

CHOR TEACH



A New Normal: Choral Culture as a Catalyst for Change

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Mind and heart have always been equally important to me. As both an educator and musician, I have always believed that empathy and education are equal and that inspiration is as important as information. I find these ideals even more relevant as I consider two related cultural trends: empathy and change. They exist separately and as a package, each informing the other.

Two major historical events in our country have caused me to pause and consider the choral craft more carefully: the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 and the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. The tragedy at Columbine High School was not the first, nor the last, of its kind, but as a young teacher, I took notice. An awareness of the impact it would have on me did not begin to solidify until many years—and many similar tragedies—later, when I began to think about the perpetrators of these kinds of crimes.

Surrounded by media attention to guns and mental health, one idea kept running through my mind: empathy—or the lack thereof. I wondered how many of these perpetrators lacked empathy. Where and how do we learn empathy? Of course, we learn empathy many ways, but I would like to suggest that ensemble arts are one of the key arenas for acquiring empathy. Music, theater, and dance are all ensemble arts that evoke intellectual understanding, encourage interpersonal connection, and emulate inspiring legacies in an environment where engagement with a particular art, and other participants, is essential.

September 11, 2001, is a day etched into the collective

history of our country. As a graduate student at Michigan State University, I sat with my colleagues in a doctoral choral seminar with Charles Smith as we heard the news of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center in New York City. That day, our imagination expanded exponentially, leading some to fear, others to a call for change, and some recommended both.

In our next seminar meeting, Dr. Smith said, “The more you can hear and imagine, the more you can do.” This was a specific reference to the ability to hear and imagine in the sense of making music. I believe that this is also true in all facets of life. The more we hear, imagine, and experience, the more we are changed.

In the last fifteen years, we have heard and seen more than we ever thought possible, enlarging our imagination. Over this time, I have observed a change in our choral culture. Conductors are more intentional with regard to programming. Composers are acknowledging our expanded imaginations by writing about important issues and leading us away from fear, often toward change. Programming around a theme is nothing new to most choral conductors. The difference is that those themes now seem to be making a statement. Sometimes the intention of the statement is for the listeners and participants to relive an event in memoriam, as with Rene Clausen’s “Memorial,” which is about the events of 9/11. This work was premiered at the ACDA National Conference in New York City in 2003.

Sometimes that statement teaches us about history, as in Gwyneth Walker’s “Right to Vote,” a work about women getting the right to vote in the United States. Other times that statement may advocate for a cause, as in the “Sing for the Cure” concerts to raise awareness and funds for the Susan G. Komen Foundation. Composer Abbie Betinis’s “Chant for Great Compassion” was composed as a response to the earthquake in the Sichuan province of China in May 2008. Andrea Ramsey composed a work as a commission for Chorus America about the Flint, Michigan, water crisis titled, “But a Flint Holds Fire,” based on the poetry of Christina Rossetti with texts by the people of Flint. Many of Minnesota composer Elizabeth Alexander’s works often reflect modern issues, such as “Palette to Paint Us as We Are,” which is based

on a poem by Gerald Rich and addresses issues of race and color. Alexander’s “Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery” is another example of a work that is making a statement about an issue, in this case, slavery of all types.

Jake Runestad’s “We Can Mend the Sky” gives voice to East African immigrants in our country. Runestad is also working on commissions involving mental health, depression, and sex trafficking. His “One Flock,” which premiered May 2016, addresses immigration as a result of natural disasters. When we discussed this “new normal,” Runestad remarked, “Recently, I posed a question to my followers on social media asking them what they would like to see addressed in a new musical work. I received many responses. It was quite telling that music continues to be an important mode of expression in relation to issues such as depression, domestic violence, and inequality. These are big ideas and can be intimidating to address through music, but I feel that it is my duty as a composer to struggle through the endeavor—to tell these stories and raise these questions in ways that are sensitive and meaningful.” He also notes, “The community created around music is one of the strongest in the world. Never have I felt more connected to a large group of strangers than I have when making music together. It is this fact that inspires me to continue creating works that ask tough questions and allows us to foster compassion with our united voices.”

Choral colleagues Jeremiah Selvey and Wendy Moy are making a statement with Chorosynthesis, a group they co-founded in 2010. According to Selvey, Empowering Silenced Voices, the title of the group’s second program, “came out of several years of projects and sensing that if choral music was to gain more audiences and have more relevance, we needed to program around ideas that matter to humanity.” Selvey and Moy explain: “We are transparent in connecting with our audiences via conversations and dialogues at conferences and on social media and through our interactive reading sessions and by way of artistic programming.” These are just a few examples of music creating empathy by inspiring an awareness of events, issues, and history in a manner that is ripe with possibility for musical and non-musical teaching opportunities.

Jonathan Palant, founding conductor of both Credo and the Dallas Street Choir, is living this new normal every day and with every rehearsal. The Dallas Street Choir is primarily made up of homeless individuals. When I asked him what motivates him, he talked of how graduate studies tend to focus on history and cultural perspectives on music. They do not necessarily spend much time looking at what is influencing the music of today and tomorrow. He said, “What fuels me

is the desire to use art to better our world.”

Palant says that his energy is not necessarily derived from historically accurate performances of Brahms and Mozart. As wonderful as those works are, they are not what he feels called to do. He claims that he seeks to “stay current with the issues and to use our fortunes to better our community, our fortunes being our voices.” He sums up what I think the new normal is all about with radio station WFAA’s Daybreak in a July 2016 interview about the “Dallas Sings/Dallas Strong” event he coordinated in response to the officer shootings in Dallas. “I woke up Friday morning thinking, I’ve got to do something. I don’t know what to do. And the only thing I know how to do is conduct a choir. We have voices, and we have something to say, so that was sort of the genesis of how we got started with trying to find peace through music.” Palant says he now hears the message of “Do what you do.”

In this new normal for our art, I am continually inspired and enlightened by my colleagues. At the root of that inspiration is the keen awareness of how we not only teach empathy but how we are experiencing empathy with our singers through the repertoire and programming ideas that are available to us. For most of us, “what we do” is direct choirs. For some of us, it is writing music. I encourage everyone to draw upon the energy and inventiveness of our colleagues who are using our art to transform hearts, minds, and communities. In this era of a new normal, we can seek insight and encouragement from them as our thought expands and we continue to “do what we do.”

Preparation, Practice, Performance, and Pondering: A Different Approach to Score Preparation

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As the ACDA Michigan JH/MS R&R Chair, I have tried to offer an interest session either presented by myself or by colleagues in the JH/MS area for our fall conference each October. This year, I wanted to try something a bit different—a presentation that was both an interest session and a reading session combined. Using the reading packet as a guide, I wanted to share ideas, strategies, and “thoughts along the