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## *Use Your Talent!*

by Paul French, OR-ACDA President



Is there anything scarier than waiting for that first rehearsal in the Fall? It makes me crazy. Who is going to show up? Will I have good tenors this year? Will I have any talent at all?

Fixing on the word talent, and having spent too many years in graduate school, I felt the need to consult the dictionary and discovered the word talent has a long and rather interesting history.

During the ancient cultures of Egypt, Babalonia, Israel, Greece, and Rome, talent was used as a measure of weight (variously between 58-90 pounds). I couldn't help thinking that the talent in my choir often felt a bit weighty. At least it consistently pulled me back down to earth.

In medieval Latin the word *talentum* had a much different meaning, indicating a sense of "inclination or desire." This meaning passed into French and English and was used in this way by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* ("his *resoun refreyneth* (restrains) *nat his foul delit* (desire) or talent"). Aside from spelling like many of my choir members and the near juxtaposition of foul and talent, I let this pass.

Two more familiar meanings of talent were the subject of Dr. Andre Thomas' opening workshop at Oregon's ACDA Summer Workshop. He recounted the *Parable of the Talents* from the gospel of Matthew (25:14-30). In this story, a master gives five talents, a unit of money, to one servant, two talents to another, and one talent to a third, each "according to his ability" (chilling words).

The first two servants, through shrewd investment, doubled their talents, but the last servant, being afraid, buried his talent in the ground. When the master returned, the two who had increased their talents received that famous accolade "well done, thou good and faithful servant." The third servant received the master's anger, had his one talent taken from him and given to another, and was banished to the outermost darkness amidst "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The metaphorical interpretation of the text is both straightforward and profound. Use your talent!

Now, I tend to resist axioms so I immediately countered with, “OK, but aside from not burying selected choir members in the ground, does this story tell us anything really useful?” I am occasionally a bit slow to the point.

Use your talent! If my focus remains the talent of the choir, over which I have only an indirect control, I am relatively powerless. But what happens if I choose to focus on my role in the process? What if the axiom read “use my talent?” Still missing the point a bit, I began an inventory of musical talent.

Andre’s talents were obvious. But as I watched him improvise room-rattling gospel accompaniments and win us over with his own infectious enthusiasm, I became uneasily aware that many of his talents were very different from my own, and the more I compared, the more I began to identify with the “less talented” servant of the parable. This is not particularly helpful, except that at least my focus was now changing from the choir’s talent to mine, as it should.

As Andre played, my first thought was, “I’m going to learn to play great gospel piano this summer and teach my choir that tune with a this-is-just-a-little-something-I’ve-been-waiting-for-the-right-moment-to-dust-off-air. That lasted about five seconds ‘til talent, in the form of massive gravitational force, pulled me back to earth.

Use my talent, not Andre’s. Even if I could imitate Andre’s piano skills, his style is very different from my own, and what works for him works because of who he is, not surface techniques.

I was reminded of what Howard Swan said in *Conscience of a Profession*: “In a choral situation, the greatest single obstacle to proper communication is that both parties too often are engaged in playing roles instead of attempting to live as real persons.” (p. 125) Real communication in rehearsal depends on a creative, spontaneous interaction between conductor and choir that is the very opposite of role playing.

No matter how frightening it sounds, we need to allow our own personality, our individual talents, to surface. For one thing, they can’t be hidden for long. Your own personality will eventually make itself known. And more importantly, the uniqueness of your personality, your talent, is at the very core of artistic creativity.

Outside of a few technical skills, it would be hard to find a common denominator between successful conductors. Perhaps the thing they have most in common is this ability to be themselves and to lead from their personal strengths.

At the risk of insulting half the Western World, I have attempted my own *Parable of the Talents*, the *Revised Conductor’s Version*: There were once three

conductors who were given different talents, each according to their ability. Two of the conductors, by investing their choirs with their individual strengths, doubled their talents. But one conductor, because of the usual cabal of fears and insecurities, buried his talent in the ground. When their students graduated, whose students continued to sing? Whose students attended concerts? Whose students remembered their time in choir as a time of self-discovery and creativity?

As you begin your Fall's activities, I hope that you will find the time and energy necessary to engage your talent with creativity, determination and joy. I hope that the "weeping and gnashing of teeth," not to mention the "banishment to the outermost darkness," is kept to an absolute minimum. And most of all, I wish you the self-awareness and courage to lead from your strengths so that, at the end of the day, you find that your talents have been doubled.