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## *How Sweet the Sound: Preserving Our National Voice*

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*Synchronicity has a way of interweaving seemingly unrelated events into life-changing ideals:*



I was driving down the road with my six year old beside me when she began humming a tune. Between catching earfuls of the Mariners game on the radio and dodging traffic, I paid little attention until I realized she was humming an obscure Latvian tune *Kas Tie Tadi*. Coincidentally, the UW choirs had just completed a quarter exploring Latvian music and had sung this tune as part of our program. So I began humming along. Her eyes brightened with surprise that dumb-old-Dad knew “her” song. When we finished we both exclaimed, “How did YOU know that song?”

Come to find out, she had learned a “new” hymn (*By the Babylonian Waters: With One Voice*; Augsburg Fortress Pub., 1995) at Bible school based on the same tune. That we knew different words mattered little, merely humming brought forth for each of us deep emotional context to that moment - she from her favorite Bible school tune, me remembering a special concert. We were each amazed.

Not long after, the planning committee met to determine the site for the 2000 ACDA Northwestern Division convention to be held in Seattle. As we were touring some beautiful facilities, we were asked, rather naively, by one non-musician facilities manager to “sing something so you can hear the beautiful acoustics.” After some nervous laughter, shuffling of feet, and a few aside comments, we begged off politely. Awhile later, upon returning to the hall, we were asked again, somewhat more insistently to “please sing.” There was a feeling among us that we would like to, yet a clear discomfort. “What would we sing?”

“We don’t really know anything.” We reluctantly agreed to sing, and then set upon the awkward task of deciding WHAT to sing. “*Shenandoah*” was suggested, but discarded as we couldn’t agree which arrangement to sing. “*Happy Birthday*” and “*Take Me Out to the Ball Game*” were candidates but

discarded as trite. We settled on the “*Doxology*.” A few bowed out at that point, either due to not knowing it or feeling uncomfortable with the religious context. So we managed to sing it fine, each hoping that none of the others whom we hold in such esteem were listening too carefully.

### **A nation’s voice**

The highlight of the year for the UW Chamber Singers was singing that Latvian concert. The University had been given a generous endowment from the Latvian government, and, since choral singing is such a revered practice in Baltic countries---indeed their entire histories are encoded in song---we were asked to sing a Latvian program for some officials and the local Latvian community.

I had the pleasure of being able to sit with the audience as the choir sang *Kas Tie Tadi*, as the piece was being conducted by a graduate student. The audience was rapt by the piece - not the performance, as if they were a part of the choir, their emotions palpably ebbed, flowed and evolved with the text. The text and tune had deep meaning in their life; hearing it gave them a chance to experience these deeply held emotions.

We closed the program with a simple hymn, *Put Vejini*, that had great meaning to the Latvian people during the Soviet occupation. A simple story of a young girl standing up for herself in marriage was a covert message of revolution to those people. Outside forces could control everything except their inner life! The audience broke into a thunderous unison clap as European audiences will, and demanded an encore. Unfortunately, we had sung everything we knew, so we asked if we could sing that hymn again and come out and sing it with them. The rendition was not pretty, nor refined, but it was a joyful noise. The tears, the fervor, the conviction, the soul conveyed from the audience was life changing to the students. Our choir members would never be the same.

### **Unrelated events?**

These three seemingly unrelated events have impacted me greatly: the joy of discovery of knowing the same song as someone else...regardless of “which version;” the depth of emotion communicated in song by that Latvian audience...with no regard to the “quality” of performance; and perhaps, most tragically, the feeling of inadequacy singing with peers, the discomfort of searching for something we all could sing, and the embarrassment that we, the carriers of our nation’s voice, had no common voice of our own.

We in the United States have something to learn from the Latvians. Singing is an elemental pillar of their culture. Since their entire history can be told in song, they always have something to sing about. Hymns that would be considered outdated and dreary in the context of our own culture are completely contemporary against the backdrop of their collective experience.

Singing becomes a fountainhead of emotion and knowledge passed from generation to generation. Many of their children today have no recollection of Soviet tyranny, yet they sing with the same emotion and understanding as their parents because they have been handed this history of song. The songs have encoded the Latvians entire history, not merely a history of events, but the emotions and lives that lived them. As the children sing, they bring alive the voices that lived each chapter of their history and live it anew.

We have no such collective voice. We have survived as a culture long enough to have a rich heritage of song, yet, contemporary society places little value on collective song. The symptoms are numerous:

- ◆ Our consumer mentality encourages us to look for the “newest” arrangement, or we look for new songs to relate to the children of the Twenty-first Century. *Home on the Range* just doesn’t do it for a child of the MTV generation. Or could it?
- ◆ The most obvious collective song, our National Anthem, is endangered as it is considered so hard to sing nobody wants to sing it. There is a strong push from media types to omit the singing of it before ballgames, as that practice harkens back to early century wartime and is certainly unnecessary in our “new world order.”
- ◆ Political correctness makes us shy away from anything that smacks of religiosity, though we have been a culture long enough to see that Judeo-Christian texts were an inextricable part of the culture of our forebears. Clearly, in today’s society much of this music may have lost its immediacy of meaning, yet we can appreciate it from purely a historical and cultural perspective, a snapshot of what was. We have reached a time that we are so afraid to offend any corner of our society or to make sure that we cover every base that our music has become, in the words of the New York Times, “defensive” and at best, vanilla. School programs are filled with forgettable seasonal tunes (*One Little Jingle Bell Fell in the Snow*) or “school sacred” (*Jubilate, Sing Our Praises to the Sky*), songs that our young singers soon forget. If it wasn’t for the wonderful wealth of multi-cultural music, our concerts of American music would be digested as cotton candy.

Perhaps one of the most evident examples of the loss of this voice is when a student auditions for our choirs. They come knowing no traditional songs. Once upon a time we could muddle through *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, or *Amazing Grace*.

Even patriotic songs are an endangered species. As a group, students can make it through the refrain of “America, the Beautiful” and that’s about it. A National Voice allows a culture and the individuals within it to express

emotion, experience, a sense of belonging, something which is familiar and constant, value, respect for what is past, and perhaps most importantly, to tap into the huge pool of collective psyche, emotion and experience which is handed down from generation to generation. We are no different from the Latvians or any other vibrant culture, we pass on the collective pain of war, suffering, of oppression, joy of success, from parent to child. Our culture painfully disregards this pool, and it lays dormant as a well of emotion that either dries up or explodes from the pressure.

Our modern culture desires to tap into this well of the soul, yet doesn't realize it. We look to cultural experiences to give us a momentary taste of that emotional pool. Church must make us feel good, television and tabloids have learned to become sensational, sporting events and rock concerts become a sort of collective primal scream.

Rock concerts are a great example of our society's desire for collective song. Audiences respond in a patterned way at these concerts: the music from the artist's most recent recording is heard with the audience sitting and often talking; older music is greeted with much more enthusiasm, by standing and clapping; the oldest music...and music deepest within the collective psyche of the audience...is greeted by pandemonium and singing so loud in the audience that often the artist will quit singing and encourage the audience to sing the hook. We love it. Yet we are dependent upon a particular band and 110 decibels to access this wealth of life within. It's time for a change.

### **A call for developing a national voice**

We, the members of the ACDA must look at ourselves as the curators of the national voice. It is our responsibility to preserve our ever growing culture in song. But first we must develop the voice ourselves. Within our choral community we must develop a repertoire of collective song that is a part of our American choral culture.

Folksongs, sea chanties, pop songs, religious songs, songs of particular regions and peoples, all can be collected and learned as a documentation of our collective history. The collective history that has already occurred must be the foundation upon which our appreciation for what is new is built, the tree upon which the ornaments of music of other times and cultures are hung. Once this repertoire is learned, then we can add to the repertoire as the new wave of multi-culturalism becomes established in our culture, and as our culture continues to evolve.

Once we as choral directors learn this repertoire, then we can become committed to passing it on to our choirs. Yes, our singers will resist; yes, singing this music will seem unnecessary or unrewarding... as has been said, we have lost the context with which to appreciate this music. However, a new,

immediate context for this music will be developed as they have experiences together. As they sit together on the bus on tour, as they join together in a festival choir, as they bump into one another at contests they can SING TOGETHER. The fact that they are singing a corny old song can be washed away with a modern emotional context as they experience collective singing. These emotions and experiences will stay with them their entire life. Perhaps then, in tandem with a deeper understanding of the historical and broader cultural meaning of these songs gained through lessons learned in our rehearsals, they can be motivated to pass these songs along to their own children, replete with the emotion of their own life experience and the precious understanding of their heritage. (Who of us parents don't need additions to our bedtime repertoires?)

### **Becoming curators and advocates**

How can we do this? If we are to become dedicated to being the curators of our bygone history and advocates of its development and continuance, we can begin this process by committing to sing together at every ACDA function.

International choral festivals have a tradition of singing, and many of our own conventions include some sort of group singing. To take this process one step further, an anthology could be developed that could become standard at every convention. If we sing this same repertoire enough together, after time it will "stick" and become a part of our internal choral culture. We will be able to sing together at informal events, or at auditions for new convention sites.

This anthology would be comprised of stock, hymn type, arrangements of tunes from all corners of our 300 plus years as an American society, and perhaps a few more fanciful arrangements that are held beloved by our ACDA culture. Perhaps once developed, then we can encourage public and private school directors, community choruses and even church choirs to spend a portion of the year's curriculum devoted to learning songs of the National Voice.

Other ideas might be to encourage solo/ensemble contests, festival choruses and the like to budget time to sing together, or at least encourage our students to sing publicly to see if perfect strangers from other schools will join them. Students at All-State choruses often want to break into song and will frequently try to sing a current hit together while waiting for a rehearsal to begin. If most of them knew a harmonized version of *Swanee River*, even though they might have groused while learning it, but they would never forget singing it spontaneously with 400 others.

Singing in this manner breaks us out of our CD mentality, that all our singing must be "good enough." Congregations sing reticently, people don't audition for choir because they "can't sing." We are so used to the CD's edited to

perfection, we realize our frail body cannot compete with that. But CD's are not necessarily a picture of reality, rather, through the miracle of the studio they approach a kind of ideal. But collective singing allows us to focus on our inner emotional perfection that CD's cannot imitate. We can become less concerned of how we are perceived, and more excited about what we can share. The Canadian government has long encouraged this kind of attitude within public school singing in Canada. We have wonderful additions to the repertoire as a result; *Song for the Mira; Boot, Jack, Jaw, Harp; Si Javais de bateau*, to name but a few. Perhaps a renewed effort to find our own voice could result in the same rich choral repertoire of our own.

Liturgical worship is based on this premise, that, no matter where I might be this given Sunday, a person can feel at home in an unfamiliar place as the liturgical voice will be exactly what they know. Our children feel more secure when travelling to a strange place when they see a McDonald's. As our world and culture becomes more complex, our souls yearn for home and roots.

Our National Voice is a glimpse into the voice of our parents and their parents. As we sing we can experience not only the modern context we bring to the singing, but the emotions of those who originally sang and taught the songs to their children. We too have an encoded history. It is up to us as curators to make this history current, and as advocates to make this history come alive. Singing together, unrehearsed and unrefined is indefensibly intimate, at times warm, electrifying, melancholy, but always as Kodaly and Maslow would say "an X-ray" into our innermost self. If we as a culture can know the immediacy of the expression of soul in song, TV would seem assaulting and trivial, worship could become more of an act rather than a need, and sporting events or rock concerts frosting on the cake rather than our only means of deep collective expression.

It is so easy, our voice is always with us, and we have so much to sing about. Lest we forget our voice, let us take on the mantle of preserving our Nations Voice and promoting its resurgence. If these thoughts strike a chord, feel free to e-mail at [boersg@u.washington.edu](mailto:boersg@u.washington.edu). I plan to create a prototypical anthology for the 2000 ACDA Northwest Convention in Seattle.

Any feedback, or if you want to participate, I'd love to hear from you.

*Peace,*

*Geoffrey*