

Global Perspectives on the Art of Choral Music

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Abstract

From her unique position as the executive director of a national choral organization and active participant in a number of international events and meetings, Abbott reports on the current trends and issues in the field of choral music around the world. From the current trends in programming and stage presentations to the concerns about training and working conditions for conductors, Abbott will share the information and insight she has gained in recent years. This presentation will also include a look at the 2006 World Assembly of Associations of Choral Conductors held in Argentina, the upcoming World Symposium to be held in Copenhagen (July 2008), and current International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM) projects.

Introduction

Thoughts by [sic] the Artistic Committee: Today's world seeks to embrace the performing artists. We in the choral world must be creative and consider how we can make our concerts and programs stimulating to our audiences, and at the same time maintain a high artistic level. As we constantly strive to perfect our art, let us look for new ways to connect to our listeners through our stage deportment and our joy of singing.

Important notice: The Artistic Committee of WSCM8 requires all concert program proposals to directly relate to the ideas of the symposium, as expressed in the overview section of this article. So all proposed concert program and stage performances should present varied, imaginative and communicative elements.

– Artistic Committee, Application to perform in main choral concerts, 8th World Symposium on Choral Music (WSCM8) in Copenhagen, July 19-26, 2008

Buried in the somewhat wordy statements contained in the application to perform at the World Symposium (Copenhagen, 2008) is a simpler statement that I imagine the WSCM8 organizers were trying to say, albeit in a more diplomatic way: "Even if you sing really well, you can't just stand there and sing!" To me, these statements are proof indeed that an essentially auditory art form feels at least some pressure from an increasingly visually and technologically oriented world to compete in a different or new way for audience attention.

If you have been to any of the World Symposia on Choral Music since they were inaugurated in 1988 you know that the artistic committee for the 2008 event is not about to compromise artistic excellence for eye-catching costumes and choreography. The message is clear, however, great singing alone may no longer be enough to be at the cutting edge of the art form.

Current Trends in Programming and Stage Presentations

Choral music is an extremely diverse and varied musical genre; in fact probably the most diverse as it is not limited to a specific historical period or geographic location. If you say, "I conduct choral music," it might mean anything from a six-part a cappella Renaissance motet to a large-scale choral-orchestral work of the Romantic era. It may have been written in 1307 or 2007. It may come from the Balkans, from the Middle East, from South Africa, from the Andes, from Paris or New York. It can be the musical setting of a Biblical passage, a poem in any language or use a made-up language or contain no words at all. It can be classical, pop, jazz, world music or folk, or just about any other label you see in the record store. It is, in short, the reflection of the extraordinarily rich cultural diversity of the people on this planet.

Over the past 25 years, choirs around the world and at every level increasingly have embraced this musical diversity, with choirs from the beginner to the most professional having a go at music from someone else's culture. Until relatively recently, they have done so in fairly standard standing formations on a stage or in choir stalls.

The concept of a choral concert, however, is changing. Using a concert venue's space in creative and varied ways, imagining concert attire as part of an organic whole, incorporating the structured use of lighting into a formal "classical" concert, moving choristers into different positions between or during pieces and, yes, even using choreography and movement are some of the theatrical elements that are now seen in choral music presentations of the highest order. They are no longer just for show choirs, the opera stage, barbershop choruses, and the elementary school concert.

None of these staging elements are new concepts. The proponents of Venetian polychoral music and Thomas Tallis with his forty-part, eight-choir *Spem in alium* were thrilling their audiences with "surround-sound" effects hundreds of years ago. Choirs from around the world performing the traditional music of their country or region long ago realized that the audience impact would be greater if they also wore traditional costume when singing. Who can resist being attentive and responsive to a colourfully garbed choir from Estonia, China, or Cuba? In Canada, R. Murray Schafer has been staging operas in the middle of the forest or out on a lake for years.

What is new in the choral world is the increasing use of these visual and spatial elements in the performance of standard repertoire and contemporary choral works by high-calibre vocal ensembles and chamber choirs. Ten or even five years ago, they would have been content to stand in standard choral formation and wow us with their vocal and musical virtuosity. Die-hard choral music fans may argue that great singing alone is still enough to keep them interested. I consider myself part of that diehard clan and so passionate about the art form that I easily tell myself that I do not need fancy lighting or chorister placement to draw me into a new choral work masterfully sung.

And yet...

Engaging the Audience

My experiences at international events, in particular at the Polyfollia Showcase Festival¹ in Normandy, France for the best emerging vocal ensembles, have convinced me that when handled with the same artistic *bon goût* that governs the choice and interpretation of repertoire, these theatrical elements can confer to choral music an even greater power to touch listeners

and even the ability to successfully bring contemporary and avant-garde works to even the most reticent of audience members.

Years later, I can still recall how I felt during the presentation of a 45-minute choral piece entitled *The Time of Wolf*, performed by the Philomela Female Choir of Helsinki (Marjukka Riihimäki, conductor) at the 2006 Polyfollia Festival. Choreography and staging are an integral part of the work. The singers weave in and around the audience members, at times singing directly over each audience member's head. The effect was mesmerizing, moving, and extremely powerful. I do not think that my appreciation of this ancient folk tale set by a contemporary composer and sung in Finnish would have been quite the same had I just watched the choir sing it from a stage. I felt I was part of the story.

At the same festival, I was fascinated to see how audiences made up largely of non-musicians and what we might qualify as the *public at large* were drawn into performances by the Finnish youth choir, EMO Ensemble (Pasi Hyökki, conductor) of some incredibly difficult contemporary works, through its very high standard of singing, its imaginative use of the concert space, and the placement of their singers. With simple and effective movement and shifts in chorister placement, they captivated the audience with works that in other circumstances might have simply elicited polite applause and a few nodding heads. Why? I think the creative use of the venue gave the audience a chance to experience the sound and the repertoire from a different perspective and to give audience members a more engaging role. That is certainly how I felt in Philomela's presentation of *The Time of Wolf*. It eliminated the barrier between performer and audience member.

I also recall how I was transported at the 2004 edition of this same festival when the Banchieri Singers of Hungary performed a program of short and well-known Renaissance pieces. The singing was beautiful, the repertoire familiar but what helped transform it into a sublime concert experience was the exquisitely beautiful lighting on the stone walls of the centuries-old church. The lighting seemed to capture and reinforce the mood of each piece. No doubt that without the lighting I would still have enjoyed the performance because the Banchieri Singers are a wonderful vocal ensemble but for me, it helped turn an excellent musical performance into an unforgettable concert experience.

I can also imagine what a memorable concert experience the EMO Ensemble gave its audience in the summer of 2002. On the choir's web site, one can read:

The aim of EMO Ensemble is to remain an experimental and versatile group of performers that is constantly renewed. In summer 2002, the choir gave a concert of water-related music at the Tapiola public swimming pool, dressed in bathrobes and swimming costumes. At the KuoroEspoo Festival in 2004, EMS Ensemble combined cinematic material and light effects to the sound environment created by the choir.

Added Pressure for the Conductor

In stating its expectations for the choirs applying to sing at the next World Symposium, the artistic committee is acknowledging the added impact of packaging artistic singing as a multisensory experience. By the same token, it also implies that if choral music is to appeal to a wider audience and to remain a strong, relevant, and viable art form, it needs to be competitive on many different levels. To ignore this trend might mean relegating choral music to the status of the *poor cousin* of the music world forever. (Globally, choral music receives

disproportionately less funding compared to other musical genres such as opera and orchestral music.)

Does this add pressure on the choral conductor? Of course it does. In addition to the time spent choosing, studying, and programming the right repertoire for one's group (and that is even before rehearsals begin), the conductor must also now give thought to the physical presentation of the repertoire, even if the job is handled by someone else. (Will we see the emergence of choral stage directors alongside theatre and opera directors?) The conductor must, in the end, assume the artistic responsibility for the final package. This implies that conductors will need not only musical training and professional development, but also training that addresses issues of theatrical presentation. An already complex profession, which combines musical and performing skills with people skills, is going to become more complex.

Other issues and concerns for choral conductors today

Quite apart from the artistic considerations with which the choral conductor must contend is another question which is no less important: "Can I earn a living doing this?" In talking about global perspectives on the choral art, I would be remiss in not bringing up the issue of working conditions for conductors. Recognizing the leadership role of choral conductors and the difficulties they often encounter in exercising their profession, the Association of Argentinean Choral Conductors (ADICORA in its Spanish acronym) in collaboration with the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM) hosted the first World Assembly of Choral Conductors' Associations from August 21 to 23, 2006 in Buenos Aires. On the agenda were working conditions, education, professional development, and the collaboration between conductors' associations and other musical organizations.²

Representatives of national conductors' associations from Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Ecuador, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, Spain (Catalonia), Sweden, the United Kingdom, Uruguay, and Venezuela met in the Argentinean capital along with delegates from *À Coeur Joie* International, France's Institute for Choral Arts, and several other musical organizations from Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Over the three days of reports and exchanges, certain common concerns emerged:

1. The limited financial resources available to the choral community compared to other forms of music-making and this despite the large numbers of people who engage in choral activities
2. The ever-present question of what is professional versus what is amateur and the bigger question of what constitutes fundable art
3. The difficulty for choral conductors to adequately earn their living by conducting and to have what they do recognized as a real profession³
4. The availability of adequate training and professional development for choral conductors at all levels, both within and outside of academic institutions
5. The general perception of choral music in society—is it just a hobby, one among many leisure activities, or an art form that deserves the respect and attention of the public at large, and by extension that of funding bodies, both public and corporate?

These same concerns were expressed over and over again, albeit in different ways, by the international crowd gathered in Buenos Aires. It was both troubling and comforting to hear one

presentation after another hone in on the same issues. These are not just concerns in Canada, but also in developing countries as well as in countries with a high standard of living. It was also interesting to hear that these were issues of concern in countries with an emerging choral tradition, which is understandable, but also in countries with a strong and deep-rooted choral tradition, which is surprising.

After three days of meetings, the assembly issued a common declaration and concluded with the goal of establishing an international network for conductors in order to develop better working conditions, to help coordinate professional development, and to help establish organizations for choral conductors where none exist.

A concrete step in working towards this goal is an IFCM initiative called Choral Conductors without Borders. The IFCM is looking for conducting teachers with the time and interest to help train conductors in developing countries and in regions where there is no opportunity to study choral conducting.⁴

Selling the Choral Art in the Twenty-first Century

We who are actively engaged in choral music are convinced of the intrinsic value of singing and of choral music's power to elevate the spirit and nourish the mind, to bring people together, to enrich communities, and to honour and preserve cultural traditions. So why, as an artistic community, do we have trouble convincing the public at large and funding bodies that this is so? Why is it so difficult to have choral conducting recognized as a profession, worthy of a decent salary and benefits, and not just something one does on the side or as a passionate but unpaid (or nominally paid) volunteer?

One may well bring up the point that the arts in general face these dilemmas, particularly in North America, but there is no doubt that when it comes to questions of funding and status, choral music takes a back seat to opera and orchestral music, despite the large numbers involved and the high volume of choral activity. This, in turn, has an effect on the working conditions of conductors and the viability of choral music as professional artistic endeavour, in addition to its worthiness as an amateur artistic pursuit.

There are never simple solutions to questions of this nature, and without a doubt greater efforts at advocacy on all fronts on the part of the entire choral community will help sell choral music to a wider audience as well to funding bodies and corporate sponsors. I would like to think that one of the answers may lie in the innovative and diverse presentation of the music, not just for a cheap effect, but in an effort to more actively engage the listener. Just as conductors and choirs have embraced diversity in the repertoire they perform, perhaps it is time to embrace diversity in the staging of choral music. As choral musicians, if we can truly engage the audience, and connect with listeners in new and stimulating ways, as suggested by the artistic committee of the 8th World Symposium on Choral Music, then perhaps ticket sales will grow and the sponsors and funding will not be far behind.

Author's Note

The presentation of this paper was accompanied by the following musical selection: *Enkeli* (V. Matveinen) performed by EMO Ensemble, Pasi Hyökki, Director (2006 Polyfollia Festival promotional CD; used by permission). The presenter also referred those in attendance to archival photos from the 2004 and 2006 editions of the Polyfollia Festival in Normandy, France.

Endnotes

1. Inaugurated in 2004 under the auspices of the IFCM, the biennial Polyfollia Festival seeks to be a reference showcase for choral music, bringing together the best emerging professional and amateur ensembles and inviting concert promoters and festival organizers to see and hear them. Its goal is to show that “a concert of choral music, when it is performed at its best level by outstanding ensembles, is a truly living spectacle, which deserves to be broadcast in the widest possible way, for the happiness of the largest audience.”
2. This assembly was the logical outgrowth of several conductors’ commission meetings and conferences held by the IFCM in recent years. For more information, visit the IFCM web site at www.ifcm.net.
3. Annual salaries for conductors differ widely (one might even say wildly!) depending on the country, the type of chorus (independent, church- or school-affiliated, professional or volunteer) and the status of the choir. A 1990 survey of its members by the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors (ACCC) showed that salaries ranged from \$0 to \$50,000, with those conductors leading institution-based choirs faring the best both in terms of salary and benefits. Recent Chorus America statistics show that it is possible for conductors to earn in the \$50,000 per year range (the median salary is less for women), if they conduct several choirs and are affiliated with an institution. The range in salaries for conductors of independent choirs echoes the earlier ACCC survey.
4. Visit the IFCM web site for more information: www.ifcm.net.

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