time rehearsing for a performance during Pride Month.

What is BK GMC's practice schedule?

Singers have a vocal coaching session on Wednesday and Sunday, and each session lasts two hours. Wednesdays are particularly beneficial for singers with weak ability, as there are fewer singers in attendance that day, so those who are present receive direct guidance from Vuthiphand. Besides these two training days, singers must practise with their groups — bass 1, bass 2, tenor 1 and tenor 2. Singers with advanced skills assist others. Each singer also spends time with individual practice.

Have you ever felt discouraged about practising?

Yes. I am one of the weaker singers who lack a musical background, so I am unable to read notes. Many members feel the same way. They are worried that they will hinder the progress of the group. Fortunately for us, singers with advanced skills encourage and support us.

Why did BK GMC decide to hold a debut performance?

It was an event to promote BK GMC to gay people, in hope they become interested in joining us. BK GMC aims to have 50 members this year. Following the debut performance, more people, including aspiring international singers, contacted us. We accept international members as well, but they must live in Bangkok or Thailand.



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Did you have any special practice for the debut performance?

Yes. All singers rehearsed onstage for three hours in a hall at Show DC where Miss Grand Thailand took place. This helped us feel less nervous or worried on the actual stage. There were specific gestures and movements that we had to practise. The concept of these gestures was to portray BK GMC as splendid, yet charming.

What was the feedback on the performance?

Audiences admired our determination, effort and dedication. They accepted us for who we are, acknowledging our abilities as singing with an accurate pitch without distortion. However, they still gave suggestions for improving solo performances.

Although LGBTI people are accepted, many members, including me, feel our self-esteem has not been fulfilled. However, after our performance at the Goethe Institut, the positive feedback helped us realise that people accept our abilities rather than focus on our titles.

How have attitudes towards LGBTI changed compared to the past?

The new generation has grown up with a more accepting mindset towards

LGBTI. As a result, people are more open-minded than in the past. Most Thais do not engage in violent attacks against LGBTI even if they do not accept us. I believe that discrimination against us does not involve severe violence like in some countries.

However, I hope people will be more open-minded towards transgender individuals since Thais assume that transgenders have careers as performers or drag queens in cabaret shows. As a result, there are not many transgender individuals in workplaces, especially in executive positions even though these individuals have excellent abilities. I hope people can come to understand and accept them more.

How do you feel about legalising marriage equality?

I believe it is not going to cost the government much if they pass the marriage equality bill. If this bill is passed, there will be more changes including reduction of workplace segregation and changing titles for transgender people. I hope people will have a better understanding of LGBTI which eventually will lead to greater acceptance and equality. I also hope the new government will reconsider approving the bill.

What advice do you have for gay men who would like to become members of BK GMC?

Send your demo recording to BK GMC. Some choirs invite famous people to join them, but we do not do that. We want people who genuinely intend to be part of us. There are gay men in other provinces who want to join us. In the future, we may let them learn singing techniques with us via online platforms and they can form Gay Men's Choruses in their own provinces as branches of BK GMC.

** not their real names.*