

## **The Icemen Cometh: A Choral Travel Saga with Implications for the Acquisition of Business Skills**

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Choir directors are, by necessity, multitalented. They commonly possess a great depth of knowledge about repertoire, vocal production, rehearsal techniques, and interpersonal relations. But there are other skills equally essential for most choir directors, skills that are rarely taught to musicians at any Canadian or Icelandic postsecondary institution: business skills. Whilst professional musicians and ensembles increasingly rely on professional music administrators, this is not an option normally open to directors of amateur choral ensembles. This case study follows the planning and implementation of the Icelandic choir *Karalákórin Hreimur's* 11-day choir tour to Alberta, Canada. From concept to concerts, it outlines processes such as budgeting, scheduling, understanding contracts, marketing events, and the logistics involved in housing, feeding, and moving the choir and its supporting cast. Instead of deferring to a travel agent, all components of Hreimur's trip were negotiated directly by the researchers (one of whom is the choir's director), resulting in large financial savings for the ensemble and greater flexibility in specifying the details of the trip.

With a budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars being typical for such an endeavour, choir directors cannot afford to give secondary importance to the development of their business skills. Nor can they assume that someone else in the choir possesses the necessary acumen. Whilst music business skills development has traditionally involved an atheoretical, on-the-job grounding in common music business practice, several studies have begun to establish a need, and theoretical basis, for music business education. This need is not limited to organizing tours, but also such things as securing sponsorship, advertising and marketing events, and managing funds in a responsible manner. Even music educators, traditionally not considered to be within the music business, are increasingly responsible for their own budgets. As this theoretical work is in its very early stages, and there is not universal acceptance of the few findings that exist, the researchers hope to contribute to the development of this emerging field.

### Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this case study was twofold. First, the researchers sought to demonstrate the need for extramusical content in choir directors' training to enhance the likelihood of musical success. It will be shown that certain musical outcomes are highly contingent on extramusical knowledge of a sort rarely discussed in postsecondary music programs. Second, because the field of music business education is still in its infancy, the researchers sought to contribute to the growing body of research conducted to establish a basis for the inclusion of music business education within postsecondary music training as a whole.

Both researchers were active participants in this case study. In addition to overseeing the planning and implementation of the choir trip, the researchers collected baseline demographic data about the ensemble and documented the budgeting, scheduling, logistics, marketing, and contractual processes. Qualitative analyses were then performed to determine which components of the trip's planning were musical or extramusical.

This study was not intended to establish a theoretical basis for music business education, but to illustrate the need for these skills to be included in a wider range of professional music courses than is presently the case. Because a case study methodology was used, care should be taken when attempting to apply this study's findings in a different context, as assumptions may vary significantly from situation to situation.

### Definitions

*Music Business:* Broadly speaking, any situation where one or more persons stand to gain economically through interaction with music, be it performance, teaching, publishing, and so forth. Economic gain does not necessarily mean monetary gain, although the two are usually synonymous. Many sources refer to the music business when discussing only the music recording industry, often meaning in fact, the *popular music industry*. In contrast, this study focuses particularly on the choir director, while the findings may be applicable to others such as composers, symphony orchestra (or jazz combo, or rock band) performers, instrument manufacturers, publishers or artists' agents, teachers, and therapists.

*Music Business Education:* Teaching business skills or theories to professional musicians or those training to become professional musicians. Music business education

can take many forms, including workshops, academic courses, books and articles, and so forth. Examples of content include Arts Administration, Music Products Design, Music Publishing, and Music Entrepreneurship.

### Music Business Literature

There are numerous handbooks or guides to the music industry, providing career information as well as an overview of the actual functioning of the various sectors of the industry (Baskerville, 2001; Borg, 2003; Krasilovsky & Shemel, 2003; Passman, 2003). These guides, generally designed for the lay reader, are commonly used as textbooks in postsecondary music survey courses, with Baskerville having historically been the most widely adopted (Nepkie, 1992). While definitions vary from text to text, all of these books focus on the American popular music industry. Indicative of the typical narrow definition of *music business* found in such publications, Baskerville dedicates only six pages to "Teaching Careers," including studio, school, and college teachers as well as music therapists.

There are currently no journals dedicated to music business education. However, the subject is sometimes mentioned tangentially in the context of larger works on music education. Jones (2002) commented on the tension between music and business as educational subjects or as ways of viewing the world. He also noted the resistance amongst postsecondary music institutions toward music industry programs, or applied (meaning business, not performance) music training. With regards to music business education at the postsecondary level, *Popular Music and Society* published three articles in the early 1990s that reflect the primary views for and against the inclusion of such content (Cusic, 1991; Hull, 1991; Sanjek, 1992). Ringering (1998) suggested a historical basis for the importance of business knowledge to the professional musician, and in doing so called into question, as others have done, the Romantic myth of composers' joy through suffering and the absence of material needs (Cook, 1998):

Bach was paid to compose the *St. Matthew Passion*. Although Liszt had a policy of teaching for free, he had a large income from wildly successful concerts and received gifts from benefactors. Musicians enjoy the grandeur of Handel's *Messiah* but forget that he wrote oratorios because he lost money staging Italian operas. Almost without exception musicians have to become savvy at business (p. 36).

### **Music Business Courses and Programs**

Only a handful of dissertations and theses have looked at music business education (Nepkie, 1992; Berthelot, 1993; Panttaja, 1995; Westin, 1996; Guise, 2004). In a study of Fine Arts faculty at several US research institutions, Panttaja (1995) determined that a large number of professional concerns by Fine Arts faculty were directly related to a lack of training in business, specifically contract negotiation. Among all faculty polled, 79% felt business knowledge is a necessity for the fine artist, yet 93% felt that business should not be a part of the formal education of the fine artist; only 14% of faculty would consider adding curricula on business and negotiation skills to the formal education of the fine artist. Berthelot (1993) surveyed all of the US universities offering music-business degree programs, and found that of all 201 programs identified only 10 were graduate programs, all at the Master's level. In his study of music business education covering all postsecondary institutions in Canada, Guise (2004) found that only 18 schools offer music business courses, with four others offering music business programs combining discrete music and business courses. In addition, Guise found that

[M]usic business content [in Canada] rarely if ever goes beyond the introductory level. Only four programs [...] offer advanced studies in music business, and even these programs generally seek to expand the breadth of music business knowledge as opposed to the depth of certain areas of the field (p. 134).

Iceland enjoys a widespread community music system and while several institutions offer advanced instrumental or vocal studies, only one of them, the Icelandic Academy of Arts, provides degree courses in music. None of these institutions include music business studies as part of the courses they offer.

### **Music Business and the Choral Director**

Amongst English-language choral directing programs, there are a number of materials commonly used as textbooks, with no single standard. A review of several of these texts shows how little attention is paid to business aspects of choral directing, especially when compared to gestural communication. Several authors state quite strong opinions about the importance of gestural precision as the primary focus for students of choral directing (Boyd, 1977; Demaree & Moses, 1995; Ericson, *et al*, 1976:

Green, 1997: Rudolf, 1994), yet little empirical evidence is provided to back up these claims. Boyd (1977) is typical of this group of authors in suggesting that a choral director should analyze a particular score and, from that, design a rehearsal plan that will lead to a successful performance. Such an approach presupposes a vast number of other outcomes will naturally follow, such as the willingness of the choristers to participate, the availability of a choir's worth of scores, a suitable rehearsal space, and an audience to fill a particular concert space and acknowledge the eventual performance. The musical score does not provide useful information in achieving any one of these outcomes. Instead, they are achieved through an understanding of group dynamics, motivation, finance, accounting, management, marketing, and positive public relations. Failure in any one of these *non-musical* areas can result in corresponding musical failure. Musical success is contingent on more than just musicianship, as will be shown in the case study which follows.

### **An Introduction to Karlakórinn Hreimur**

In 2005, Karlakórinn Hreimur celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Hreimur is part of an Icelandic male voice choir tradition that dates back to the first public performance by a men's choir, in Reykjavík, in April 1854. Originally, Hreimur's members were drawn from three neighbouring valleys in South Thingeyjarsyslu, in a remote and scarcely populated area of northeast Iceland. With continued urban migration, decreasing rural populations, improvements in roads and transport, and in the face of increasing competition from other recreational diversions—especially television—many small male-voice choirs struggled and folded. Hreimur, however, expanded and today it is the only male-voice choir in this predominantly rural county of just less than 4,000 people, which includes several small hamlets and the small fishing town of Húsavík. The choir numbers over 60 men between the ages of 17 and 70 some of whom live more than 100 kilometres away from each other and travel considerable distances in often difficult weather conditions to rehearsals twice a week between October and April.

The choristers include small-holding sheep and dairy farmers, lorry drivers, a wide range of skilled manual craftsmen—including electricians, carpenters, car mechanics, and welders—white-collar workers at both clerical and managerial levels, a sales director of a leading national fish processing company, and a local director of education, to name just a few. Enculturated in long-standing and wide-spread vocal traditions, the men generally possess high levels of vocal and aural skills. They learn extensive and varied repertoire, usually in four-parts, and perform regularly, often to large audiences

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and almost exclusively by memory. Research has illustrated how singing, both in the male-voice choir and in everyday experience, appears to be a central concept and technology of Self for many of the men in Hreimur and that it has significant agency in their personal and social lives (Faulkner, 2003; Faulkner & Davidson, 2004). The choir has made five long-play recordings and has toured extensively in Europe, making visits to the Faroe Islands, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, England, and Finland. The choir performs a wide range of repertoire, both a cappella and with a variety of accompaniments ranging from piano to a small ensemble of guitar, bass, and harmonica.

### **The Proposed Trip**

Whilst Hreimur has toured widely in Europe, the idea of visiting and singing in Canada has long been a dream of many of its choristers. Genealogy is important to Icelanders and several members of Hreimur know of relatives in Canada whose ancestors emigrated there in the last decades of the nineteenth century, along with thousands of other Icelanders, to escape the extraordinary hardships of natural disasters, severe winters, and illness that had decimated Iceland's population. Significant Icelandic communities still exist in Manitoba, Alberta, and Vancouver, BC, and several Icelandic choirs have visited them during tours to Canada. The choir's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday seemed an ideal opportunity to bring this idea to fruition and connect Icelandic communities in Iceland and Canada. The tour had been seriously considered since the choir's last overseas trip to Austria and Switzerland in 2000.

### **Budget and Schedule**

The budget was set in early 2004, following consultation with Hreimur's members at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in late 2003. It was based on figures the choir had been given for standardized travel agent trips of a similar length, which would not have met the choir's needs. An additional factor was that the choir did not want the price each individual would contribute to go over the 100 000 ISK psychological threshold; it was felt that 70,000 ISK per head was the sort of figure the group might reasonably be able to raise from concerts, programme advertising, sponsorship, grants, and so forth. Thus, the preliminary budget estimate was 170,000 ISK per person, including flights (roughly 80,000 ISK), hotels, transportation, breakfasts, and some evening meals. This translated to approximately \$3,100 CAD per person. Multiplied by the 120 choristers

and family, the total budget for the trip was around 20.4 million ISK, or \$375,000 CAD. This figure does not include lunches, some dinners, and discretionary spending by participants. Because travel agents seemed unwilling to book a trip to the choir's measure, the choir's director chose to book all components of the trip independently.

The original plan was for the choir to depart Iceland on June 10 (arriving in Calgary, Alberta on June 11), and depart Calgary June 22, 2005. These dates were later changed to June 11-23. The 60-voice choir would be accompanied by supporting musicians, friends, and family, with a total of 120 individuals attending. The provisional schedule included three days based in Calgary, three in Kananaskis, and three in Edmonton, with two transit days. The Calgary portion of the trip would include a concert at Stephansson House around June 13 or 14 to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of renowned Icelandic poet, Stephan G. Stephansson. While based in Kananaskis, the choir would travel to the Banff Centre to perform at the Rolston Recital Hall. Finally, the trip to Edmonton would feature a third concert in honour of the Icelandic National Day on June 17, with celebrations to be held the following weekend. Additional days would provide time for shopping and self-guided touring of the cities, day trips to major tourist attractions such as the Banff Townsite, the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, and the West Edmonton Mall, and travelling between Edmonton and Kananaskis, an all-day journey. As there was significant time to prepare music prior to leaving Iceland, minimal time was devoted to rehearsals whilst in Canada.

### Logistics

The logistics of housing, feeding, and moving the choir were determined within the parameters of budget and schedule. After briefly considering the possibility of billeting the choir with members of the community, the organizers decided that the benefits of hotel accommodation outweighed the costs. It was determined that it would be preferable to stay in no more than two or three hotels during the trip in order to help the choristers feel settled and to minimize time lost moving from one location to another. After considering several properties in Calgary, a decision was made to go with a premium-level property located in the downtown core. While the cost was higher than several options, the location of the hotel obviated the need for any transportation during off days, resulting in a cost savings and a large increase in individual choristers' flexibility of options when exploring the city. A similar property was selected in Edmonton for the same reasons. The initial plan for the third hotel had been to book something exciting in the Banff area, such as the Banff Springs Hotel or

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Chateau Lake Louise. These were quickly found to be far outside of the group's budget (by a factor of three or four times), despite the buying power of such a large group. Through consultation with a representative at the hotel in Calgary, a resort in Kananaskis, south of Banff, was recommended. This property combined the relatively low rates of the city hotels with the amenities of a high-end resort, and was a short drive (through beautiful scenery) away from Banff, allowing for easy day trips.

All three hotels are owned by the same organization, which made it possible to bargain other needs into the contract. Room selection was somewhat flexible, giving individual choristers the option of upgrading to a better view or lowering the cost by sharing with more than one other member. All breakfasts, and several dinners, were negotiated into the price of accommodations, minimizing the need for pocket money for the choristers. Other dinners and all lunches were left open, to allow opportunities to explore and socialize. Scheduling breakfasts also ensured that, at very least, minimal levels of punctuality and nutrition were met. Finally, additional benefits of booking within a single hotel chain were found in terms of transportation, as transit between sister properties could be easily and affordably arranged. During the initial planning phase, the plan was to charter buses for the duration of the trip. It later became apparent, however, that (with the exception of the Kananaskis-Edmonton leg) the group's transportation needs could often be met by using prescheduled bus services, such as airport shuttles, and demand-based courtesy services, such as interhotel shuttles.

### **"Seeking-Musicians with Understanding of Contracts"**

Of the various budgeting, scheduling, and logistical planning tasks noted above, the primary requirement is an understanding of business practices, not music practices. Budgeting and scheduling skills began with the use of basic mathematics when calculating the overall budget for the trip and grew more complex as the trip planning process continued. More advanced skills included verbal and written business communications with travel agents, followed by financial analysis and risk analysis prior to the decision to forego the services of a travel agent and book the trip independently. While not formally stated as such at the time, the creation of the multi-day schedule for the trip was a fairly advanced exercise in strategic planning, which encompasses a range of business skills. It required the planners to determine a limited number of achievable goals (both musical and extramusical) for the trip and

then balance often conflicting requirements of time, money, and interest in order to maximize the benefits to the group *en masse*.

The creation of the schedule also required a substantial understanding of logistics, grounded by the practical application of further business skills. The first of these was a cost-benefit analysis, used in deciding whether to book billets versus staying in hotels, and balancing financial and psychological factors. An understanding of group dynamics was used in deciding to use only three hotels, thus limiting transit days and enabling the choristers to feel more settled despite being abroad. Full cost accounting enabled the researchers to justify choosing premium-level hotels, as they resulted in overall financial savings when the costs of transportation were included in the total figure. Had the logistics planning begun with finding the lowest-cost hotel options (a fairly standard practice), the increased expense on transportation would have more than offset any cost savings on accommodations. Finally, the researchers' negotiations gave the choristers flexibility on choice of rooms, meals, transport, and entertainment options, none of which were initially proposed by the hotelier.

Similar skills were needed in marketing Hreimur's performances whilst in Alberta, in order to ensure the choir would be performing to an audience of some sort (preferably interested, supportive, and sold-out). Members of the choir were in touch with the Icelandic community in Edmonton, and the director developed contacts through the Canadian Male Voice Choir Federation. Contacts were also made in several Alberta communities in order to give the choir some choice in selecting performance venues. Finally, a concert was arranged with staff at Stephansson House, near Markerville in central Alberta, which is a focal point for the Icelandic community in Alberta and a key site for this trip. Despite these many tasks, one unforeseen event served the dual purpose of underlining the need for comprehensive business skills and dramatically altering Hreimur's plans.

On October 25, 2004, near Húsavík, Iceland, the researchers were taught a valuable lesson about the value and nature of contracts. Having spent months negotiating subtle details with outside parties about flights, hotels, and performances, the choir director took an informal poll of the choir members who were planning to travel to Canada. The poll revealed that, despite committing to the trip on several occasions in 2003 and 2004, over half of the tenors were now unable to participate. This left Hreimur with a ratio of one tenor for every two basses, something untenable given the selected repertoire. The trip was immediately suspended, and cancellation was confirmed at Hreimur's AGM on December 8, 2004.

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The traditional, and accepted, advice when dealing with contracts is to sign only when *all* of the details have been successfully negotiated. Had contracts been signed with the hotels, airline, and other parties, it is likely that whomever signed them (on behalf of the ensemble) would have been financially liable to pay a cancellation fee, at the very least. Because the researchers had an understanding of this basic business principle, no contracts were signed regarding flights, hotels, or performance, and thus Hreimur and its representatives were not financially liable for the cancelled trip.

After a brief cooling-off period, the choir began once again to function normally, and plans for future projects have recently begun to circulate. Because of the researchers' experience in organizing the aborted trip, and in addition to the traditional advice regarding contracts, we therefore propose The New Rule of Contracts: **ONLY SIGN AFTER THE TENORS DO!**

### **Summary and Conclusions**

While the outcomes of this case study were unexpected, they still support the researchers' assertions regarding the need for formal music business education for choir directors. Had the trip been booked as a standard package through a travel agent, the costs would have been significantly higher whilst the choir's flexibility would have been more constrained. By applying their own business skills instead of contracting out to external facilitators, the researchers' hours of preparation would likely have resulted in a large financial savings for the choir and a more satisfying trip for those involved. Ultimately, it was a business issue (tenors backing out of their verbal contract) that precipitated the musical outcome of no trip and, thus, no concerts.

Logically, there are many other occasions where choir directors would see substantial benefits from using their own business skills. An understanding of group dynamics, applied to the selection of members, can have a significant impact on the long-term functioning of a choir; negotiation skills can help or hinder in the acquisition of appropriate rehearsal space and supplies at a reasonable cost; and many choirs collapse due to deficiencies of marketing, both in terms of attracting an audience and attracting new members. Instead of leaving these activities (which are key components of a choir director's job) to chance, the choral community will be well-served if researchers and educators endeavour to find ways to more fully integrate extramusical content into choral directors' training. The field of music business education is still in its infancy, with very little research available, no professional forum for the dissemination of research, no established theoretical basis, and little agreement on key terms such as subject matter (or even the name of the field itself). While conducting research in such

conditions can be logistically and intellectually challenging, the lack of research means there is much to be done, much to be studied, and much room for growth.

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